The Rules of Exceptions

by Amehhh

Summary

Thanks to a mail mix-up and a frustratingly difficult to write essay, Sherry Thompson meets a consulting criminal under the guise of Richard Brook. He's cute, yes, but she has a list of rules she's promised herself to never break when it comes to men. But, Jim Moriarty has never been one for rules, and Sherry Thompson has always been one for good stories. Namely, mysteries.

Notes

Hi all! I finally decided to post this on AO3, so if this is your preferred fanfic reading site of choice, you're in luck!! Anyways, I hope you enjoy this as much as I enjoyed writing it :)}
The Visitor

I never thought that it would end like this, a sea of quotes on notecards surrounding me as I failed to write a single sentence. I’d been working on my final essay for what felt like hours, but upon looking at the clock, I realized that it had only been one. I let my head fall against my head as I sighed. I wasn’t going anywhere with this. My body ached for a break, but I continued to tell it that until I wrote my introduction paragraph, I was going to remain on this couch, numb or not in my seat. I knew my thesis, I knew what it was that I wanted to write about, but the words just weren’t coming. I was uninspired, unmotivated. However, above all else, I was disciplined. That would be my saving grace this semester, along with my cup of coffee that finally went tepid.

Two o’ clock. It was certainly too early to have a drink, even if it was five o’ clock somewhere. Just do it, I told myself. Just do it, Sherry. It was time. I was going to write like my life depended on it. Or—I was going to, until I heard the sound of the mailman. Okay, just…one paragraph, I pleaded with myself. Reward yourself by getting the mail. That’s all you have to do. One. Paragraph. Taking a deep breath, I plunged in. At the very least, there was always editing and revising. It was just a first draft. Don’t take every word you say so personally. Nothing has to be perfect on the first try, I argued with myself.

Five minutes passed. My paragraph was six sentences, followed my fool-proof introduction-paragraph-structure, was done. That’s all it had to be. Not perfect, just done. It’d only have to be perfect when I turned it in. My scholarship was depending on it.

Relieved, I stood up and grabbed the mail from outdoors. I half-prayed, silently, begging whatever higher power there was to eradicate all bills from today’s envelopes. No such luck. Phone bill, student loans from undergrad, and…oh. This isn’t mine. This was the third time I’d gotten his mail. I wanted to consider it fate, but really, it was just a distraction from my paper. I stared at the blank envelope, deciding whether I should go give it to him now, or later. My decision process was about half a second long. I’d do anything to get away from the stale air of my living room and disappointing essay.

All I have to do is run it over, I told myself, while putting on some make-up. It’ll take five minutes—less than that, even—I told myself, changing into clothes that were much nicer than my 3-day-old pajamas. This mail call is definitely, completely, and totally not a distraction, I told myself, lacing up my shoes.

As I walked outdoors, I kept the envelope under my cardigan, not wanting to get any rain on it. A blank envelope usually meant something important, so I didn’t want the weather to tarnish it. I let myself in next door, and trudged up the stairs. In and out, Sherry, in and out. Sherlock will definitely know you’re avoiding something. But, really, the third time in a month—maybe it wasn’t my place to say, but I didn’t know how easy it was to mix up 220B and 221B so frequently.

The first time I’d met Sherlock was when his landlady, Mrs. Hudson, invited me over for tea. “It’s not every day you get a new neighbor,” she said. She also told me that she’d invited the two men from 221B down for tea as well, since we’re neighbors now, after all, and, well, one of them could be a handful, so it was better I see what I was in for up front. John had been courteous, offered to show me some London sights since I was new to the city, and the other, Sherlock, looked bored beyond all belief. Mrs. Hudson gave me a telling look that let me know that that sort of behavior was normal for him. The general ruling was that Sherlock was always going to get on people’s nerves. There would be little, if any, exceptions of this rule.
There were two voices behind the door. And one definitely wasn’t John’s. “Sherlock?” I called out, knocking twice.

No response. Not a client, then, I’d assume. The previous two times, Sherlock had given me a harsh “What now?,” but this time, there wasn’t a peep.

“I know you’re in there. I’m coming in. They did it again.” I pulled on the door handle, allowing myself in. No, the other voice definitely wasn’t John.

The two men sat across from each other, both now staring at me as I walked in. Sherlock was there, yes, but the other—I’d never seen him before, and he didn’t quite look like a client. For starters, he wasn’t sitting in the client’s chair. I could deduce that much. His hair was brown, slicked back. Dark eyes, brown, I think, but nearly black. He wore a suit that looked more expensive than my apartment’s rent. Clean shaven, with…I hated to say it, but, with eyebrows that I thought were better than mine. And, dare I say it, he had a little something to him that made me want to know more. Maybe it was the suit, maybe it was the way he set down his tea as a way of acknowledging my presence. Was I envious, or something else?

“Oh.” I paused briefly, then walked over to Sherlock. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you had company,” I lied. This looked to be a rather serious call. “Not a client, I take it?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes—I was sure of it. “No. He’s not,” he drawled.

“One of your smart friends, then, is he? I didn’t know you were so popular, Sherlock. I’m starting to get jealous,” I joked, hitting him with the envelope, which he took out of my hands, and set aside.

“I wouldn’t say that.” He looked at the other person with an aggravated expression.

The newcomer decided to speak up, finally. “But I am smart, Sherlock. You must give me some credit.” A small smirk appeared on his face.

I held up my finger. “Hold up. Not another word.” I lowered myself down to Sherlock’s level, resting my head upon his shoulder. Sherlock’s body language screamed annoyed, but he tended to be annoyed with everything. “Let’s see now…” I gazed upon this newcomer, trying to analyze him. I’d hoped I’d picked up a thing or two from Sherlock. Despite his loud bits (and I say that lightly—violin at three in the morning and occasional gunshots tended to be more than simply ‘loud bits’), I did find him to be just as intelligent as he said he was. After all, it wasn’t every day that you met someone with such a presence. “Hmm…so, mister,” I said, not giving him a chance to tell me his name, “you’re not a client, as I said before. You’re not sitting in the chair. You’re here for business. I mean, you’re not in the chair, John’s not here, and you two don’t seem to be having a good laugh about the good ol’ days.

“You…don’t do public transportation. At all. Your suit is designer, and someone who can afford designer clothing doesn’t just take taxis or the metro.” I paused, looking at Sherlock, trying to figure out anything else that I could comment upon. Sherlock did it so easily, so naturally. “What else, what else…Oh! You’re left-handed. Callouses. And, the way you’re holding your tea. So. How did I do?”

A soft laugh. “Very good. Three for three. I’m impressed.” The way he said it piqued my interest. His voice held a small lilt. He wasn’t British—or at the very least, he didn’t grow up here. “Quite
“Thank you, thank you,” I pretended to curtsy.

Sherlock held up his hand. “Don’t get any wrong ideas. She’s not that impressive.”

I gave him a quick, slightly-harder-than-friendly slap on the arm. “Well, you don’t have to be so rude about it,” I laughed. “I think that one of these days, if John is ever sick, that you should take me on one of your cases. I’m just saying.”

He looked up at me out of the corner of his eye. “Don’t you have an essay to work on? Stop using me as a distraction.”

I pursed my lips and rolled my eyes. “I was just about to leave, anyways.” A smile reappeared on my face. He was always like that. With some kind words from John, his roommate, I knew not to take any of what he said too personally. “But I’m serious about helping you on a case. Any time you need me, Sherlock. Any time at all.” I meandered towards the door. “In any case, I’ll see you later Sherlock. And it was nice meeting you too, mister!” I left before giving him a chance to say his name or giving myself a chance to say mine. I decided upon moving to London to leave a little about myself to the imagination. I couldn’t say with any certainty that it helped me succeed in getting friends, but, one could hope. I’d have to move away at some point, anyways.

As I left 221B and entered my own humble abode, I hoped that I had intrigued this other man. I felt compelled to get to know him, but he didn’t seem like the type to invite just anyone out for brunch. He looked like he needed a reason to talk to somebody—as though he wasn’t one for idle chatter. If there was anything that I was good at, it was making a lasting first impression. I wished it was a good one.

But, if I could wish to be good at one thing right now, I thought to myself as I settled back down in the circle of notecards and quotes, turning on my laptop, it’d be writing this godforsaken essay.
A Knock on the Door

Chapter Summary

Alrighty, here's the next bit! I hope you enjoy this one as well :) 

A knock on the door an hour later brought me out of my essay-induced stupor. I’d advanced by a whole page. That mail delivery really *did* do me some good, after all. I made myself rise off of the carpeted floor, knees cracking and all. After stretching for a hot second, I made my way over to the door, unlocked it, opened it, and found myself face to face with the man who was in Sherlock’s living room.

“Hello again,” I offered. I had more or less expected that he’d get my number from Sherlock and text me. With a suit like his, I could have only imagined that he was a busy man. I definitely didn’t expect a house call. I was just lucky that I didn’t change back into my pajamas.

“Hello again, indeed. I realized shortly after you left that I never got your name,” he drawled out, waiting for my response.

“I never got yours either,” I told him. It was a rule of mine to never give my name out first. I learned early on that a lot could be said—or left unsaid—with a name. Coming from a small town like I did, my peers and I learned that names held weight, reputations, rumors. It was better to assess first than to assume. I looked him over, now that he was standing up. He was a few inches taller than me, but not so tall that he could use his height to intimidate. “I may not be as smart as you or Sherlock,” I confessed, “but I do know how to get a man’s attention.” I leaned against the doorframe, placing the ball in his court.


“Sherry. Like the drink. Sherry Thompson.” I held out my hand. “Glad to officially meet you, mister.”

Richard accepted my hand and shook it firmly. A businessman’s handshake. His hands were neither clammy nor sweaty. They didn’t tremble, either. He wasn’t nervous in the slightest. “Well, Sherry-like-the-drink. Would you accompany me for a drink sometime? I must admit you intrigue me. Besides, any friend of Sherlock’s is a friend of mine.”

I smiled. There it was. My mother gave me two rules about men when I left home for my undergraduate studies: firstly, if a man isn’t nervous about asking you out, he has ulterior motives and it’d do me best to not date him; and secondly, never go out with a man for drinks on the first rendez-vous, date, hang-out, whichever. I’d offer an alternative date, and whether he accepted or not would partially determine his integrity. “Well, mister, I hate to say it, but I’m not intriguing one bit. In fact, I’m rather boring. When I’m not working on essays, I visit the Thames, just to watch the water run by. I go to the library for fun. And I do my best to go to bed at ten o’clock each night. The most interesting thing about me is the fact that I know *the* Sherlock Holmes.” I shrugged and gave him a funny frown.

A small chuckle. “I find that most people aren’t typically what they say they are. In fact,
most people tout themselves on being so interesting when they really...aren’t. But you, Sherry-like-the-drink, there’s something about you that stands out from the crowd.”

Oh, no. Not that. I ran my tongue over my teeth and nodded my head before looking back up at him. “You know, mister, if you’re trying to compliment me by insulting others, you’re gonna have to try a lot harder.” I stared at him. Not harshly nor too friendly. Just enough to let him know that I wasn’t going to budge on my stance. Like I was eagerly awaiting his response, but wasn’t going to give him enough time to think of one.

There was a small shift in his demeanor. A dangerous glint appeared in his eyes, but the welcoming smile remained on his face.

I wondered if that was his fool-proof technique, and that I’d caused the effectiveness rate to go down from one-hundred percent to only ninety-five. Men never really took it well when they didn’t get what they want on the first try. But, he did intrigue me, so I figured that I’d give him another chance. He was a friend of Sherlock’s. And while Sherlock could be a bit of a pain sometimes, he was also a good person. And if Sherlock knew Richard, then I expected that he’d be a pretty okay person, too.

Besides, regardless of how our next few interactions would be, I’d get a good story out of it. And, in all honesty, I loved stories. “But,” I said immediately, not giving him any time to respond, “I could give you a few pointers over breakfast or lunch. Sorry, it’s a personal rule that I don’t drink alcohol on the first date.” I knew I was taking a risk by mentioning that it was a date despite him not having mentioned it earlier, but I felt it was a risk I could easily recover from.

“How about The Monocle Café, ten o’ clock, next Friday. Unless you have class then?”

He neither denied nor confirmed that it was a date. A date it was, then. The café sounded expensive by name. I could cut into my breakfast budget a little bit in order to satisfy this craving. “No class. That sounds good, thanks.” He exuded confidence, but was willing to renegotiate plans. Interesting combination. I was looking forward to see how that played out in the future. “It’s close by, though?”

“A few blocks south. Do you need a ride?”

I shook my head. “That’s not necessary. I’ll walk there like a boring person.”

“You seem to be invested in convincing me of that,” he joked. I didn’t know whether I wanted to prove him right or wrong. I’d never thought of myself as an intensely intriguing person before, but I guessed I’d need a paradigm shift to keep him invested. “But, I suppose we’ll see, won’t we?”

“I suppose so,” I agreed.

He dipped his head to signal his goodbye as he turned to the street.

“Wait,” I called out to him. One thing had been bugging me since he had shown up just five minutes ago.

He paused, and turned around, waiting to see what I’d have to say next.

I stood up from my position against the doorway. “How did you know where I lived? I mean…I suppose since my mail gets mixed up with Sherlock’s, you had to have known that I lived close by. And I also suppose that since over there,” I pointed across Sherlock’s place to Speedy’s, “is a restaurant, you had to have deduced that I lived here?”
A smile crept back onto his face and appeared alongside a little laugh. It was a genuine smile—the kind with crow’s feet near the eyes. “Good guess, but I’m afraid not. You were correct in that I don’t take public transportation—too grimy for my taste.” He paused, gauging my reaction. I tried not to give him one. “I simply just asked my driver what building you went in. Not everything is as complicated as Sherlock makes it. I can tell you’ve been trying to learn from him. Not a bad idea. However, I hope that in the future, you could learn something from me as well. Until Friday, Sherry-like-the-drink.”

Feelings of mild amusement and embarrassment crept their way into my chest. My face rouged, and I let out a huff of laughter. “Yes, until Friday.” I turned to go back inside, and shut the door behind me. My mother had told me never to go out with a man that wasn’t nervous about going out with me. And he was about as nervous as the sea is dry. But, I supposed I could make an exception to the rule just this once. After all, I did like stories, and he seemed like he was full of them.
The Spider in the Cafe

Friday had rolled around much sooner than I thought it would. I tried to swallow my nerves the whole time that I was walking to the café, but to no avail. *He’s just a guy, Sherry. Nothing to be worried about.* But, even so, he wasn’t just your ordinary man—he was on Sherlock’s level, which meant that this could go either very well, or very terribly. The rain was falling harder than I’d liked it to have been. The water effectively made my styled curly hair look straight once again, and I ended up looking as though I’d nearly drowned. At least I’d tried, and if he was as intelligent as he made himself out to be, he’d know that. I stood at the entrance of the café for a moment, cleared my throat, began to unbutton my coat, and walked in.

Mr. Brook was sitting at a table, near the back. He gave me a small smile and short wave when our eyes met. I took my coat off before sitting down, hanging it on the back of the chair. “Hello,” I offered.

“Morning. I see you caught a piece of the weather on your walk here?” He had an amused look on his face. Maybe I should have accepted that ride offer.

I let out a short huff of laughter. “The rain got worse as I continued walking. I tried to do things with my face, y’know,” I made the sign for beautiful, “but the rain had other plans for me this morning, it seems like.”

“Is it a rule of yours to not carry an umbrella?” He leaned out of the way so that the waiter could bring us two glasses of water. “Thank you.”

“Thank you.” I paused. “It’s not one of my rules, per se, but I have been socialized to suffer torrential downpours. Where I’m from, there’s a sort of hierarchy when it comes to umbrellas. The top of the pyramid is your high-class business moguls, who always carry an umbrella with them so that their suits don’t get ruined. And then there’s normal people—people who don’t work for million dollar companies—who refuse to use an umbrella under any circumstance in order to show their superiority. And then there are those who do use an umbrella, but it’s obvious that they want to move away to a sunnier place. So, no,” I laughed. “No umbrellas for me.”

“And where exactly are you from?” Richard sipped from his glass.

“The pacific northwest. America.”

He made an approving face. “I did notice the accent.”

“I noticed yours too,” I told him. “You and I should stick together. Irish?” He nodded in confirmation. “Anyways—this past week, I’ve been curious. How exactly do you know Sherlock? As I’m sure you know, he tends to keep to himself and his work, so that doesn’t leave a lot of room for any outsiders like you and me.”
Before Richard could answer, the waiter came back over and asked us what we’d like. He got an English breakfast tea, whereas I got a double espresso. “Powerful choice,” he commented.

I smirked. “I gotta have something strong. My life right now is a never-ending sea of essays.”

“We all have to make sacrifices.” He closed his eyes and gave me a that’s-just-how-life-is look. “Do things we don’t want to do. And I must admit that knowing Sherlock isn’t always something I want.” He paused, blew on his tea and sipped on it. “We play games with each other.”

“What kind of games?” I poured a packet of sugar into my tiny drink, and stirred it with the spoon that they provided for me.

He leaned in as though he was telling me a secret. “Detective games. London’s our playground.” Another sip of tea.

My eyebrows raised at his response. I thought that it’d be something more like chess, in all honesty. Something more logical, and less role-play. So he was interested in mysteries, too. I was glad to know that we had something in common other than Sherlock. “Well, Sherlock’s the detective. Does that make you the criminal?” I leaned in as well, and our eyes met over the rims of our small cups. A playful smile tugged at the edges of my lips. I thought I sensed a shift in air pressure, but it was still raining cats and dogs outside, so it was possible that I’d imagined it. A few moments passed where neither of us said anything, mindlessly listening to the rain splattering against the window.

“Perhaps,” he said, finally. “But what would that make you?”

A laugh escaped my lips. “Hopefully not the victim.” I was more of a thriller girl than a policier. In any case, I liked games, too. And this Richard Brook was slowly becoming one of my favorites. I couldn’t quite understand what he was getting at. There was an ulterior motive hidden in him somewhere, and I wanted to figure out what it was at any cost. Even if the cost was me getting hurt. It’d make a good story, in the end, anyways.

“No,” he agreed. “I should hope not.” Another sip. “So, tell me, Sherry. What is it that you do? Or are you going to try to convince me that you’re boring, still?”

I set my cup down in its saucer. I was halfway done. “Well,” I tried to stop myself from smiling, “I personally think that what I’m studying—I’m a student—is pretty interesting, though I don’t know if others would say so. I came to London to study Shakespeare. Shakespeare programs are pretty rare in the United States, so to get a really strong education, I dropped everything and moved here. And now, all that I seem to do is write essays and read articles. I see plays, sometimes, too.”

“And which one is your favorite?”

Not a beat had passed when I responded: “Titus Andronicus.”

He let out a low whistle. “Macabre choice.”

“It’s a macabre play,” I agreed. A tale of war, politics, and pie. “Some say that the good ol’ Willy Shakes never even wrote it. I’d have to disagree with them, though. Even the most comedic person can have gruesome thoughts, from time to time. Why couldn’t he, as well?” I crossed my legs, resting my chin upon my hands. “And what is it that you do, mister?”
“I dabble. Detective games. Acting. Business. Whatever’s interesting at the moment. I like to change things up every now and then.”

“Don’t like being tied down?” Curioser and curioser. A man willing to be flexible, and patient. A man who played games. A man who didn’t like to be bored. I rubbed my lips, thinking. His phone hadn’t gone off, nor had he even checked it. Either he was very polite, or he had nobody wondering where he was right now. It was right then that I decided. I was determined to know what he had to do with me. I had a hunch telling me that it wasn’t just attraction on his end. And, in order to find out what it was, I’d have to figure out how to keep him wrapped around my finger. It made me feel rather like a con-artist, but what could I say? I liked mysteries.

“Heaven’t found anything worth being tied down too,” he responded.

I lifted my espresso in response, and finished it off. “Nothing wrong with that.” We continued chatting and the rain continued pouring. Richard had finished his drink a couple minutes later, but we still sat there, at the back of the café. Before we knew it, an hour and a half passed, we’d ordered more coffee, we’d laughed, raised our eyebrows, and engaged each other in what I thought was a pretty good conversation. He was truly as intelligent as he said he was. And charming, as well. I felt a small pang of sadness. I really wanted him to be a good guy. One that actually cared, was patient, had no ulterior motives. I tried to shove those thoughts away, knowing that it likely wasn’t true. But, I could hope.

When we got our bill, I picked up my purse and began looking for paper money in my wallet. Richard stuck his hand out, placed it on the bill, and dragged it towards himself. “I can cover it dear, no need to worry.”

I pulled out a ten. “Are you sure?” Our drinks couldn’t have been that expensive, but I was expecting something much more pricey—I could pay for it, thankfully.

He nodded. “Positive. It’s my treat. I was the one that asked you here, after all.”

The lilt of his voice made my heart jump a little bit. Oh, no. “Well, thank you,” I said, stuffing the ten back into my wallet. “I appreciate it.”

The waiter returned with Richard’s change, wished us a good day, then left us to help other customers. Richard peeked at the window. The rain looked like it was coming down even harder than it was before. He gave me a look, wanting to know if I needed a ride.

I nodded my head in response. I had no desire to walk in that. I had pride in the way that I didn’t use an umbrella, but I knew when to suck it up.

He slipped his phone out of his pocket, and dialed somebody. “Hi. Yes, yes. We’re still at The Monocle Café. Two minutes. Bye.” His driver, most likely. He stood up, pushed in his hair, and offered me his hand. “Shall we?”

A smile crept onto my face, and I looked up at him. I was ninety percent sure that my face was beet red. Oh, no. This was bad. Very bad indeed. “We shall.” My heart skipped a beat as I placed my hand in his as he helped me up. I grabbed my coat when I noticed—what was that? A small spider, dangling on a lonesome thread. “Hang on for just a sec.” I cupped my hands around the spider, checked to make sure he was still there, and then nodded to Richard to lead the way outdoors.

“Not afraid of spiders, then?” He asked, peering at me with a curious look upon his face.
I shook my head. “No, not at all. They just want warm, damp, dark places, is all. They’re not that scary if you know how to take care of them. And even if they bite, well, most of them aren’t venomous. Anyways, they’re more scared of us than we are of them. They’re just doing their jobs, poor things.” Once we were outdoors, I crouched down and released the spider. “They’re the unsung heroes of this world. Without them, we’d be overrun with all sorts of other insects.” When the spider had safely crawled out of my sight, I dusted my hands off and raised myself back up to a normal height.

Richard looked at me with an expression that I couldn’t quite place. Approval, maybe? “You’re doing a rather poor job of convincing me that you’re uninteresting.”

I laughed. I always had a soft spot for spiders, though I wasn’t sure that that made me a person of interest.

He pointed at a black car. “That’s our ride.” He opened the door for me, then followed me in. “220B Baker Street.” And we were off.

I turned to him. “I’m a little curious, so I have to ask. Why did you come over last Saturday in person when you could have easily gotten my number from Sherlock or John?”

“Important matters should never be discussed over the phone,” he drawled out in a way that told me he meant it. “Which, reminds me.” He pulled out his phone, tapped on it a few times, and handed it to me.

I entered in my number, saved it, and handed the phone back to him. So, I was an important matter, huh? I couldn’t say that that wasn’t flattering. We made small talk in the few minutes it took to get to my place. When we arrived, he offered his hand again to help me out of the car. Once I was out, he didn’t let go. With his free hand, he made a twirling motion with his finger, signaling the driver to drive around the block. We were alone.

When we were at my front door, out of the rain: “I don’t suppose you have a rule about kissing after the first date?”

“What would you do if I said yes?” I let my lips part, and looked up at him innocently. Was I really going to break another one of my rules? All for a man who treated me with coffee when I didn’t want alcohol? The ball was in his court now. I honestly didn’t know what I’d do if he went in for the kill. Would I be more disappointed in him or myself? Or would I be relieved that he had stopped me from making that choice myself?

My breath hitched as he leaned in. Did I put lip balm on this morning? His head curved at the last second and kissed me on my left cheek. Slightly longer than a peck. In a moment of clichés, I brought my hand up, and felt the spot that he’d just kissed. My heart was beating so quickly that I thought I had been brought back from the verge of death. Did that really just happen?

Richard gave my hand a squeeze before letting go of it. “I’ll text you. Until next time, Sherry-like-the-drink”

“I’m looking forward to it, mister.”

He gave me a quick smile before turning around and leaving the apartment building. If this was how I reacted to a simple kiss on the cheek, I was mortified to think about my reaction if he dared to kiss me on the lips. I was genuinely looking forward to it. Please, please let him be a good guy. I wanted nothing more than that.
**Alike in Dignity**

Chapter Notes

Here's the next installment! It's just beginning for our grad student and favorite consulting criminal, so I hope you all enjoy :)

When Richard Brook finally texted me, it was three whole agonizing days later. Agonizing, partly because I hadn’t expected to wait that long for him to text me, and partly because I had to scramble up a working thesis for my culminating essay. There was so much that I wanted to say, but figuring out how to say it concisely and professionally proved me much trouble. Because of the troubles I’d been having, I’d mostly been watching Netflix and taking naps. Sometimes, I even ate ice cream.

His text took me by surprise, since it’d conveniently (or not-so-conveniently, depending on how you looked at it) come about an hour after I finalized my working thesis. While I would’ve been nice not to worry about wondering if I’d said anything wrong las Friday in the time that I was working, it was also nice to not have to daydream about our next date.

‘Walk around London at 10 this Friday? Let me know. -RB,’ is what his text had read. I waited five minutes before texting him back, not wanting to sound too eager. I told him that I could do Friday, but I wasn’t sure if I could do 10—I’d just pegged down an appointment to speak with my advisor a 9 o’ clock that day, and didn’t know how long it would take us.

‘Not to worry, just let me know when you’re in the clear. -RB,’ was his response. I briefly wondered if signing texts with your initials was a British thing. John and Sherlock did it too, on the off chance that I texted them. I smiled as I set my phone down. So, for the time being, he was still interested. Whether he was actually interested in me or something else, I wasn’t sure, but the point of the matter remained: he was interested.

But for how long would he be interested? If he was looking for someone with lots of spare time to spend with him, then I’d no longer be a good match. In those three days, I’d taken on quite a few responsibilities. In addition to working on my dissertation which took up most of my time, I’d also agreed to help out with a bake sale, I’d agreed to help a professor with their research, and I agreed to be a teaching assistant. All of these sounded easy—I’d done them before, save for the research—but they were beginning to leave me a little drained. Waking up each morning began to be a bit of a chore, and each night that I’d turn in felt like a blessing. I was tired of answering emails and grading quizzes.

The next week was a little difficult, to say the least. Instead of focusing on my studies as I intended to, I thought ahead to my advising appointment, and more importantly, my date. No, no, wait. My date, and then more importantly, my advising appointment. I had to keep my priorities in check. I was here in England to get a degree, not a husband. Richard Brook was a charming man, and I was becoming attracted to him much more quickly than I liked. What I really needed to do was become attached to the library, and do all the research I could before I got burnt out. I decided that after my next date, I’d really crack down on my studies.

When Friday rolled around, I woke up feeling less than pleased. It was seven-thirty, and not only did I have to get ready to discuss my thesis, but I also had to get ready for my date. I had
to be mentally and physically prepared, together, ready by the time I left my apartment. I was smart enough to have laid out my outfit and bag out the previous night but now it was a matter of actually looking presentable to the two people I’d have to impress today.

After fumbling around with my makeup and jewelry, I’d triple-checked my bag to make sure I had all the papers, journals, books, and articles that I needed. I caught myself before I rubbed my eyes, groaning. I didn’t want to ruin my eyeliner. It was going to be a long morning, and all I wanted to do right now was see Richard. I swatted my face. No, I told myself, you want to get your degree. Richard’s just a distraction. A fun one. Finally, I left my house a few minutes early, which I prided myself on.

I arrived at my professor’s office fifteen minutes early, in hopes that maybe she was already there, and we could start our meeting early, and then we could end early, and then I could go for my walk with Richard. Her door was shut, and there was no light peeking out from the gap between the door and the floor. So I sat, rested my head upon my chin, and waited, staring at my phone.

A hand on my shoulder brought me out of my fatigue-induced haze. I startled, and looked behind me to see who it was. “Oh! Hi, I—I didn’t expect to see you here.” My mouth dropped as he handed me a small coffee.

Richard smirked. “Thought you could use a pick-me-up before your meeting. You seemed stressed about your paper last week.” He pointed at the coffee. “It’s an espresso.”

It was a 12oz. cup. “Where did you go to get an espresso this big?” I took the lid off and blew on the liquid to cool it down. I’d always been a bit of a weenie when it came to hot drinks.

He cocked his head. “Anywhere can do it if you ask in the right way.”

“Oh my gosh, Richard, this must have been so expensive—thank you.” There must have been at least eight shots of espresso in here, and espressos weren’t cheap for their size.

He shrugged. “Just wanted you to be awake for your appointment. And our date,” he sang. “I also saw that you added some sugar to your espresso last time. I tried to get the ratio just right.”

My professor Joanne walked up to her door and unlocked it. “Hullo, Sherry.” Her eyes flickered to Richard. “Let me turn my computer on and I’ll be ready when you are.”

“Thanks, Joanne.” Richard kissed the top of my head. I could’ve sworn that Joanne’s visage paled a bit, but I wasn’t wearing my glasses, and I probably just needed more caffeine.

“Text me,” Richard said to me, squeezing my shoulder once more before he let his hand fall beside him as he walked away.

I gathered my things and took a deep breath, realizing that it didn’t matter how much caffeine I had if my thesis wasn’t good. So, I prayed to whoever was listening, please make my thesis good. Or at least workable. I didn’t think I could bear it if I had to think of a completely new topic after racking my brain for so long about this one. Here’s hoping.

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My appointment went better than expected. My rough outline looked fine for the most part, I had to tweak a sentence in my thesis, and I was given more authors to discover. All of this was doable in the two weeks between our next appointment. I pulled out my phone from my pocket
and texted Richard, letting him know I was on my way out now and where would we like to meet. Before going outside, I walked into the women’s room to check my hair and make-up. Nothing changed, really, just a couple hairs out of place. Good. Finally, I went outside, craning my head so I could try to find him. He’d texted me back saying that he was by the library but would walk towards where I was.

I spotted him a couple yards away, so I jogged to meet him halfway, buttoning up my coat while I was at it. “Hi,” I greeted him.

“Hello. I take it that it went well?” He offered his arm to me, which I gladly took. This time, he wore a nice blue suit, well-tailored and once again, probably more expensive than my rent. I had to admit I found myself both a little jealous and unworthy. A businessperson with a woman studying to get her masters in Shakespeare—it didn’t seem like a match that made much sense, especially when there were likely other women in his class bracket. But, I wasn’t going to complain. I was very happy with where we were right now: casual, but still intrigued.

“Yes,” I agreed, straightening my back. I recounted to him my new assignments in two weeks’ time, hoping that it wasn’t boring him, and told him that I was mostly glad that all of my work wasn’t for nothing, that I was glad that I didn’t have to redo anything.

“That’s good,” he mused. “I’m glad to hear it.” We began to walk along the street, meandering with no direction. Or, we could have been going somewhere specific, but I had no idea whether there was a park or anything nearby.

“So, how’s your business going?” I offered. I didn’t know exactly what he did—but if he could afford suits like those and multiple espressos in one go, he must be somebody extremely important.

He opened his mouth to begin, but was cut off by his phone ringing. I never took him for a Bee Gees man, or even a person to put one of their songs as his ringtone, but to each their own. “Excuse me, will you?” He let go of my arm, and wandered a few feet ahead of me, just out of earshot with all the hustle and bustle around me. I picked at my nails, wondering what the call could be about, since I still had yet to learn what exactly he did for a living, besides dabbling. I looked over at Richard, whose pleasant neutral expression had changed into something I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of. His eyes widened, eyebrows raised, shifting into furrowed eyebrows, a snarl. With every word he said, his left hand, making the shape of a flatted OK symbol, moved up and down as though he were the composer of Beethoven’s Fifth. Finally, he hung up the phone, and I pretended to be very interested in something in the window. “Sorry about that,” he apologized. “Some people.”

“It’s okay,” I said, relacing my arm through his. “What was that all about?”

“Somebody’s going to get a pink slip,” he sang.

“I’m sure it couldn’t have been too bad. Besides, you still haven’t really told me what you do yet. I mean, you play detective games with Sherlock, and you’re the criminal, obviously,” I joked, “so is it possible that work and play mix?” I rubbed my chin as though I was stroking an invisible beard.

Richard smirked and laughed. “Well, sometimes you have to take any means to get to an end. But really, I just help people with their problems. If somebody comes to me and they need something, I try to help them figure out a way to take care of it. I’m a consultant, in that way. I know a lot of people, have a lot of favors to cash in…just trying to make the world go round, I suppose.”
“A criminal that helps people,” I gasped dramatically, “I never thought I’d see the day. There’s always a first time for everything though, isn’t there?”

“There certainly is,” he mused, looking at me.

I tried to stifle a smile. I don’t know if I’d ever met a person this charming before. “So what do you do if you’re the one in trouble?”

“I honestly can’t say that I’ve ever been the one in trouble. I have an appearance to keep up as the person above the chaos.”

“That must be nice. It gets tiring to be in the middle of the chaos all the time.”

He hummed. “Not if you know the right people.”

I looked up at him. “Are you one of the right people then, mister?”

“If you allow me to be.” He looked down at me, eyebrows raised, expecting an answer. His tone indicated something more. I supposed that I should have seen this coming. After all, I wanted it too. I’d wanted him to do this since the moment we’d met, I think. I felt as though this was some sort of modern day Romeo and Juliet. But was I Juliet or was I Rosalind? Would I sacrifice myself or survive the play?

There were no rules for this. The last time I’d dated somebody was in my freshman year at college. Everyone else between then and now had wanted something besides romance. And so for now, I felt lost. There were no rules to adhere to or to break. I took a good look at him. He was somebody who had money and a good memory and had an impeccable taste in suits. His hair was slicked back, and he sometimes had the habit of wearing sunglasses despite it being cloudy every day in England. He yelled at people over the phone. But he respected my wishes, my rules. He brought me coffee even though I’d never asked him to. He made me feel special, and important. I wasn’t entirely convinced that romance was all that he wanted, but I figured that I may as well have a good time while I figured it out. I was going to get burned in the end, but god, if it didn’t feel good up until then. “Yeah, yes.”

He licked his lips, just enough for me to notice, parted his lips briefly. My breath hitched. I hadn’t kissed someone in god knows how many years—what if I forgot how? It couldn’t possibly be anything like riding a bike, that was for sure. He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it. “Nothing else would make me happier.” Instead of letting my hand drop, he intertwined his fingers with mine, and continued walking. “Except, perhaps, if you accepted my invitation to go out to dinner with me tomorrow? My treat.”

“I’d be delighted.” I couldn’t stop smiling. I was always a bit of a late bloomer, but now my time had come. And he was worth the wait.
Richard picked me up at six o’clock, right on the dot. I was just putting on my shoes when he had arrived. He told me to wear my best dress, that we were going somewhere special. I had only one dress that fit special occasions such as this one, but I figured that it’d have to be good enough. I’d told him about it beforehand, out of nerves that I was surely going to look out of place, but he reassured me that I’d be fine, and that he’d take care of anybody who decided to think otherwise. Smoothing out my dress, I stood up, glanced at myself in the mirror (I’d been so tired recently—I was lucky that my under eye circles weren’t showing), and opened the door with a smile.

He didn’t bother to hide the fact that he was looking me up and down. He scoffed, “I can’t believe you were worried. You look marvelous.”

I batted my eyelashes coyly. “Only marvelous?” Not even a beat passed before I followed with an “I’m just kidding. You look rather suave yourself.”

The suit he was wearing today was a dark maroon, once again impeccably tailored to fit his stature. His hair was coiffed back with a little gel, and he even had a little pocket square. He was so out of my league. How did I manage to get so incredibly lucky? And here I was, wearing a dress that was probably worth a tenth of his shoes, and home-painted fingernails that still had some polish on the skin. I was only playing at being upper class, but I was having a fun time with it. I was allowed to have multiple lives, to be a diligent student by day, and arm candy by night, I conceded. But still, I had to wonder, if I was playing at being rich, then what was he playing at? Was he the Robin Hood of romance, helping young women feel better about their lives by courting them?

“You know,” he drawled, “I could think of quite a few synonyms.” He offered his hand, which I graciously took. “Some such as stunning, striking, gorgeous, and that’s only three.”

I felt my face heat up and a smile creep onto my lips. I realized that I couldn’t do anything but giggle like a small schoolgirl who’d just gotten her first kiss. I turned my face away and covered my mouth with my hand. “Stop,” I whined playfully, laughing. “You’re embarrassing me.”

We stopped right in front of the car. Richard grabbed my chin, and ran his finger just below my bottom lip so as to not ruin my lipstick. “You should never hide a smile as beautiful as yours. That’d be a crime against us all.”

My mouth fell open slightly, and I found myself at a loss for words. Stupidly, “Okay.” I was utterly starstruck and in deep, deep water. There was no way I could keep up with him, but I’d be damned if I didn’t try. He opened the car door for me, and let me go in first as he had all the previous times we’d ridden together. Richard told the driver the name of the restaurant, something French-sounding, and I already knew that this dinner was going to be the fanciest thing I’d ever have. People like Richard didn’t seem to skimp when it came to dates. And wooing women, I noted. Not that I didn’t enjoy it.

When we arrived, I confirmed that the restaurant had a French name, which meant that it was expensive: Clos Maggiore. They had won quite a few awards, apparently, and some of the bottles of wine didn’t even have prices next to them. The food here seemed to be worth more money than I made in a day, it looked like. I could have only come here in my dreams. The only thing I could afford to eat here by myself was a glass of water, apparently. Maybe an appetizer, if I
was feeling spendy.

“Order anything you like. Don’t even look at the prices,” Richard told me. Well, I’d do as he asked. When would I get another chance to eat like this?

Once the waiter had taken our order and brought our food out, we were immersed in conversation. I’d told him about my childhood, living on the west coast in the United States with just my mother. How I’d been lucky enough for her to be able to take on debts to help me pay for college, and how I did my best to do well in order to make her proud. So that her money didn’t go to waste. And now, here I was, sitting in debt, but getting a good education. “Sometimes I wonder if I made the right choice,” I confessed to him. “Sometimes I think that maybe I should have studied business or economics instead of literature and Shakespeare.”

“What makes you say that? You certainly seem to have a knack and a passion for what you do.” He leaned in closer after taking another bite of his food.

“Ehh,” I twirled my fork in my food before actually taking a bite, “In all honesty, I see the lives some people have. The designer clothes, the minimalistic apartments, the fancy cars…those are all things that I want—that anybody wants, really—but it sometimes feels all too obvious that I was never meant for a life like that. Not with the route I’m on now. I mean, I’d like to have a life like that, but it just doesn’t seem possible.”

“When do you say that?” Richard furrowed his eyebrows, appearing to be genuinely curious.

“My paycheck,” I laughed. “Shakespeare scholars don’t exactly make six figures.” Though I really, really wished that they did. But, on the bright side, they made decent livings, sometimes as librarians, or archivists, or as world-renowned experts on the subject. If I was lucky enough, I’d be able to work at a Shakespeare Festival back home, or even at the Globe here, if that was even possible for a person like me. Alas, a girl could dream.

“You just need to know the right people,” he mused. “You deserve those things. Anyone who says otherwise is a fool. You just need to take what you want with no regrets.”

I leaned back, taking a sip of the hideously expensive wine he’d ordered. “Well, I’d have to do some major budgeting. Thank you for listening,” I sighed. “It’s just something that’s been plaguing me for a while, and since I’ve moved here and seen how posh everybody is, I’ve been so busy with my studies that I’ve hardly gotten to know anybody, so I’ve been keeping things all cooped up in me, and it’s not good. So, yes. Thank you.”

“I’m always here to listen. Just let me know when you need to talk. I’m sure I could pencil you in for next Tuesday, maybe around 4 o’ clock?” He joked. Something about his tone of voice reminded me of a professor and their busy schedules, what with classes, grading, and office hours.

“It’s a date then,” I played along with his jest. “But really, it’s nice that you’re willing to listen. Most men aren’t,” I said, taking a big sip from my glass.

“Ahh,” he said, raising his glass in a Gatsby-like fashion, “But you forget, I’m not most men.”

No, you certainly aren’t, I thought, allowing the wine to course through my body. I smiled at him. It had been a while since I felt so relaxed and at peace. I never once thought I’d feel this way in a restaurant where everyone spoke only slightly above hushed tones, with clinking glasses being heard from every which direction.
“Did you want any desert? I’m sure that the waiter will be coming back soon to ask.”

My stomach felt warm and full and I didn’t want this night to end. “I have to be honest with you, mister. I don’t think I could go for any more food right now. But I’ll tell you what. I have a bottle of wine back at my place that we could share.” He perked up upon hearing this. “I can’t really pitch in money-wise, but I can make sure our night lasts a little longer, don’t you agree?”

“Sherry, that’s the best idea you’ve had all night,” he agreed. “After all, this is our third date, isn’t it?”

A shocked smile spread on my face, and I looked around to confirm that nobody else but me heard his comment. “You cheeky bastard!” I cried. “We could at least get to first base before you talk like that.”

Before taking the final sip of his wine, “I could make that happen, if you’ll allow me.” A pair of raised eyebrows. Dark brown eyes over the rim of the glass. An accent to die for.

The wine that I’d had tonight had certainly lowered my inhibitions, and was making me suggest things that I wouldn’t normally in a sober state. But, it wasn’t in control of me yet, and we had a few hours left until tomorrow. I was more than willing to make them count. I was in a position to allow myself to make a few stupid decisions without regretting them. I mean, I did have a rule that told me not to take any men home with me if I was drunk, but what was one more rule? That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold.

That which hath made them bold hath made me drink. Drunk. I had clearly overestimated myself and my alcohol tolerance. It’d been a while since I’d had that much, and wine always hit me harder than liquor, so I was left trying my hardest to pretend that I wasn’t as drunk as I was. After a car ride and a bumpy walk from the car to my apartment, we had finally made it inside. “Make yourself at home,” I told Richard. “I have some white wine in the fridge, is that okay?” He nodded. “I’ll grab some glasses.”

After struggling with the cork for a minute, I was finally able to pour ourselves some wine. When I brought the two glasses out, I found Richard standing by my wall, looking at the mess that was now my thesis, with a few personal photos mixed in. “Is this you?” He asked, pointing to a small picture.

I handed him his glass and took a small sip from mine. “Mmm-hmm. That’s my mom and I at my high school graduation.” I blew out a breath of air. “I can barely believe that that was ten years ago.” A lot had changed since then, mostly for the better. I had rounder cheeks back then, and a terrible haircut. I could point out a few of my friends in the background, Micah, Taylor, Carly…I wondered how they were all doing, and if they ever thought of me sometimes. Probably not, I figured, given that I rarely thought about them myself.

“And your thesis,” he continued, gesturing to the sticky notes stuck to the wall, and notecards I’d thumbtacked. I wasn’t flexible enough to spread everything out on the floor anymore, so I’d resorted to pinning important quotes and ideas on the wall to give myself some extra room. It was a good idea until I realized that I’d literally been staring at the wall when I found myself unable to write a sentence.

Slowly, I nodded. “Yes. Now if you don’t mind, I’m here to talk about you, and not my dissertation,” I said, the word feeling like cotton in my mouth, taking his hand and leading him towards the couch. Or my teaching assistantship, or the bake sale, or my professor’s research.
“Oh, about me now?” He said, feigning modesty. “What could there possibly be to talk about?”

“Do you want more wine?” I asked, looking at his empty glass. He agreed to more, and I began to divide what was left in the bottle between the two of us. “Well, for starters,” I started, sitting us both down, “you could tell me how it’s possible for one man to look so…ravishing in a suit.”

“Only ravishing?” He raised his eyebrows and let a mischievous smile slide onto his face.

My faced rouged in embarrassment. I’d really hoped that he’d forgotten about that by now. “Well, I could think of a few synonyms,” I said, after I’d recovered from my miniature heart attack. “Such as entrancing, captivating…tempting.” Oh, maybe I was both drunk and bold. That would be a nice change of events. Normally when faced with this much wine, I’d either laugh at everything that anyone said or I’d be a blubbering mess.

He threw his head back in laughter.

“Okay, okay,” I threw up my hands, then took another sip of wine, “I have to ask. It’s been bugging me all night.” He gave me an expression that told me to continue. “Have you ever been a professor?” Now, my voice was really beginning to let on that I was much more drunk that I appeared. I hung onto certain syllables for much longer than I needed to, and my sentences ended with my voice going up an octave.

Richard leaned in. “How do you figure that? What gave it away?”

“So you admit to having been a professor,” I asserted with a smug smile. I let out a stream of air. “I don’t know. Nothing really gave it away, I guess. There was just something about your tone of voice at one point. Besides, you’re an intelligent guy…sometimes it feels like I’m taking a class that I didn’t even know I was enrolled in.” A beat passed. “Not that you make me feel stupid or anything, because you don’t. Just that what you have to say is interesting on a whole other level, is all,” I continued, trying to justify my words, which was difficult thanks to the alcohol.

He let out a small chuckle. “Curioser, and curioser,” he mumbled, looking at me over his wine glass before taking a sip from it. “I knew you intrigued me for a reason, Sherry. But,” he looked over to the clock that I’d hung on the wall, “I’m afraid that I’m going to have to get going. I have an early day tomorrow.” He finished the last of his glass and set it down on the side table.

“You are a busy person,” I agreed. I stood up with him so I could show him out of my apartment. I was lucky that I had a hallway separating my apartment from the outdoors, because otherwise I’d have to put on the heat after letting him leave. Disappointment swelled in my chest. I’d rather hoped that he would kiss me. But, I guessed that it just wasn’t the right time, and we were both drunk, and, well, maybe it was for the best. “I’ll see you later,” I told him, opening the door.

“Have a good night, Sherry-like-the-drink.” Richard gave me what I think was a knowing look. I think he knew damn well what he was doing, going off like that without having kissed me. A small smile tugged at the edges of his lips, and he slowly walked off without looking back, hands shoved in his pockets.

I nearly shut the door behind him before I got half a mind to call out after him and say, “Wait!”

He stopped, and spun on his heels to turn around. He sauntered back over to where I was
standing in the doorway with an expectant look on his face. I saw him glance at my lips and then back up to my eyes.

That’s when my mouth ran dry. I was going to ask him to give me a kiss goodnight before he left, but now I felt the nerves creeping in through my fingers, and I found myself unable to ask him for what I wanted. “Um,” I said, filling the silence, “I always have trouble with this zipper. Would you pull it down just enough?” I pointed behind my shoulder, throwing an embarrassed smile on my face. I didn’t tell him to wait just for this, and we both knew it.

But, he responded, “Sure.” I turned around so he could get to my zipper. With one hand, he brushed my hair off and over one shoulder, and with the other, he pulled the zipper down to where the band of my bra was. He lingered there for a moment, and I wanted nothing more than to see his face to try to figure out what was going through his mind at that moment. I felt him shift behind me, and moved his other hand so that both were resting on my shoulders. My breath hitched, ready to be turned around and faced with the most devastatingly passionate kiss in all of kissing’s history.

Instead, he lowered himself and kissed the nape of my neck. His lips rested there for a few moments, before he pulled up just enough so that I could feel his breath on my skin. I sighed, probably audibly, but I didn’t care. Slowly, I turned around to him, only focusing on his lips. At this moment in time, there was nothing that I wanted more than to kiss him.

His lips parted just slightly. I thought that he was going to go in for the kill until he spoke up. “I’ll call you tomorrow to see how you are. Have a good night, Sherry.” And with that, he walked away.

And then I was alone, standing in the hallway between the front door to the building and my apartment. He had left me hanging onto something that I was only barely able to grasp. I closed my eyes, trying to imagine what it’d be like if he had actually kissed me. Maybe it was a good thing that he didn’t. It was a rule to not let men kiss me for the first time when I was drunk. It was a rule that I would have gladly broken for him.
Cried to Dream Again

Both Richard and I were beginning to get busy, it seemed. Me, with the second draft of my paper and now all my extra-curriculars, and him, with his business. Luckily, we had still managed to go out once or twice in the two weeks that had passed. We still hadn’t kissed. It was actual, literal torture. But, in the meantime I used what seemed like a metric ton of lip scrub and lip balm. When the time was right for us to kiss, I had no desire to have dry, chapped lips.

For right now, though, I was content. More than content. I walked along the Thames, surprisingly only wearing a cardigan as my protection from the weather. Today was a rare sunny day, I realized, so I decided to soak up some vitamin D before it completely escaped my grasp. I knew that I had plenty of responsibilities that were waiting for me back at my place, but I was currently ignoring that. I had emails from students, and from the group that was running the bake sale, and my paper, but I had no cares in the world. It was sunny, I was happy, and I allowed myself to feel something other than stress.

I had to admit though, I was a little bit disappointed with my schedule in that I found myself so busy that I had no time in the next two weeks to go on a date with Richard. He understood, after all, he was a busy man himself, but it was still something that I’d looked forward to. Alas, such is life.

Everyone was in a good mood today. The sun had truly brought out the best in people. I leaned against the railing guarding the fine line between land and a quick drop to the Thames, listening to the conversations of those passing by. They were in groups, alone, in couples, and they all wore smiles. The sunlight was dancing off of the rippling currents in the Thames, in little diamond shaped patterns that made me want to paint. If I stared too long, it became blinding, but it was the sort of dazzling picture that would have been worth it.

I sighed, feeling the soft wind through my cardigan. It was chilly, but not so cold that I felt the need to go back home. Everything about this moment was perfect. Everything about my life right at this very second was absolutely perfect.

A pang of sadness filled my chest. I was going to have to leave here in a few months. Go back home, make a life back in the United States. It was obvious, logical, practical. But how could I do that to myself? In the short time that I’d been here, I’d made a life. I had friends, a good support system, responsibilities, a boyfriend, a fondness for British name brands, a newfound love for tea, a dream that called to me from Stratford. Melancholy. Bittersweet. How could I leave everything behind like that? Leave this beautiful city, this beautiful river. Everything here was a train ticket away. I could go to France for less than two-hundred dollars. A flight to Latvia wouldn’t even be six hours long. England seemed to be my whole world, now.

Shaking my head, I tried to clear my mind of those depressing thoughts. Those thoughts were for when I was packing my suitcases to return home, not for when I should be out, enjoying the day. I had so much happiness in my life right now, and it didn’t need to be bogged down by a case of the foreign student blues.

Another sigh escaped my lips. Part of me felt annoyed that I forgot my sunglasses on such a beautiful day as this one, but I was also glad that there was no filter between me and the world right now. There was so much going on around me. Children laughing, friends out and about, business folks rushing somewhere with a to-go coffee. I was a part of it all, and I was so incredibly lucky. Who else could have dropped everything to go study abroad, and in London, no less? I was privileged and hardworking and it paid off. I had a wonderful boyfriend, had incredible neighbors,
lived by the best river in the world, and had the opportunity to visit museums, see plays, go to bars. The city was alive, and it had welcomed me with open arms. How could I be anywhere but here right now?


“Oh!” I startled, and turned to face him. “Hey, how are you?” I hadn’t expected to see him here. In fact, I hadn’t expected to see him for another week or so. He looked as though he didn’t expect to see me either. Well, to be fair, today was the perfect day for a stroll along the Thames.

“You’re crying,” he plainly stated, eyebrows furrowed.

I hadn’t even noticed. I raised a hand to my face, and indeed felt a wetness along my cheeks. “Oh,” I said, looking at my fingers as though confirming that they were now, indeed, wet, before looking at him. “I didn’t even notice. I don’t know why I’m even crying… I think I’m just… happy.” It wasn’t a lie. My heart was feeling so many things right now that it was probably just overloaded. That was how I felt, right at this moment. I began to think that my tears were a mixture of beauty and sorrow, because how else would I describe the feeling of happiness being here alongside a pre-emptive bout of melancholy and nostalgia for when I’d have to leave?

Richard’s eyes darted down and back up at my eyes. Was this it? He took my chin into his hand, and pressed his lips onto mine. A north wind passed between us. It was the sign of Lucifer himself, if you believed in superstitions. But how could a man, this man, who was tenderly gripping my chin, and kissing me so sweetly be the devil? When he released me, I couldn’t do anything besides stare into his eyes, wanting more, wanting to be alone. I smiled, the corners of my mouth tugging just upwards. He looked at me confidently, not wondering if he’d made the right decision or if he’d broken any rules. He knew that he’d done well and wasn’t afraid to show it. Neither of us said anything.

This moment was unlike any I’d ever been in, and I never wanted it to end. Birds chirping, the Thames rippling, the feeling of warmth on my skin. Richard, standing in front of me. Me, breathless and alive. “Well, if I was happy then, I must be absolutely blissful now.”

“Are you, then?” Raised eyebrows. A smirk trying to stay hidden. A twinkle in his eye.

I nodded definitively. “Definitely.” A shared laugh between us. I reached out to straighten his lapels. “What are you doing out here? I thought you would have been cooped up in an office making important business deals. Or are you taking a break from being such a busy man?”

He shrugged. “I could say the same thing about you. Shouldn’t you be grading something?”

“Yes,” I said begrudgingly. “But I figured that this was a much better alternative.” My heart rate had finally slowed, and I rolled my lips together. Oh, good. I was wearing lip balm. I wrapped myself tighter in my cardigan. The north wind was blowing harder now, and clouds were slowly rolling to London in the distance.

“I’m glad I could be of assistance,” he mused, then looked at his watch. “Well, it appears that I have to go. I have an important appointment to keep. Do you want somebody to pick you up?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks. I’m going to meander back home. It’s not quite a tempest yet.”
He looked to the far-off clouds, a serious expression resting on his face. “It soon will be.” A change in his visage, something brighter now. “Well, Sherry. Get home safely.” This time, he put his hand on my cheek, thumb rubbing just under my eye. My cheek was no longer wet. Another kiss, as sweet as the first. He made the telephone sign and mouthed “I’ll call you” as he sauntered off the direction opposite of my apartment.

A blush spread on my cheeks now that I was alone. Kisses like those were the kind you thought about at night when you had somebody else in your bed. As I began to walk off, I took one last glance at those foreboding clouds. The more I thought about my little detective game, the more I wondered if he was playing some sort of game as well. In the beginning, I thought he was, and now I was so sure. I wanted this to be the real deal, but it felt as though he was Prospero, the sorcerer, and I was Ariel, the spirit unable to escape his grasp.

My keys jangled as I began to pull them out of my pocket. I had such a good walk (definitely in the top ten of all walks I’d ever taken), and I was rather disappointed to go back to my studies and work. My body slowly began to feel decrepit, old, tired. I really didn’t want to do work right now. Buzzing came from my phone, and I looked at it excitedly, hoping it was Richard. Actually, it was John: ‘Sherlock needs your help. Come over when you can. JW’

Saved by the bell, it seemed. I stuffed my keys back into my pocket, gladly making my way to my neighbor’s. Excitement bubbled up in me—maybe he needed my help for a case. Finally, my time to shine. Part of me had always wanted to be a detective when I was younger, but once it was time to choose a career path, I figured that the chances of me dying in action were much less if I decided to pursue the arts.

I knocked Sherlock and John’s door before I walked in—something that had become commonplace for us whenever I came over. John was the first to greet me with a hello and would you like a cup of tea? Sherlock, on the other hand remained seated at his chair, hands in his thinking position, silent.

Once the tea had been delivered to my hands, John began. “Sherlock’s got this case recently, and we thought it might interest you.” He handed me a few small pieces of paper which had various quotes inscribed on them. I took a good look at each one: Hell is empty and the devils are here. What’s past is prologue. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language. Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows. And, most forebodingly: He that dies pays all debts. These were all from The Tempest—and didn’t Richard just say something about a tempest coming soon? I shook my head to rid myself of those thoughts. This was just a weird coincidence. Besides, this couldn’t possibly have been plotted out and documented in the half hour between seeing him and Sherlock.

When I’d finished looking through them all, Sherlock finally spoke up. “Well?”

A beat of silence between us. “Well…what? They’re from The Tempest, but surely you know that. And they’re…they’re creepy quotes. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m flattered that I can help you Sherlock, but I’m not too sure what it is you’re asking of me. If you wanted to know who said which quotation, or what the plot is, I’m sure you could just Google it.” The tale of a magical man wronged by his brother twelve years earlier, forced to live on an island with his daughter, a spirit, and a slave, only to use his magic to shipwreck those who had wronged him so long ago. There was more to it than that, but a paraphrase would have to do.

A sharp intake of breath. “Yes, but you have the training to properly analyze each quote and its relevance to the scene, act, and the entire play itself.” He looked at me expectantly, stood
up, and towered over me. “I want you to cross-reference the quotations within the play and their relevance to where we found them.” He handed me a manilla file that seemed to be filled to the brim with photos and various other reports from Scotland Yard.

I took the file from his hands and flipped through its contents. “So you want me to do your homework for you.” It wasn’t a question. It was more of a fact, than anything else.

“Well…” Sherlock began before John cut him off.

“Yes,” John confirmed, looking at me with tired eyes. He understood my pain, I could tell that much. “It’d be very helpful.”

What was one more thing to my ever-growing pile of responsibilities? “Can I put this on my resume?” After all, it was real-life usage of my studies. An incredibly short and very brief internship, I could say.

Sherlock shrugged. I took that as a yes.

I sighed, defeated. This wasn’t exactly what I meant when I offered to help him on a case, but it was a start. If I impressed him, he’d be more willing to bring me along some other time, right? “Okay. I’ll do it. I’ll let you know if I find anything, okay? But next time,” I pointed my finger at the two of them, “you have to take me along on a case. Even if it’s a really simple one.”

John smiled and let out a small laugh. “It’s a deal.”

Sherlock looked at him pointedly, eyebrows furrowed. He opened his mouth to speak before John, bless him, once again cut him off.

“Promise.”

I finished the last of my tea and set the cup down on a table. “Well, thanks for the tea. And the case,” I waved the folder in my hand. “But, I ought to be starting some homework. I’ll get back to you as soon as possible. I’ll see you around.”

Before I could get out the door, Sherlock stopped me: “Sherry.”

“Yes?”

“You haven’t talked to a man named Moriarty recently, have you?”

I frowned, shaking my head. “I can’t say I have. If I did talk to someone with that name…” I shrugged, “then I didn’t know anything about it.” Sherlock responded with a nod and sent me on my way again. I’d never even heard the name before. But if Sherlock asked me about it, then there was something that he was trying to work out, and I might be involved somehow. I didn’t want to think of that. All I wanted to think about now was Shakespeare, and the heavy sleep I knew that I’d be getting tonight.
My body sagged under the weight of how tired I was feeling. Two weeks had passed since I’d seen Sherlock, and he—well, John—seemed pretty understanding of the fact that I had a lot on my plate. When I wasn’t working on my dissertation and my TA responsibilities, I was studying \textit{The Tempest}, reading articles about \textit{The Tempest}, and watching different productions of \textit{The Tempest}. This left me tired, running off of coffee that made me more anxious than awake, and unable to sleep.

At the moment, it was nearly nine o’clock, the sky was dark, and my kitchen was \textit{hot}. I’d been baking what felt like non-stop for the past few hours. The bake sale was tomorrow, thank god. That meant I could stop fretting about those emails and rid myself of another task. All I had to do was wait twenty-four more hours.

Richard and I had mostly been communicating by text and the occasional check-in call when we’d both had a day too busy to even think about texting. Overall, his stuff was the usual, and my stuff was busy, busy, busy. Right now was one of those times. My phone buzzed, I turned off the music that I’d been blasting to try to keep myself energized, and accepted his call. “Hey,” I greeted. “You’re on speaker.”

“Anyone else there?” A curious tone bordering on cautious.

“Nah,” I responded, using my hands to mix together a bowl of ingredients. “I’m just baking right now and my hands are busy.”

“Ah. How’s that going?”

I let out an audible sigh. “It’s going. I can’t wait to be done, though. I’ve been baking for the last couple hours,” I laughed. It wasn’t a happy one. But, I planned to fake it till I made it. I could cry and sleep once I’d gotten my degree.

“What’re you baking?”

My hands were absolutely covered in cookie dough. At first, it’d been a fun change of pace, but now the sight of the dough was starting to make me feel a little nauseous. “I’m in charge of gluten-free, allergen-free, and vegan options. So, I have just about every kind of peanut butter, chocolate chip, sugar, and snickerdoodle cookies on hand. Do you want me to save you or your coworkers any?” I couldn’t give away too many, but I’d already set aside some cookies that had broken or had spent just a little too long in the oven for those over at 221.

“Well…maybe a few,” he confessed. “Surprise me.”

I’d began rolling the cookie dough into little balls and placing them on a baking sheet that had finally cooled. “Will do.” Inhale. Exhale. After the next two batches of vegan and allergen-free cookies, I’d be done for the night. Thank god. “How’s work?”

I imagined that Richard shrugged at this point. “The usual. Just a lot of decision making at this point. And waiting for somebody to get a clue…” He grumbled that last part.

“A Blue’s clue?” I mumbled back, now washing my hands.

“What?” Understandable conclusion. My guess was that Blue’s Clues wasn’t exactly shown outside of North America—maybe even the United States itself.
“Oh, nothing. Just a television show.” I was too tired to discuss the semantics of my favorite tv show as a four-year-old and how Steve was arguably a very good detective. I bent down to open up my baking cabinet, looking for some more flour. I knew I had some back there, somewhere. Forcing canisters and bottles out of the way, I came up with…nothing. Squat. Zilch. I closed my eyes, forgetting about the phone call, and shouted. “Fuck!”

“Is everything okay?” Genuine concern leaked into his voice.

“I—” My voice started out louder than I wanted it to, so I cut myself off, allowing myself to find words in a nicer tone of voice. He’d done nothing to provoke my outburst—my own stupidity for not buying enough flour did. My throat began to burn as I started to speak again. “I don’t have any more flour,” I said in a near whisper. “I um…” It was too late to wait for what was in the oven to finish to go out and buy more. Maybe I could go see Mrs. Hudson if she was still awake? And if not, Sherlock was definitely still awake. That man never slept, I was told. My voice began to waver. I was so tired. “I just need more flour. I need to go. And get some. Flour. I need flour.” I didn’t want to leave my apartment with the stove on, but I’d been using it practically non-stop since four or five, and it hadn’t begun to burn just yet.

Richard spoke just before I was going to tell him I was going to hang up. “I’ll bring some flour over. Don’t worry. How much do you need?”

Oh, Richard. He was too sweet. While I really wanted him to do this, there was a part of me too prideful for this. I was the one who chose to put too much on my plate, and now I’d have to eat it. “Richard—you don’t have to—”

“I’m going to. Now, how much do you need?”

I shrugged, even though I knew he couldn’t see it. The burning in my throat was going away, and my voice stopped wavering as badly. “Um…I think just a regular sized sack. Maybe two, just in case?” My batches were pretty large. I hated asking for a just-in-case sack, especially when I might not even need it, but what if I did? That would just set me off to a downward spiral.

“I’m on it. Just give me a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll unlock the door so you can just come in.” I rubbed my hand on my forehead, then ran it down my face. My throat had stopped burning just in time for my eyes to start. I hoped that the bake sale would be cancelled. I didn’t want to get there at eight in the morning to help set up. I wanted to sleep in for god knows how long. These past two weeks, I’d been getting a maximum of six hours of sleep each night, and a minimum of only four, sometimes. “Thank you. Really.”

“Don’t worry about it. Be there shortly.” And with that, he hung up.

When Richard arrived, he knocked twice before entering. I was standing at my kitchen counter, in the middle of wrapping baked goods since making more cookie dough wasn’t an option for the past twenty or so minutes. “Hey,” I called out, acknowledging his presence. When he came into the kitchen carrying two sacks of flour, I noticed that he was wearing one of his suits. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t come as a shock to me, considering it was past nine o’ clock. I figured that he’d be much more casually dressed. The only difference between day-time Richard and night-time Richard, it seemed, was the fact that he had the beginnings of a five o’ clock shadow.
I realized that I had created this expectation in my mind that he’d be coming in sweats or something, and now I felt myself rather embarrassed, wearing a plain white t-shirt with baking ingredients all over it and sweatpants a size too big stained with dried cookie dough. But, regardless of the embarrassment that was clearly showing on my face with the help of my reddening cheeks, I took the sacks from his hand, placed them on the counter, and looked at him with the most meaningful expression I could muster in my current state. “Thank you so much. You’re a literal lifesaver.”

He looked at me, and I felt more transparent than ever. If he was on the same intellectual level as Sherlock, then surely he was deducing something about my present state of sanity. The wild pony-tail, the dark circles under my eyes, the chipped off nail polish—I was clearly headed for some sort of break, wasn’t I? “I’m just glad I could help,” he offered.

“So,” I tried smiling the best I could, trying to lighten the mood, “you’re in the business of helping people. How can I ever repay you?”

Richard looked up and to the left, a sign of thinking. “Hmm…” He pursed his lips, in the middle of a thought. “Maybe a little sugar, in exchange for the flour?” He took one of the broken cookies I’d set aside, ate a bite, and continued. “When you’re feeling up to it, of course. These will do in the meantime.”

The bit of laughter that I gave came out more like a huff than anything else. I was tired, my body was tired, my eyes were tired, and I couldn’t tell if it was truly me that was upset with him for suggesting a kiss at this moment or if it was just the fact that I was cranky. I tried to play it off as though the comment didn’t bother me at all. “It’ll be an IOU, then. Just tell me when, and I’ll gladly oblige, mister.”

I think he noticed that I was not in the mood for that kind of joking around. “I’ll help. It won’t make it go faster, but it might be more pleasurable. Besides, I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Oh, Richard.” I deflated, annoyance exiting just to leave me with just how tired I felt. “You got me this flour, you don’t have to—”

A determined look appeared on his face. “No, no. I will. I like playing house sometimes.”

“Well…alright,” I said, with a little reluctance. He did offer, and it couldn’t hurt. “But you probably don’t want to bake in that.” I gestured to his suit. “Um…I have another pair of sweatpants that are probably about your size, and I don’t know about shirts…”

He began undoing his tie. “Undershirt,” was all he said in response.

I nodded, rinsed my hands off in the sink, then went to my room to find the sweatpants. When I returned, he was sitting down, in the middle of taking off his shoes. His jacket, shirt, and tie were folded into a neat pile. He must get his suits dry-cleaned pretty frequently. I handed him the sweatpants and told him that the bathroom was that way, but if he wanted to stay out here, that was fine because I wouldn’t be able to see him from the kitchen anyways.

Afterwards, he joined me in the kitchen, rubbing his hands together. Now that I was looking at him without a suit, he seemed…different. Not necessarily less powerful, but maybe less commanding. As though he had taken off his sometimes intimidating-businessperson-aura along with his tie. Now, it was me who was in control. “I’d like for you to be on bagging and packaging duty.” I wiped my hands off on my pants, and began to show him how I was separating them. Once I knew for sure that he understood my system, I went back to checking my recipe and measuring out this goddamn flour.
The silence between us would have been more comfortable had I not been so fatigued, but it wasn’t necessarily a *bad* silence. I think we both knew that I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. Once I’d put the next batch in the oven—oh god, it was nearly ten o’clock—I let out a long, heaving sigh, and rubbed my face, surely smearing some cookie dough while I was at it.

I could both hear and feel Richard slowly turn around. I turned around too, holding a cup of flour, so we could face each other. The bag of cookies he was holding crinkled when he put it down. He looked at me dead in the eyes, pensively, in a way that I didn’t think was supposed to make me feel small but did anyways. “How are you, Sherry-like-the-drink?”

With that one question, he had opened the floodgates. I set down my cup of flour, afraid that I’d drop it with the way that I was wilting, and found myself having trouble to speak. I broke eye contact, my chin crumpled, my throat burn, and tears stung my eyes. When I finally did speak, my voice cracked and came out just above a whisper. “I’m *so* tired.” And with the final admittance that I had indeed pushed myself too far, the waterworks came pouring out.

In one swift movement, Richard came to where I was standing and wrapped his arms around me. I buried myself in his chest, not caring that there’d definitely be tear-stains when I came back up. My crying turned into sobs once or twice, and he didn’t say anything. He simply just stood there, one hand gripping the nape of my neck, the other rubbing my back, waiting for it to all come out.

I only separated from him when the oven’s timer went off. He pulled back, planted a kiss on my forehead, then put on the oven mitts so he could take care of it himself. While he did that, I trudged my way over to the sink and splashed my face with cold water. How embarrassing was that? I was a little disappointed in myself that I couldn’t wait to cry until I was alone. I didn’t want to turn back around to face him after the little scene I’d made, so I simply stayed put.

To my surprise, he came over to me and wrapped his arms around my waist. He kissed my cheek, allowing a weak smile to appear on my face. At least he wasn’t too weirded out, or anything. I’d seen too many of my friends’ boyfriends proclaim that women were emotional beings, then run away when their girlfriends expressed any emotion at all (besides happiness, that is). Finally, I decided to talk. “Sorry. That was, um…”

“Sherry,” he hummed in my ear. He put his hands on my waist and turned me around so I could face him. He looked at me with another very serious expression. “Do you remember when I said that I’d hope you could learn something from me?”

The first time we met. I nodded weakly, not wanting to make eye contact.

He lifted my chin with his thumb. There was no avoiding his intense gaze. “There’s two things I want you to always remember. One: important matters should never be discussed on the phone. Two: never say ‘sorry’ when you should be saying ‘thank you.’ People help you because they *like* you, Sherry-like-the-drink. So don’t ever apologize for existing or taking up space or having emotions. *That’s* what you can do for me in return for the flour.”

I nodded, trying to work up the ability to smile. “Okay. Thank you.”
By the time we’d finished, it was nearly eleven o’clock, which wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. Still, I was tired, and now that I was calmed down from my earlier outburst, I didn’t want Richard to leave. It was Thursday night, which meant that he likely had to work tomorrow, and wouldn’t want to stay the night. Although…it couldn’t hurt to ask. The worst he could do was say no.

“Hey, mister.” I began, putting a rest to my cleaning. What had been a disaster only a few hours prior was now beginning to look like a kitchen again.

“What?”

“Would you, um…” Just spit it out. I knew that he was going to say no, but it was the fact that I was at least able to ask that mattered. Besides, it was one of my rules to not have a boy sleep over unless we were serious (something we hadn’t discussed yet), but I was tired and I wanted to be held. “Would you like to spend the night? Here? I know you probably have work tomorrow, and you have to get up early, but so do I, so I was just wondering—”

“Sure.” What? “I have a later start than usual tomorrow, so everything should work out just fine.”

I wasn’t sure if he was being truthful, or if he just agreed so he could see the shocked look on my face. But, I supposed that it didn’t really matter, since either way I got what I wanted. Now that it had been decided, I now found myself hoping that my room was at the very least decent. “Great,” I smiled. “I’m glad. My place is your place, so…help yourself to anything you want.”

“Anything?” That dangerous glint was back in his eye, as though he was the spider and I was the fly. His mouth wore a smirk that let me know exactly what he was thinking.

My face rouged. Oh, god, he didn’t think that I asked him to spend the night for that, did he? I laughed nervously, and changed the subject as quickly as possible. “I don’t really have anything manly as far as pajamas go, but feel free to wear whatever you want.” I turned the lights off in the kitchen and we made our way towards my bedroom.

He certainly made himself at home as he began to take off the sweatpants, leaving himself just in his boxers. I turned around, not wanting to stare at him or at any parts of him, then began changing into pajamas myself. I changed as modestly as I could, trying to show as little skin as possible—I really wanted to get the message across that I wanted to be asleep with him, not sleep with him. When I turned back to the bed, dressed in my most first-time-boyfriend-is-staying-over appropriate pajama set, I found Richard’s eyes slowly making their way up to mine. A smirk graced his face.

“I don’t suppose you want that IOU now, do you?” I joked, trying to stifle a yawn but failing.

He shook his head. “No, I’m saving that for another time.” He patted the opposing side of the bed. “Right now, I want some good old fashioned quality time with my hard-working baker.”

I snorted in laughter. “I never want to see another baked good in my life again after tonight.” But, unfortunately I’d be stuck selling them all tomorrow. Such is life.

He feigned shock, eyebrows raised. “Now, who else am I going to play house with after a
long day at work?" I supposed that with such a busy daytime job that he didn’t exactly have the time to settle down and do domestic things, like cook or bake. Or even curl up with somebody after a long day at work. Somebody to wake up next to and spend lazy Sunday mornings together.

“There’s always Sherlock, isn’t there?” I dryly suggested as I sat down on the bed, making sure to set my alarm. “Six-thirty okay?”

Before I could face him again, he took my shoulders in his hands and started rubbing them. I let out a sigh of relaxation. He gave me a noise of approval for my offered time. “Yes,” he said slowly. “You’re right. There is always Sherlock.” Richard leaned forward and gave me a kiss that landed on my right ear.

I pulled my legs under the covers, and so did he. He turned the lamp next to him off and we were left in near darkness. I felt for him and he pulled me in closer, so that I was lying on his chest, and his arm was wrapped around me. We rested like that for a few minutes. At first, I felt unbearably awkward. It had been a while since I’d shared a bed with somebody. But after a little bit, I felt myself relax, allowing myself to sink into his body. If we could stay like this forever… that would be ideal. His chest rose and fell with every breath he took, and my left hand fit snugly at his side. My eyelids dropped, racing ever closer to sleep. Richard shifted, lifted my chin up with his finger, and softly planted his lips onto mine.

When we parted, I could see the faint outline of his figure. The street lamp from outside barely illuminated the room, and rain sprinkled the window. I lifted my hand, ran it briefly through his hair, and pulled him in for another kiss. He shifted, and intertwined one of his legs between mine. I longed for these kinds of intimate moments, the ones where you could rest yourself on a person’s chest, feel the hair on their thighs as they rubbed against you, catch the whispers of the other person’s breath hovering just above your lips. He lifted my left leg above his hip, and it was then that I realized how strong his hands were. He left his hand on my thigh, gripping it as though to claim it as his.

Another kiss. Longer, this time. More…desperate, maybe? I shifted myself, resting more comfortably on my right side. With my left hand, I traced the tendons in his neck, to his clavicle, and then finally to the curve of his shoulder. I lifted the sleeve of his white undershirt, tracing patterns into his skin. In a suit, he was ravishing, commanding. But like this, with only an undershirt and a pair of boxers? He was mine, all mine, and I’d do anything for him so long as he asked. I reached my right hand up to feel his face again, resting it on his cheek where his five o’ clock shadow was beginning to grow.

And still, another kiss. He parted my lips slowly, and allowed his tongue to graze over my bottom lip as though asking for permission. I gladly obliged, granting him new access to my body. He shifted again, rolled over so that his weight rested on his left forearm. He was over me, but he wasn’t quite on top of me. With this new position, I felt more of his weight relax onto my body, and a pointed pressure against my pelvis. His hand slid up from my thigh to rest on my hip bone, playing with the elastic band of my pajama shorts. I so badly wanted him to roll my underwear down, let his hand play and discover a new part of my body—the part that pounded in anticipation—, then slide in and out of me, as though it was what we were always meant to do.

That was another rule that I so badly wanted to break, but needed to follow. At least for tonight. I didn’t want to have sex with a man that I didn’t love—though I truly did have a fondness for Richard Brook. I wouldn’t have sex with him tonight, I was too tired for that, that I knew, but if he asked me a month from now, a week from now, tomorrow, I’d respond happily.

Enthusiastically. For the time being, who cared about the games that we were separately playing? The only game that mattered was the one that our tongues were playing.
When we pulled away, his breath was uneven, ragged. I found him absent from me, as though he was something I never even knew I was missing. This man was going to ruin me, and I had a feeling that I was going to let him. He leaned in closer, and I puckered my lips slightly, only to find that he kissed the tip of my nose. “That was mean of me, I’m sorry. I know you’re tired,” he breathed out with a deeper voice than normal.

I allowed a smile to grace my visage. He was correct, I was indeed tired. Though I was sure that another couple minutes of kissing wouldn’t make me any worse for wear tomorrow morning, I didn’t protest. We readjusted once more: out from our kissing position, and back into a cuddling position. The one where I was resting upon his chest, the one where he kissed my forehead and did a little shimmy to get closer. Our legs intertwined, his arm wrapped around my waist, my hand gripping his side.

“Goodnight, Sherry-like-the-drink.”

“G’night, mister.” And with that, our breaths deepened, as I was left with the thought at the back of my mind that maybe this was part of his game—to get some innocent woman so irrevocably in love with him only to leave her hanging by a thread. At least it would’ve been fun in the meantime. But who would be the first to run?

When I awoke to my alarm and turned it off, the first thing that I noticed was the lack of another presence in my bed. My heart briefly sank, thinking he had left sometime last night until I noticed that the kitchen light was on. Rolling my way out of bed, I slid my slippers onto my feet and joined Richard in the kitchen. He sat at the table, sipping on coffee and going through the case file. I decided not to say anything about it until I’d had a little coffee in me. While I was certain it was mildly illegal for me to have that case file, Sherlock had asked me to help, and Richard had just found them, I guessed.

“Good morning,” Richard hummed, already partway dressed. His dress shirt was tucked into his pants, and his tie was hanging around his shoulders. “I helped myself to some coffee. I assumed you wanted some, too.” He nodded towards another mug that was on the opposite side of the table.

“Mmm-hmm,” I mumbled, sitting down and taking a sip. It was just the right temperature for me, so he must have gotten up about a half hour ago. I rubbed my eyes, disappointed at feeling my bed-warmth leave my body. I’d have to start getting ready soon, if I knew what was good for me. I looked around. The kitchen was spotless and all of the cookies were packaged. Thank god I didn’t have to do anything else besides sell those cookies from hell. My eyes landed on the file that Richard was looking at, but I still didn’t say anything. It was early in the morning, and he was probably just curious.

“So I found this file,” Richard began. I rubbed my eyes again. Thank god. I really didn’t want to bring it up. “I’m intrigued. Did Sherlock give this to you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s for a case. There were some quotations from The Tempest involved, and he thought I might be able to help in that respect. I think I have, a little bit, but I’m only able to really research it when I’m not doing homework or,” I gestured at the kitchen, “baking cookies.”

He closed the file, and said something under his breath. I asked him what he’d said and he said that he had just found it interesting, was all, and that it wasn’t his thing, detective-work. After a few quiet minutes that consisted of us sipping on our coffees, we both got up and slowly began getting ready for the day. While there being another person getting ready with me made a
difference in my morning, it was a positive difference. I craved domesticity—mornings like these, and nights like the previous one.

When I finished putting on my make-up, I told Richard that another person helping with the bake sale was coming to pick me up, since I had so many cookies, and that he could leave if he needed to, he didn’t need to wait for me.

He wrapped his arms around me from behind and kissed my left cheek. “If you insist, dear.” I looked at him with mild shock registered on my face because of the new pet name, to which he responded, “I told you I liked playing house.”

I turned to face him, placing my arms on his shoulders. “Is that the game we’re playing, now?”

Richard shook his head with a smile. “No,” he said, giving me a kiss. “We’re playing something else entirely, I think.” A beep sounded from his phone. “And that’s my cue.” We walked to the door, which I opened for him. Before leaving he turned around and told me that he’d call—he expected that the next week would be busier than the last. I told him no worries, that I myself was finishing the rough draft of part of my paper. Another kiss and he was gone. If we weren’t playing house, then what were we playing at? Oftentimes, I found myself thinking less of the game that I was playing, less of the rules of the game, and more about the prize and how I’d do anything to keep it. I still wanted to know his motivations and reasons for taking an interest in a woman like me, but I wanted to know the game he was playing even more. Each time he left, he gave me more questions than answers.

Some odd hours later, I was manning the bake sale. I was surrounded by mountains of cookies, cakes, and breads—none of which I wanted to see. I couldn’t wait to go home and grab myself something that had less than 5 ingredients. Mac and cheese, or maybe even a quesadilla. Anything that wasn’t sweet and sugary.

On the bright side, I was with a few others in my cohort, and they seemed to be just as tired as I was. After we’d set up camp at our table in the student union, we’d run out of things to talk about, and we weren’t enthusiastic about discussing our theses. So, we sat around, lounging, waiting patiently for the lunch rush so that we could begin to really move these. I understood that our program needed more money, but I think that at this point we all would have rather written a proposal for a grant. It would’ve been more writing, sure, but we also would’ve probably gotten more money.

Altogether, it was me, Alexander, and Andrea who were currently manning the table. After noon, we’d switch out with another few people with our cohort. They’d take down the table and whisk away the cookies to a place I didn’t have to see. They’d probably just take them home—in a few hours they’d all be free, anyways.

Andrea, probably my closest friend in the cohort, nudged me when I heard the doors open and two people walked in. “Hey, who’s that? Think he’ll give us his phone number for a piece of cake?”

“You might want to get his phone number before giving him any cake,” I joked before putting on my glasses. “Oh,” I said, startled. “Richard!”

“Hello, Sherry. I mentioned that you were having a bake sale and somebody,” he glared at the person next to him, “wouldn’t stop talking about it. Sherry, Sebastian. He’s a colleague of mine, you could say.”
I stuck out my hand and Sebastian shook it. “It’s a pleasure.”

“Likewise.” He turned to Andrea, who was blushing and stuttering profusely, to begin ordering some baked goods, leaving me talking to Richard, and Alexander simply sitting there. Alexander was rather good at playing the third wheel, I discovered after a few weeks of knowing him.

A smug grin appeared on Richard’s face. “Since I already have some cookies, I was thinking about using my IOU to get some sugar instead.” He leaned over the table, lightly gripped my chin, and kissed me, which I gladly reciprocated.

His lips tasted of tea, and for a brief second, I thought I could smell a whiff of gunpowder. “Don’t worry about it,” I told him. “Consider it on the house.” I straightened his lapels and smoothed them out. Sebastian seemed to be done making his transaction (I noticed that he bought a plate’s worth of cookies), and looked at Richard expectantly. Andrea gazed at Sebastian, and Alexander just sat there awkwardly.

“Well, we better be off. Wouldn’t want to be late for our next appointment, now would we?” Richard glanced at Sebastian, though I thought it looked more like a glare. “I’ll text you about dinner sometime.”

“Sounds good.” I affirmed. “Thank you for dropping by, mister. I’ll see you later.” I waved as the pair walked off. The further away from our stand they walked, the more Richard’s personality seemed to transform: the commanding presence he had turned into something more volatile, dangerous, and looked not as though he were scolding Sebastian for wanting to come here, but as though he was threatening him. Sebastian, however, seemed rather uninterested in what Richard had to say, now that he had his cookies. The other time I’d seen him act like that was when he was on the phone with another employee.

As I began to help another customer, I began to wonder if there was a side of him I hadn’t seen yet. There was the Richard I was dating, the Richard who most likely had ulterior motives (I still couldn’t shake that feeling), and now the Richard who dealt with business. And if the business Richard was anything like ulterior motive Richard, well then, I certainly had a problem, didn’t I? But what game would feel satisfying without a plot twist? There were still rules to my game, but it seemed that Richard was the wild card.
Weave Flowers in my Hair

My birthday was in a week. Slowly but surely, I added cake ingredients to my fridge, cleaned my apartment, and worked on my paper. When my birthday came, I didn’t want to feel burdened by my responsibilities. And, I wanted to eat cake (surprisingly, after my vow to never eat another baked good again). The pros to my birthday being in a week were these: 1) two weeks had passed since Richard and I saw each other, but he said that he’d definitely see me on my birthday, 2) Sherlock and John invited me over so they could celebrate with me, and 3) the semester would be halfway over. The con to my birthday being in a week was this: it was the same week as the due date for the entire first draft of my paper.

On the bright side, I was done with the bake sale, and I’d sent off my Tempest research to Sherlock, which meant I only had my scholarly activities to focus on. The pro to that was that I had more time for my paper. The con to that was that I still didn’t have any time for anything else. I was as busy as ever, but with different priorities. It seemed as though I was constantly telling myself that my studies would be over in a few months. My life appeared to be a struggle of getting through this week, and the next, and the next, with no sign of change.

Granted, I knew what I was signing up for when I applied to the university here. Moving here was fun, and then it got boring. Meeting Sherlock and John was fun, and then my studies got boring. Meeting Richard was fun, and my studies continued to be boring. Well, boring wasn’t a fair word at all—Shakespeare interested me greatly, but reading and re-reading the same few plays over and over again, reworking the same paper…it was mundane. But my birthday was going to change that. It’d rejuvenate me, give me something to do other than stare at my notebook and computer screen.

I glanced at the clock to see how much time I had left to work on grading some students’ work. At six, I was planning to leave for Sherlock and John’s, and I figured that once I returned home, I’d be either drunk enough to sleep or to have incredible, new, and ground-breaking ideas for my paper. I was hoping for the latter, but betting on the former. Five o’clock. Yikes.

I shuffled my papers into various piles based on their relevance and the order in which they came. A groan flew out of my mouth as I stood up, knees sore from being in a sitting position for so long. The pajamas I was wearing two nights ago were still on my body, and my hair was a tangled mess from me running my hand through my hair in frustration for so many times. I had a lot of work to do if I wanted to look somewhat presentable.

By six o’clock, I was much more presentable than I was earlier. Hair was up, make-up was done, and I deemed myself ready. I made my way over and greeted Mrs. Hudson before heading upstairs to 221B. It’d been just over two months since I’d been here last—far too long, in my opinion. John let me in when I knocked, and Sherlock looked as though he hadn’t even heard my entrance. A couple balloons floated around our heads, and John brought over two shots of what smelled like vodka. “Well then, bottom’s up!”

We clinked our glasses and threw our glasses back. The alcohol burned my throat as I forced myself not to cough. This was a well-needed break from my studies. I was more than prepared to let loose tonight, let myself get caught up in the now instead of the what-will-be. Lazily, Sherlock raised his shot glass and downed his as well. Alcohol didn’t seem to be his number one vice, but it also appeared as though he was thinking hard about something. I knew better than anyone else what thinking too hard could do to a person, so I poured another shot into his glass, sat down next to him, and smiled. “Come on, Sherlock. Do it for me. It’s my birthday
He rolled his eyes but obliged.

“That’s the spirit!” I cheered. “Two vodkas for two Sherrys!” Sherlock’s face turned into one of mild surprise at the name, so I turned to John. “What, does he normally go by Sherly instead?” I took another shot as John shrugged, laughing.

A knock on the door. The door opening. Mrs. Hudson, standing with a cake with brightly lit candles. “Mrs. Hudson! You shouldn’t have!”

“But I did! Go get a knife for us, Sherlock.”

Another roll of the eyes, and still, he obliged, bringing all the necessary items to eat a cake.

“Here to join the party?” I asked her. “We have alcohol!”

“I brought my own dear, don’t you worry,” she said with a sly smile. She went to the kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea, then unearthed a flask from her jacket’s inner pocket. *Oh my god.* I wanted to be her when I was older. Landlady who kept a flask on her at all times? Sign me up.

We enjoyed each other’s company and merriment for the next few minutes, interrupted only by somebody’s bark of laughter. Sherlock even joined in, and thanked me for the times that I brought the mail up for him. I think it was safe to say that we were friends now. This night was so fun—I really didn’t know how it could be any better. Maybe if Richard was here? That’d definitely make it incredible. But alas, we were both so busy so often.

My ears perked at another knock at the door. We all looked around at each other—nobody was expecting anybody else, which meant that it couldn’t be Richard here to surprise me.

“Sherlock! I know you’re in there.” A man’s voice I couldn’t quite identify.


A man, probably in his late forties with silver hair opened the door, slightly out of breath.

“Gareth?” A confused look appeared on Sherlock’s face. “What are you doing here? Another case you need my help with?”

At the mention of a case, my disposition brightened greatly. This man must’ve been a detective. I conspicuously grinned at Sherlock, trying to will him with my mind to let me tag along.

Sherlock noticed, and buried his face in his hand. “I shouldn’t have said anything. *No.* Absolutely not.”

“Sherlock,” I whined. He avoided making eye contact with me. Knowing I wouldn’t make any progress on him, I turned to Greg (Gareth?). “You usually let John go on cases with you, right? Even though he’s not a detective?”

Greg nodded. “Sure, yeah.”

“Well—John—do you want the night off?” I turned to him, nodding my head obviously trying to get him to say yes. I think that even without my visible cues he would’ve wanted the
night off.

John grinned and looked at Sherlock, who was slowly beginning to look more and more distressed. “That sounds splendid. Greg,” he began and walked over to me, pausing only to put his hand on my shoulder, “Sherry here is the birthday girl who’s always wanted to be a detective. It would mean the world to her if you let her come along.”

I smiled, trying to be as pleasing as I could possibly be. It had been a while, but I tried doing my best and biggest puppy dog eyes as well. I think Greg fell for it because he acquiesced, or was just so used to breaking the law by allowing civilians onto crime scenes that he didn’t care anymore. Sherlock sighed dramatically. “Thank you! I’ll do whatever you need me to do—even if it’s just standing away from everything.”

We all began to walk out of the apartment, leaving John and Mrs. Hudson to their own devices, alcohol, and cake (though I took a slice for the road). I walked ahead of Sherlock with Greg, who leaned down and muttered to me, “For the moment, the most important thing you can do is keep Anderson and Donovan away from him. I’ll introduce you to them when we arrive on the scene.”

I said I’d do whatever he needed, so I accepted my new task graciously. When we arrived at Greg’s car, Sherlock let me have shotgun since I was “the birthday girl, after all.” Really though, I think he just didn’t want to talk to anybody on the drive over. Greg and I shared pleasantries such as how did you become a detective, and why did you move here from the United States, and what is it exactly that you study again? Just before our arrival, I shot Richard a text: ‘Going to my first crime scene! Wish me luck! ST’

My phone buzzed shortly afterwards, but I figured that it was just a ‘stay safe!’ type of text in response. Sherlock and I followed Greg to the edge of the Thames. I beamed at Sherlock and wrapped my coat around me. At first glance, Sherlock looked annoyed (probably missing his dear Watson), but I saw a smile creep onto his face.

Sherlock walked over to the body (a reality that I knew about but didn’t really think about until just now), and Greg introduced me to Donovan and Anderson, who both seemed rather unamused that I was there. I didn’t mind though, I deemed it my mission to keep them away from Sherlock.

We did, however, waltz over to where the body was, and I began preparing myself to be a mediator between them and Sherlock. At first glance, I blanched—a woman, drowned, recently recovered from the Thames—and then I took another glance. Flowers were falling out of her mouth and flowers were intricately weaved in her hair. I nudged Sherlock, catching his attention. “Sherlock,” I mumbled, trying to stay out of earshot of Anderson and Donovan, “That’s Ophelia. I mean, not literally, but…whoever did this was clearly influenced by Hamlet.”

“Well, Hamlet’s the one who said that, not Ophelia, for one. It’s just before he tries to get his Uncle to confess to having murdered Hamlet’s father. The Devil, the King, Hamlet’s Uncle, has fooled everyone but Hamlet. Hamlet’s speaking to himself when he says this. My best bet is that it’s a message. Not a threat, but something we need to internalize. My other guess is that The Devil, in this instance, is whoever murdered this woman.”
“Or the person who paid somebody else to do it,” Sherlock muttered.

“What was that?”

He didn’t respond to that, but instead said, “You’re proving yourself to be a good Watson after all.”

“Oh, stop,” I joked. “You’re making me blush.”

Abruptly, Sherlock stood up. “Come now, Sherry. It looks like we’re through here.” I followed him as he stalked away, but not before I shook Greg’s hand and thanked him for letting me come and play detective.

When I caught back up with him he’d hailed a taxi (a talent I had yet to acquire), and let me in first. “That’s it? No action-packed chase scene? No…being held at gunpoint?” I laughed, though I was positive that if any of those things happened, I’d already be dead. I wasn’t the most athletic, and I definitely wasn’t smart enough to get myself out of a tough situation like that.

“For now, yes. That’s it. Usually I reserve the chase scenes for John, and not amateurs.”

I leaned closer to him. “You know, if you let me come with you on more cases, I won’t be an amateur anymore.”

This elicited a chuckle from him, but he didn’t say anything further. I took out my phone, ignoring the fact that the bright light was burning my eyes now that the sun had set, and took a look at what Richard has responded: ‘Good luck! And by the way, you’ve inspired me to brush up on my Shakespeare. Found some rather good quotes in Hamlet, my favorite being: ‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.” Would love to discuss it with you at some point. -RB’

An uneasy feeling settled in my stomach, but I attributed it to the cake and alcohol I’d had an hour prior. Two very explicit Shakespeare references in one night—and both of them Hamlet. I was still personally debating on whether coincidences existed or not, but this seemed to bizarre for it not to be. Or maybe it was so bizarre because it wasn’t a coincidence? I didn’t want to think about it. Richard had taken an interest in the file Sherlock gave me some weeks back…

Before I could think about it further, we’d arrived at Baker Street. Sherlock paid the cabbie, which I thanked him for, and we stepped out to face the cool, fresh air again.

“Thank you for letting me come on a case with you, Sherlock. It meant a lot to me.” I hugged him, and he, to my surprise, lightly hugged me back. “Anyways, I best be off now. It’s close to my bedtime.”

“At eight o’ clock?”

I shrugged. “You’d be surprised.”

He must’ve found that as an acceptable answer. “Come by tomorrow—we’re bound to have leftover cake. You should take it. Aren’t students usually starving?”

I nodded my head. “I can’t speak for British students, but American ones, yes. We are. Always.” I pulled my keys out from my pocket and began walking towards my apartment. “I’ll see you later, Sherlock. Night.”

“Goodnight.”
A few days had passed, and it was Saturday once again. I was scrambling to get a head start on grading so that Sunday wouldn’t be too terrible. Today was when Richard and I were celebrating my birthday, and despite the fact that I was channeling both motivation and discipline, I still felt myself tingling at the excitement. He’d said that he was going to surprise me, make my birthday unlike any other. He seemed a little boastful of this, but not so much that it seemed untrue. So, I was left to my own devices until I figured out what he was planning.

I’d already called my mom, who made me open her gifts over the phone. She knew that I didn’t want material things, as I’d just have to pack them up and lug them across the Atlantic Ocean, but she gave me two of the most helpful things you could give a person my age (twenty-eight, by the way): money for rent, and money for a student loan payment. Thank the heavens. Now I had money to save and spend, and take Richard out for dinner for once.

Shaking my head, I lifted my red pen, ready to make some marks. So, let’s see here…this student had accurately identified the character speaking and the play, but had failed to—a knock on the door. And just as I was really getting into it, too. But then, as I stood up, I realized that it might be Richard, so I made my way to the door even faster. I found not Richard, but a postal worker who needed my signature. I signed, a little bemusedly, then he handed me a weighty package and left.

I didn’t order anything. And I wasn’t expecting any gifts from abroad, either. But, my name was written on the package, so I opened it carefully with scissors. The box itself was the fanciest box I’d ever seen. It wasn’t your typical brown cardboard from Amazon that had gotten squished in the mail, but white, with a thin layer of strong tape, and my name written in cursive. What in the world?

A note lay on top of some fabric dressed in plastic. I’ll pick you up at 7. -RB. I set the note aside, and lifted the contents out of the box. A dress unfolded itself in my hands, a gorgeous one, something out of a dream. It was pure white, one of the colors of royalty back in Shakespeare’s day. There were jewels on it, and the layers of fabric came together as though they’d make my body look better than it ever had in a dress. This was too much. I knew Richard could afford nice things, but this? It was breathtaking. Something I never thought I’d even be able to touch in this lifetime. How did I ever get so lucky?

I immediately hung it up to try to get some of the wrinkles out and did my best to get back to work. I relocated several times, trying to refresh my mind, but it still wandered to the expensive beauty hanging in my room. In the end though, I did end up grading quite a lot. More than expected, honestly but I think that was partly because my nerves ended giving me more energy than taking.

By seven o’ clock, I was showered, made up, and ready to go, and Richard was right on time. When I opened the door for him, he looked me up and down rather conspicuously before
saying, “I’m glad I got the right size. You look beautiful, birthday girl.”

“Hello to you too,” I smiled. I locked the front door and took his arm, following him to his car, a pretty black Mercedes. He opened the front passenger seat for me, and I glanced at him, a little surprised. “No driver?”

“Not this time,” he confirmed. “Tonight’s going to be just you and me.” He got in the driver’s seat and set off confidently. I hadn’t driven for nine months, so part of me thought that I’d forgotten how, even though I was sure it was like riding a bike (more or less) and that you never really forgot. He leaned back comfortably, but left his hands at ten and two. We made small talk for the first few minutes of our drive, but once we’d driven for a couple miles, he told me to close my eyes, and I obeyed. I was excited to see where we’d end up—we’d already gone to cafes and expensive restaurants, so I was wondering what else there was he could do to surprise me.

I felt the car slow, and then stop. I still had my eyes closed, waiting patiently. Richard came around to my side of the car, helped me out, and put his right arm around my shoulder to guide me. The cold air hit my skin in a refreshing way after being in the car. A jingle of keys. A door opening. Definitely not a restaurant. We entered, and I was met with warm air, and what I assumed was a carpet. “You can open your eyes now.” So I did. Richard shut the door behind us.

“Oh, wow,” I breathed out. We were standing in a minimalistic and grand foyer. Everything was fresh, white, and up to date. We were in the house of somebody who had money, power, and taste.

“Welcome to my home,” Richard offered, arms spread wide above him.

I balked. “This is yours?”

“Do you like it?” There was a strange mixture of smugness and a need to be validated on his face.

I spun around in a full circle. “Like it? I’d do anything for a place like this.” This place was everything I wanted. It was sleek, professional, organized—and once again I was wondering how I managed to find and date Richard, and why on earth he was interested in me. Surely there was somebody in the same class as him that he was interested in, or maybe he just wanted somebody to impress. Either way, these were things I didn’t want to worry about now: it was my birthday, after all.

He held out his hand. “Let me take you on a tour.” We wandered throughout his house, which was a two-story delight. Each room seemed grander than the last. The bathrooms were unbelievable—I think my whole living room/kitchen combo in my apartment could fit in one of them. Everything was well-decorated (though I had to admit that the lack of family and friendly photos left me wondering about his past), and there wasn’t a trace of dust anywhere. He soon introduced me to his favorite room: his office. I could see why. The bookshelves lining the walls, a Macbook set on the big mahogany desk, and a fireplace were the first things my eyes were drawn to. I could only imagine how beautiful this room looked with only the sunlight illuminating it.

And as surely as we entered the office, we left it. We slowly made our way to the kitchen (which had more appliances than I’d ever seen in my life), and then to the dining room. In the middle of the room, there lay a table with candles, and platters upon platters of covered dishes. I turned to him, smiling in amazement. “Did you do all this?”

“Well…I have to admit, I did hire some help. Come now, sit, sit.” He pulled a chair out for me, so I followed suit and sat down. He poured wine for the both of us, but before he sat down, he
looked at me as though he was thinking hard about something. “Do you want your gift now, or after dinner?”

I stared at him blankly. “I…I thought my dress was my gift,” I confessed. There was something else? When it was his birthday, how would I ever begin to compete?

“Oh,” he smiled, “it was a gift, but not your birthday gift. Here.” He brought out a box that had been hidden from my sight. It was square, flat, and thin. Definitely jewelry.

I looked between him and the box before opening the top. “Richard,” I breathed out, and brought a hand to my chest. “This is—it’s beautiful.” A necklace decorated with gold, diamonds, and rubies.

“Fit for a queen,” he decided. He took the necklace from the box, and walked behind me, clasping it on my neck. “I was going to get you the first folio,” he mused, hands resting on my shoulders, “but my contacts were having a hard time tracking one of them down in time for your birthday.”

Laughter escaped my lips. The first folio? There were only so many copies in the world. Most were kept in a high-security library, and the others sold for millions of dollars. Surely, he was joking. But something in his eyes told me that he was serious, even if there was a smile resting on his face. “Thank you, mister.”

He leaned down and gave me a kiss. “You’re welcome, Sherry-like-the-drink.”

“Now, let’s get started on this meal, shall we?” I offered, and he sat down on the other end of the table. We began digging in, and a question had risen in my mind. “So, I’m curious. All of this is well-thought out, as things usually are with you. How did you land upon rubies?” I brought my hand to the necklace, feeling the intricacies of the work. I couldn’t wait to look at myself in the mirror and admire what he had adorned me with.

He wiped his face with a napkin before speaking. “Like I said, I’ve been brushing up on my Shakespeare. Rubies were mentioned in a very interesting quote. The mental image was so…” Richard look as though he was looking for the word, “scandalous.”

“Was it from Measure for Measure?” That play was one I’d only briefly mentioned in my thesis, but it was an interesting one in the canon nonetheless. A nun’s brother is imprisoned for having impregnated his fiancée before their marriage, thanks to the new religious ruler in town, but after listening to the nun speak, the religious ruler is so tempted by her that he doesn’t know what to do: in the end, he tells her that he’ll let her brother go, so long as she sleeps with him.

He nodded. “Yes, I figured that I’d get started with some of the lesser well-known ones first.”

“I’m impressed,” I laughed. “Normally, people would go straight for Hamlet or Romeo and Juliet.” Measure was respected, but definitely not well-known by any means. It did mark a pivotal point in Shakespeare’s thinking process and plays, however, so it’s not without its dues. And this, I felt, marked a pivotal point in our relationship, though I couldn’t exactly say why. “Let me guess —The impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies, and strip myself to death, as to a bed that longing have been sick for, ere I’d yield my body up to shame.” The nun, Isabella, is discussing the religious ruler’s, Angelo’s, proposition. She intertwines the beautiful language of intimacy with the horrific image of her whipped back, therefore telling him that offering her body in such a way would be the most painful thing she’d ever do, that she’d bear the scars and shame for the rest of her life. The ultimatum Angelo proposes to her is an impossible choice. Refuse and let her
brother die instantly, or accept and she dies for the rest of her life. If *that* was the quote that he was referring to, then, this game between us was something that went deeper than I thought it did.

“Exactly,” Richard confirmed. “You have a good memory for peculiar quotes.”

I was correct, and found myself not knowing quite how to react. “Well, Shakespeare was a peculiar playwright. It’s hard to find someone whose beauty in language matches the bard’s.” I thought our games had been parallel for the past two months. I wanted to know why he was so interested in me, and I figured that that was because of what I assumed his game was: I was hard to get into bed with, a challenge, and he liked challenges. So did I. But I also wasn’t a threat, probably unlike women of his status: I had no money, no contacts, no power. I was a safe person to play this game with. But slowly and surely, I wasn’t sure the game he was playing was even safe to begin with.

“Tell me, how did the case with Sherlock go? I bet it was incredible,” he leaned in, resting his chin on his hand.

The talk about the case I’d helped with pushed my current worries aside. I could worry about them later. I was positive that nothing menacing was going to happen tonight—it was just a feeling that I needed to unpack later, when I was alone. Besides, all I found myself wanting to do was talk about how cool it had been to *finally* pretend to be a detective, how one of my childhood dreams had come true.

Richard listened intently, and I saw something in his form soften as I continued rambling on. It was a subtle difference, but it was difference enough to make me realize that he hadn’t been soft before. A pivotal point in our relationship, indeed.
Alrighty, so this chapter definitely has some M-rated content in it, so just be warned in case that's not your thing!

We were now discussing our families over empty plates, full stomachs, and half-filled glasses of wine. I had grown up on the west coast with only my mother, though I was very close with my aunt and uncle as well, who’d always come see me get an award or graduate. Richard lived in Ireland for a long time, with his mother and father, and a brother (though he mentioned him only in passing and never discussed him again), and in recent years they’ve rarely talked for what seemed like personal matters.

I downed my glass of wine, and he poured me another—a sign of a respectful man. My grandfather had told me that if a man notices that your wine glass is empty and he didn’t pour you another, then he wasn’t worth your time. I was glad I didn’t have to break that rule.

A lull passed through our conversation. “Richard,” I began, slowly noticing that my face had gone a little numb.

“Yes?”

“Take me on another tour of the house.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Another?”

I nodded. “Yeah. You see things in a different way when you’re—well, when you’re drunk. You notice the little things, like the moulding.” Though, I would be lying if I said I wasn’t afraid of getting a little lost if left to my own devices. Thankfully, he acquiesced to my strange suggestion, most likely on account that it was still before midnight, and therefore still my birthday.

Clearly, Richard didn’t have the same amount to drink as I did, because when he stood up, he did so effortlessly, whereas I took my sweet time, trying to find balance in my body. He took me by the hand and we slowly made our way around for a second time, and I allowed myself to fall in love with his house again. His bathrooms had clawfoot bathtubs, and the moulding along the hallway walls was as exquisite as I thought it would be. I could feel a pang of jealousy rise up in my throat, knowing that if I had been given a certain hand, or played the one I had better, I could have had this, too.

And finally, we were back to his office. I took great care in looking at the books on the shelf. Many were psychology textbooks, some math, some science. One shelf in particular held classic novels such as Moby Dick, David Copperfield, and—I smiled—a newly purchased hardcover anthology of Shakespeare’s entire work.

Richard waltzed up behind me. “See anything you like?”

I turned to face him. He stood between me, and his desk. “Actually, I do.” I tried to repress the smile that began to grow on my face. I walked over to the commanding desk, and asked
if I could sit down in his chair. “I always wanted to know what it felt like to be powerful.” He accepted my request, and I gingerly sat down in the chair that was almost too big for me. I intertwined my fingers together, trying to lean menacingly over the desk with a stern look upon my face.

“Do you feel powerful?” He asked, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Is it…everything you wanted it to be?”

Laughter escaped my lips. “I feel in control, that’s for sure. But I didn’t really do anything to achieve this seat, this position. So I don’t know if I can truly say that I feel powerful, you know?”

He nodded, then slowly bent down to whisper in my ear. “What if I told you that I could make you feel powerful?”

I looked over my right shoulder, to where he was. “And how would you propose to do that?”

He placed a kiss on the nape of my neck, lingering for just a moment so I could feel his hot breath upon my skin. He moved to my neck, below my ear, my cheek, and finally my lips. “Many think that having power means being stoic and unmovable. But power, true power, is succumbing to your emotions, letting them course through you, and using them to your advantage.” His hand gripped my knee, and slowly began to pull my dress up.

The white fabric bunched around my knees, and his hand found his way to my inner thigh. His touch brought gooseflesh to my skin, and his hand was creeping ever so slowly up leg. It was a simple action, a simple touch, yet my legs trembled and a burning desire dampened my underwear. He continued, “To have power is to give yourself up completely to it. Now I ask, do you want to feel powerful, Sherry?”

“Yes,” I breathed out. I’d gladly give myself over to him, power or no.

Richard brought himself to his knees, a sight I never thought I’d see, and spread my legs. I still sat at the desk, and Richard would have been out of sight to anyone who needed to see him. He peppered kisses along my thighs, taking his goddamn time. I wrapped my fingers in his hair, and I struggled with an internal battle over whether to push him towards me or not. I hated waiting, but it made the reward sweeter.

And finally, oh my god, he reached me, pressing his nose against my underwear and inhaling, giving me a quick kiss through the fabric before hooking his fingers around it and bringing it to my ankles. A brief pause, and he dove right in.

His hands gripped my knees, keeping my legs open—and thank god, too, since they would’ve slammed shut with the pleasure that coursed through my body. Slowly and purposefully, he dragged his tongue upwards, finishing and resting on my clit. A breath that I didn’t even know I was holding escaped my mouth. He licked me again, and again, and once more for good measure.

My eyes remained closed, but when he stopped, I opened them briefly to see what he was planning on doing next. His left hand lifted from my knee, and lightly trailed its way up to my center. He stuck his middle finger in his mouth, wetting it with saliva, and lazily brought it to my folds, tracing my clit before finally positioning itself at my entrance. The pad of his thumb rested on my clit, rubbing it slowly. Oh god, if he didn’t do anything, I was going to—his finger slid into me, and my mouth elicited a small moan.
He pumped his finger in and out a few times before adding another. Oh my god, I wanted him to fill me up, I wanted him to bend me over and take me on his desk, and hold my hands over my head, and grab a fistful of my hair, and, oh god his tongue had replaced his thumb on my clit and this was too good to be true. I didn’t stop the moans and the “oh gods” that were coming from me. Heat was building, and he was pumping into me so fast, and his tongue was licking and his lips were sucking in ways that I didn’t know were possible, and, and—

A buzzer harshly sounded in the room, startling me, and drawing me back from my orgasm. “Boss, I have the USB. I’m coming up.” Sebastian’s voice, I think?

Richard let out an annoyed sigh and began shifting his body so that he could be in a more professional position. I wrapped my legs around him, stopping him from moving any further. It seemed that he was thinking exactly what I was thinking. He buried himself back into my folds once more, and I emitted a sigh of relief. I was so close. He pumped slower this time, making an effort to be noiseless. My legs tensed. Soon, soon, soon.

Sebastian walked into the office, and looked confused as to why I was sitting in Richard’s chair. A little confusedly, “I…have something for your boyfriend.”

Little licks on my clit. I took a sharp intake of breath. “He had to step out for a moment, he’ll be right back.”

He nodded, and brought his hands together, waiting patiently, rocking on his feet.

There was no way I could be completely quiet with how Richard was working me. I let out a small whine that I quickly turned into a cough to clear my throat. “We’ve met before, um… Sebastian, right?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

I was close. I closed my eyes and rested my head in my hands. Richard was making it hard for me to talk. “Could you—do—do me a favor? I’m feeling—faint. Could you fetch me a glass of water—please?”

Sebastian agreed, and left to find the kitchen. Now that Sebastian had left the room, Richard was more generous. He lapped at me quicker, pumped his fingers in me more furiously, and brought me over the edge. My body tensed, I brought my hands down to his hair to bring him closer to me, and my toes curled. I made all the effort I could to remain quiet, so that Sebastian wouldn’t be able to hear from downstairs. He slowed down, allowing me to ride out my orgasm, allowing me to rock myself on his face.

When he deemed that I was done, he made his way back up to a standing position, pulled my underwear up a little bit, readjusted my dress, and unfolded a handkerchief from his pocket with which to wipe his mouth and hands. He leaned over to kiss me, and the heat and musk emanating from his face reminded me that this was the most intimate I’d been with someone in a very long time. It was an intimacy I missed and craved and was glad to enjoy with Richard.

When Sebastian’s footsteps, I put my underwear back on and Richard spoke up as though we were already having a conversation. “I heard that you were feeling a little faint?” By the time Sebastian had entered the room, Richard’s hand was on my forehead, falsely gauging whether I had a fever or not.

I thanked Sebastian for the water and gratefully took a couple sips before I stood up so Richard could have his seat. Richard held my hand tenderly and told me, “If you’d like, there are
pajamas in the second drawer down in the dresser. I’ll come join you in a few minutes.”

Richard and I shared a knowing smile before I left for the bedroom, holding the glass. My legs shook as I walked. It was true—I allowed myself to succumb to what I was feeling, and I’d turned into somebody, however briefly, that could wrap her legs around somebody to keep them from moving, that could talk to somebody’s business partner without raising suspicion, and somebody that loved seeing a man on his knees.

Two doors down on the left was his room, I remembered. When I entered, I sat allowed myself to sit on the bed and take everything in before changing into pajamas. He had hardwood floors and stark white walls. It was well-decorated, and everything matched, though it did look a little sterile. There were no pictures, and nothing looked out of place. It didn’t look lived in. But, I wasn’t planning on telling him how to decorate his own house, so I thought nothing of it. Finally, I stood up, and opened the second drawer down in his dresser. The pajamas he had stashed away were less extravagant than I thought they would be. I had thought that they would be matching, and silk. I changed quickly. I had left the door open and didn’t want Sebastian to see me changing.

When Richard finally parted from his partner, who let himself out, he found me laying on his bed, scrolling through my phone. I wore only my underwear and one of his undershirts. I looked up at him and smiled. “I borrowed one of your hangers for my dress. I hope you don’t mind.”

He shook his head. “Not at all.” I think he would have minded more had I let the dress fall crumpled to the floor. “I apologize for Sebastian—he knew we were busy tonight, but I did tell him to bring me that USB as quickly as possible, no matter what.” He himself began to change, then crawled into bed with me. “How was your birthday, Sherry-like-the-drink?”

I leaned forward to kiss him. “Very good, thank you. You went above and beyond, and… those gifts, I’m…thank you.” I couldn’t find any other words to express my gratitude. The gifts were unreal and unexpected. What words could I have used to make him understand? “And thank you for tonight’s dessert.” I kissed him again. “I could return the favor, if you’d like.”

He smiled. “As much as I would love to take you up on that offer, Sherry, I couldn’t possibly allow you to use your mouth in such vulgar ways on your birthday.” He pretended to think. “Maybe on my birthday, though.”

A laugh escaped my lips. “It’s a deal.” I rolled over onto my side while he turned off the side lamp and began to spoon me. We stayed like that in the dark for a few minutes. Both of us were tired, it sounded like, what with the deepening of our breathing. I wanted to enjoy my birthday until it wasn’t my birthday anymore though, so I spoke. “What are you thinking about?”

“People,” he offered.

“What about people?”

“They’re so…ordinary.” Except he didn’t say ordinary. He said ordin-er-y with his accent. His voice was raspy with sleep, darker.

I didn’t respond to this immediately. I was momentarily a little hurt that he didn’t include a ‘but not you, Sherry,’ but I understood the late night existential pants of sadness and lackluster that appeared sometimes, especially after a few glasses of wine. “So what if we are?” I finally retorted. “Even the smartest, most talented people are still ordinary at the end of the day. We get up and make coffee like everyone else, we go to work or school like everyone else, and we go to
sleep like everyone else. I’m ordinary…you’re ordinary…it’s just what we do with our time and our lives that can make us extraordinary I suppose. Or how people remember us after we die.”

“I’m ordinary?” He asked, mumbling.

I shifted to face him and kissed his nose. “Well, I don’t think so, but I also have a bias. Why do you think people are ordinary?”

Richard fiddled with the sleeve of the undershirt I borrowed from him. “I have so many plans, Sherry. So many. And nobody can keep up with them—not even Sherlock, it seems like.”

“And you don’t want to slow down,” I responded. If Sherlock couldn’t keep up with them, then there was no way that I could. But, luckily, I was his girlfriend, not his coworker.

He nodded, confirming. “Precisely that.”

“Then maybe, instead of changing the people, you change perspective. What about your plans do they not understand? Don’t make it easier for them, but change how you word the problem. Or, alternatively, if you just want people to be more extraordinary, change your definition of extraordinary.”

“How would you define extraordinary?”

I thought for a moment before feeling sure of my definition. “For people? An extraordinary person is a person who did the impossible, or strives to do the impossible. It could be someone like you, who helps people with their problems, or it could just be somebody who is trying to survive day to day. People are ordinary, yes, but people can be extraordinary too, given the right circumstances.”

A small smile played on his face. “Spoken like a true Shakespearean scholar. Do you think you’re extraordinary?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not striving to do the impossible. I just want my degree,” I laughed. “Even my impossible essay is very well possible—it’s just that I’m lazy. Do you think you’re extraordinary?”

“Yes.” No hesitation whatsoever. He looked so serious saying it, too.

I snuggled closer to him, resting my head on his chest. His heart beat in my ear, and I could feel his chest rise and fall with every breath he took. “Well, I think so, too.” And I did. I really, truly, did.
The next morning, I woke up alone and unsettled. I vaguely recalled my dream from last night, and willed myself to remember what my subconscious had told me, to no avail. My hand passed over what used to be Richard’s side. No warmth emanated from it. Slowly, I rolled out of bed, taking my time in sitting up. He wouldn’t just leave me all alone in his house, would he? A voice came from down the hall, probably from his office. No, he wouldn’t, I supposed. He seemed to be much too private for that. After all, two months had passed, and despite all the good times that we’d had, a thought planted itself in my mind that I didn’t really know him at all.

Now that I was sober, I allowed myself a third look at his room. It was the same as I thought earlier, even though the moulding was just as exquisite as before. Minimalist to the point of being sterile. I’ll have to fix that. I stretched and yawned, slowly bringing myself to my feet. I began to tug at the corners of the blankets, hoping that the bed would be made to his standards. It was the very least I could do for him, after the lavish gifts and dinner. “Ah!” I sucked in air in response to stubbing my toe on one of my heels, which had then, of course, been kicked under the bed. I crouched on my knees and let my hand slide under the frame.

On my first try, I didn’t find my shoe, but rather a…full suitcase? I released the handle like it was iron-hot, and found my shoe after another few pat-downs of the floor. Why on earth would he have a ready-to-go suitcase under his bed? The only people I ever knew to do that were those in films who needed to be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. The kind who were on the run. I looked under the bed once more to confirm with my eyes what my hands had felt. That was a suitcase if I ever saw one.

Questions were slowly bubbling up to my brain. If he was planning on leaving soon, he’d tell me, right? Or maybe we just hadn’t gotten to that stage yet? I could have been completely wrong, anyways—maybe he wasn’t on the run, and that was filled with old memories, like a classier sort of shoebox. But still, that didn’t make sense. Maybe he really was doing something, and maybe he really did need to go on the run. What position would that put me in? And, I ran my hand down my face and sighed, slightly disgusted with myself, would he want me to come with him?

Okay, Sherry. You’re just jumping to conclusions. I took one last peek at it. Maybe I’d ask Richard straightaway, to calm my nerves. But then again…maybe I wouldn’t. We were all alone, in a house I wasn’t familiar with, and at an address that I didn’t know. While I trusted Richard him, I also trusted my own mind. Sure, this strange discovery might mean nothing, but what if it meant something instead? And that something was something I wasn’t supposed to know about?

After straightening his undershirt out and putting my hair up in an I-just-woke-up bun, I left the room to find my boyfriend. I willed my heart to slow down from its rabbit-like pace. Chances were that I was worried over nothing. The air in the hall was brisk, a perfect change from my bed warmth. I paused before stepping in front of the office, checking to make sure that he was finishing up the phone call I heard him start a few minutes prior.

In a hushed tone, “You will get me those files by four o’clock tomorrow. No excuses. Can you even comprehend what we’re doing? If you fail, you will never see the daylight again, I can assure you. … Good. Very good. I’m counting on it.” An annoyed sigh. Who was he talking to? And what files could be that important? And on a Sunday? He had said that he was in the business of helping people and making the world go round, and that didn’t quite sound like helping people. Maybe I’d go see Sherlock once I got home, and see what he had to say on the
I knocked on the door a few moments later, trying to make it seem that I hadn’t heard what I’d just heard. “Richard?”

“Come in.”

I opened the door and stood in the doorway. I opened my mouth, and all of my questions nearly came tumbling out. I took a deep breath, shoving them back down my throat, instead saying, “You look hard at work. I was thinking about making some coffee. Would you like some?” In truth, I couldn’t remember if he had a coffee maker, or French press, or anything of the sort, but any question was better than the ones tumbling around in my head.

He looked at me with an expression I couldn’t quite decipher. It wasn’t a harsh or cold expression, but a more…calculating one. A moment later, he released a breath of air and smiled with a renewed warmth to his face. “That would be nice. I’ll join you at the table in a minute, Sherry-like-the-drink.”

I nodded, taking my leave. He had looked at me as though he was contemplating his next move. Maybe he had heard me walk up to his office, after all. But—another thought raced through my mind—if he was trying to keep something a secret, he wouldn’t have spoken about it only two doors down the hall from me, in a tone that was so near a stage whisper. Could it have been possible that he wanted me to hear it, so that he could gauge my reaction? A wave of uneasiness washed over my body. This was what—the second or third time that I’d had doubts about Richard’s authenticity? I found a French press and began heating some water. If he gave me any more uneasy feelings, then I’d ask him about it. Maybe I would go to Sherlock after all…

My thoughts clouded my brain as my natural coffee-making instinct took over. I pilfered through cabinets to find mugs, and made my way over to the dining table with the two full cups of coffee, and made a second trip to bring over a small bowl of sugar cubes I’d spotted. I sat in the same spot as the previous night, partially waiting to start on my coffee for Richard, partially waiting because it was too hot. My eyes closed as I allowed myself to think of what I was now going to consider clues: The Tempest comment, the Hamlet comment, that bizarre Measure for Measure comment, the suitcase under his bed, the phone call… You know, maybe I really was overthinking things. Maybe he really was just trying to get to know my interests better, and I was just making him out to be this secretive, scary person? But maybe he was a secretive, scary person…?

My dream came to me in bits and pieces until I could finally make out the whole. It wasn’t a dream, actually, and it wasn’t quite a nightmare. There was a statue of me, as though I’d looked at Medusa herself. And there was blood. A lot of blood. Beware the Ides of March. Well, I had been scouring the pages of Julius Caesar recently. I guess it was to be expected that my dreams would be Shakespearian, too.

His footsteps brought me out of my trance. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I lied. Then, as an afterthought, I added, “Well, I mean, not nothing. Nothing important. It’s no longer my birthday and it’s Sunday, which means that I have no excuses to procrastinate my work any more.”

“Do you have a lot to do?”

I shrugged. “No more than the usual. How about you? You were in your office.” I picked up the mug and looked at him over its rim, trying to act casual when I was really trying to gauge
his response.

He sipped on his coffee. “Also the usual. Work never stops in my business, but such is life. I’d be bored, otherwise.” We allowed the morning silence to wash over us. I sat, trying to analyze him, wondering if he was analyzing me at this very moment. He broke the silence between us. “How much farther do you have on your paper?”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Well, I’ve written my entire rough draft. And that was the easy part. Now, you know, I have to go in and clarify everything, revise things—which is hard in its own right, because I wrote it, therefore everything makes sense to me; but I also have to take an axe to it and cut out all the parts that have no point being in there. And that’s hard. I may detest this paper with every fiber of my being, but it’s still my baby.”

Richard nodded, listening. “Cutting it will make it stronger. You make your paper sound like a weed in the rosebush of academia, but it’s always the weeds that come back with a vengeance.”

A bemused smile formed on my face thanks to his strange analogy. “Which play was that from, again?”

He let out a soft laugh. Maybe it was how he looked in the morning light, or maybe it was the tousled bedhead and pajamas, but something tugged at my heartstrings. I had a few reasons to be wary of him at the moment, but I had quite a few reasons to trust him, too.

“Hey, Richard.”

“Hmm?”

“I know it’s not my birthday anymore, but…I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?” He murmured, leaning forward, eyebrows furrowing.

I held up a finger as I walked to where I sat my purse last night. I dug around a bit, and found my phone, which thankfully still had a charge. My phone rested gingerly in my hands, as I worked up the courage to ask my question. “Will you take a selfie with me?”

Richard’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Want something to show on Facebook?”

I scoffed, pretending to be offended. “You know I don’t use Facebook that much. C’mon.” I settled myself in his lap, and opened the camera app. “This is just for me…and my mom,” I confessed. “She wanted to know what you looked like and wouldn’t rest until I told her that I’d send her a picture. Okay. Ready?” I waited until we both had our most darling smiles on before capturing the moment. I kissed his temple, preparing to stand up to go back to my coffee.

To my surprise, he wrapped his arms around me, and I came tumbling back down to his lap. He gave me a kiss straight on the lips and pulled away with a smug grin on his face before releasing me.

We chatted about small things for a few more minutes over our coffees. I tried to ask about his business a little more, to see if I could get any other information or reactions out of him, to no avail. Which was probably a good thing, as it helped calm my nerves. Finally, I admitted to myself and to Richard that I’d probably have to get going soon, that those papers weren’t exactly going to grade themselves. I didn’t want to leave, but I also wanted to ask Sherlock about what he knew of Richard.
And so, with a businessman’s ability to manage situations, he provided me with a pair of sweatpants to travel with instead of the dress (“Keep them, they look good on you”), said he’d get my dress dry-cleaned and necklace polished, and helped me out the door. Just like that, I was back to normal, boring, ordinary life. I’d been treated and adorned as a queen, and now I was standing in front of my apartment with my keys out, watching Richard walk away.

Would someone with something to hide really walk his girlfriend to her door every time he dropped her off? *If he was a good actor, maybe.* I glanced up at 221B. The chimney had no smoke, and the lights were off. Sherlock and John were probably out on a case, which meant that I’d have to call upon them later. I could only hope that I wouldn’t be forced to sit in the client’s chair and be scrutinized. Regular life it was, then.

Two more weeks had passed, and Richard and I had resumed our “normal” way of communicating via text, how-are-you-doing-calls, and him somehow knowing where I was and bringing me an espresso. That being said, I didn’t exactly know how he knew where I was a lot of the times, which reminded me that I’d yet to see Sherlock about him. Then again, I was only ever in my own apartment and on campus, so I supposed it wouldn’t have been too hard to figure out where I was…

Either way, today was a special day. It was our three-monthiversary. Normally, I wouldn’t make a big deal about month anniversaries, but he’d been so gracious to me in terms of gifts that I felt the need to repay him somehow. So here I sat, putting the final touches on the wrapping of the gifts I’d gotten for him.

Richard, I discovered, was a difficult man to shop for. He was a private person, and even his own home reflected that. He was truly a minimalist at heart. Despite having told me that he’s travelled often for work before, he had no sorts of souvenirs, and the lack of décor on his walls made it difficult to decipher what his interests were. So, I did what anybody else would do, and tried to play it cool, pretending to practice my deduction skills on him when really, I was just trying to get a sense for his taste (I needed better ideas other than upper-class and fancy-looking).

I shot Richard a text: ‘Coffee today? Nothing important, just wanted to see you :) – ST’

A few minutes later, and I had my response: ‘Monocle at 5? -RB’

It was two o’ clock now, which meant that I had a couple hours to get ready and work on some grading. I didn’t know what I wanted more: the time to go by quickly, or for me to grade a bunch in the allotted time slot. Only time would tell though, so I dove right in.

Before I knew it, I found myself waiting in the downstairs portion of The Monocle Café, glad to be rid of my cell service for once. It was busy, as expected, but the hum and drum of passer-bys relaxed me. It was nice to not be cooped up in my apartment, for once. I spotted Richard coming down the stairs with a cup of tea and waved so that he’d know where I was. He joined me a few moments later, making himself comfortable.

We exchanged pleasantries for a few moments as I worked up the nerve to give him my gifts. They weren’t much compared to his, but I hoped that he liked them all the same. “So, I actually have something for you.”

His eyebrows shot up, and he brought a hand to his heart. “Me? For me?”

His feigning of being overly-shocked and acting silly calmed my nerves a bit, so I brought
out the first of the two gifts, which I had wrapped to the best of my abilities. It was obviously a
book—even an ordinary person could have guessed that. “Well, it’s our three month anniversary,
and I don’t normally celebrate those…but you’ve done a lot for me in those months, so I just
wanted to show you that I appreciated everything you’ve done.

Richard took the gift from my hands and slowly began unwrapping it, gently pulling at the
tape. It was almost painstakingly slow, and watching him pull off the wrapping was near torture.

I opened my mouth, as I felt the need to explain it. “Um, so, you’re always asking me about
my paper, and you’ve been brushing up on your Shakespeare, so I thought you might appreciate it.
It’s one of the main sources for my thesis, and I thought it might be something that we could…” I
searched for the word, “…share. Or, at the very least, the spine’s a good color, and it wouldn’t
look out of place next to your Shakespeare anthology.”

“You noticed that.” A statement, not a question.

“Bookshelves are telling of a person,” I offered. “They’re one of the things I take great
notice of.”

He smiled, placed the book down next to his tea, and grabbed my hand. “Thank you. It’s
like a little piece of you will always be with me.”

I laughed. “Well, about that…” I was pretty sure that he knew I had something else for
him, but was trying to play it cool. I brought out my second gift and handed it to him. “There’s
this, too.” This was the one that I was most nervous about. It was sentimental, so my heart
pounded at the thought of his reaction.

This one he also took time to unwrap, and it was more annoying than the last time. He slid
it out, revealing a photo frame and a small smile on his face.

“So, I noticed that you didn’t really have a lot of decoration in your house, and you
mentioned that you liked playing house, so I thought that you might like this… Um, so you can
hang it, but if you don’t want to put a hole in your wall, you can also just prop it up on a side table.
So when you’re feeling domestic, you can have it up, and if when you don’t, you can just place it
face down or hide it in a drawer, and nobody will be the wiser…”

“You put a lot of thought into these,” he commented, placing his hand back on top of mine.
“Thank you.”

“Well,” I smiled, pleased that he liked my gifts, “like I said, you’re always doing things for
me. It’s the least I can do.” He began rubbing my hand with his thumb, and my heart skipped a
beat. And just like that, another rule of mine had been broken without my even trying. I thought
that I’d been doing a fairly steady job of keeping my emotions in check, especially with a man who
I thought wanted something more out of me than I was necessarily willing to give. But as we sat
here, in the middle of this busy café, I looked at him with apparent admiration. My heart found its
way to my sleeve.

Even with all the doubts that I’d had about him recently, he had also given me more than
anybody else would have been able to. He’d given me material things, heated moments, and a
hope for the future. He had everything that I wanted, and he had me, too. I hoped that this would
never end, whatever it was between him and me. I was in much, much deeper than I thought I
would be. And as I looked at him, I felt butterflies in my stomach and a four-lettered word on the
tip of my tongue.
Richard was away for business for the past couple of weeks, which suited me just fine. Though I missed him, it gave me time to work on—and prepare to turn in—my second draft, and to catch up on everything I’d put off, including seeing my dear friends over at 221B. Since I hadn’t seen them for a while (unfortunately neglecting them for my schoolwork and boyfriend), I decided to make them cookies as a neighborly gesture. About two months had passed since I last baked, and I found myself once more emotionally prepared to use my oven.

Surprisingly enough, Sherlock had been the one to invite me over. He’d seemed pretty serious about it, but he was always serious. I both hoped that it was and hoped that it wasn’t a case. The last one left me nervous and on-edge. And with the deadline of my final draft steadily approaching, I wasn’t sure if I could handle another responsibility. And honestly, if it was another case, I didn’t know if I’d accept or decline. Would a second-time-in-a-life-time be worth the stress? I wrapped up my cookies and placed them into a Tupperware container. There was only one way to find out.

I walked over and entered 221B with my usual knock, holler, and waltzing in. John said hello to me from the kitchen, and Sherlock sat in his chair playing the violin. Sherlock continued playing, only glancing at me once or twice. I sat down on their couch, placed the cookies on the coffee table, and remained silent about the new spray-paint smiley face on their wall. John placed a cup of tea by Sherlock, and then brought over two cups so that we could share a conversation over them.

“How’re you doing, John?” I asked, blowing on the tea.

“I’m good. The blog is growing more popular each day, and Sherlock’s been keeping me busy when I’m not at the hospital. Though, sometimes, even when I’m at the hospital.” John sipped on his tea, mildly glaring at Sherlock over the rim. “How are you? How’s your paper?”

“Good! My paper’s really coming along. I’m about to turn in my second draft in a few days…so I’m distancing myself from it before I make another round of edits. I am kind of nervous, if I’m being honest. It’s the biggest thing I’ve done, and if I don’t succeed and I can’t get my degree, then you know, I’m just going to be a failure at life and wither away into nothingness, but that’s just, you know. Normal. Nerves talking. I’m sure it’ll be fine, but, you know, what if it’s not?” I let out an awkward laugh at the end, fearing that I’d overshared.

But John, kind as he was, simply smiled and nodded. “I remember when I was in school to become a doctor. Those were not my best days. You’ll get there, Sherry. All the pain and suffering that comes from school will be worth it.”

John was always so kind when he talked to me. I was glad to have a friend like him, someone who’d already experienced so much and could calm my nerves about the future. Not that we saw each other frequently, but it was nice knowing that he was just a text or short walk away. “Yeah, you’re right. Besides, maybe afterwards I can find myself a detective and go on cases,” I smiled, snuggling into the couch.

Sherlock abruptly stopped playing his instrument, and set it carefully down beside the chair. He and John shared a look between each other, and then both turned back to me. I had the unquestionable feeling that I’d done something wrong. Sherlock took a sharp breath of air. “How long have you been dating your current boyfriend, Sherry?”
My face rouged. It’d been a while since it did that when talking about Richard, but I also felt rather embarrassed that I’d completely forgotten to mention him to them. There was so much that had happened in the past few months, what with my things, and them on cases…we were just so busy. And—oh god, I’d totally forgotten to talk to either of them about my worries. No matter. There was enough time in the present. “Oh, well, actually almost four months now. It’s nothing super serious, but…I hope it will be.” Nothing super serious? Sherry, he bought you a designer dress and necklace for your birthday.

John stood up and placed a hand on my shoulder. “Sherry…why don’t you sit in the chair across from Sherlock?”

I whipped my head up at him. “The client chair?”

He pursed his lips, searching for the right words to say. “I think we all need to have a conversation.”

Following John’s lead, I slowly made my way over to the client’s chair and settled in. Whatever it was they were about to tell me, I wasn’t sure if I was ready. And to think, only a few minutes before, I had worried that there would be another case. I had no idea that I’d actually be a part of it.

“Does Moriarty treat you well? Has he mentioned anything about his business to you?”

I coughed on my tea. “I’m sorry, who?”

John’s eyes widened, and he and Sherlock shared another look. One more urgent, this time.

“James Moriarty,” Sherlock affirmed. “Your boyfriend.”

I locked eyes with Sherlock, whose eyes narrowed upon making contact with mine. Sherlock, besides Richard, was the smartest person I knew. There was no reason why he’d so horrendously mix up Richard’s name, but I also had no idea who this Moriarty was. Both of us were firm in what our truths were, but one of us had to be wrong. Sherlock was the smartest one in the room. Sherlock was also the only other one in the room when I’d met Richard. There’d be no reason for him to mix up faces and names, which meant… The strange behavior when he took phone calls, the strangely timed Shakespeare references, the suitcase under his bed…

Richard Brook was not who he said he was.

Tea spilled onto the floor, splashing my legs and the chair. I couldn’t feel my face. My hand fell over my mouth, which hung open in stupefied horror.

“I don’t think she knows,” John murmured to Sherlock, alarmed, and standing up to grab a towel from the kitchen. Sherlock stared at me until John returned, wiping up the mess I’d made. When he was done, he set the towel aside and placed his hand over mine. “Sherry, James Moriarty is a bad man. You know how Sherlock is a consulting detective? Moriarty is a consulting criminal.”

“Which is rather humble of him, considering he’s regarded as the Napoleon of crime,” Sherlock interjected.

“He’s not the sort of person you want to be involved with. Now, with my dating track record, I probably shouldn’t give you any advice,” John laughed a little, trying to lighten the mood, “but I’d get away from him as fast as you can. You don’t want to know the things he’s done.”
I looked to Sherlock after a few moments, trying to find the will to speak. “The Tempest murders.”

He nodded.

“The Ophelia murder.”

He nodded again.

I looked back to John, who was looking at Sherlock, annoyed that Sherlock confirmed my suspicions. “Did he hurt you?” My voice was shaking.

“No,” John responded. “He wanted to, though.”

“When?” I whispered, losing control of my voice.

“Two nights ago.”

So he was back in the city. Maybe he’d never left. It was a good thing, I supposed, since I had gotten some distance from him. The four-lettered word that had been sitting on my tongue shriveled up, turning sour. I was a fool. I was a fool for being so willing to play a game I knew wouldn’t end well. There was no way that I could have seen this coming. I didn’t expect anything to this extent.

John noticed my prolonged silence as I chewed on my nails. “It’s not your fault, Sherry. You couldn’t have known about this.”

And how could I have? Yet the guilt and fear hung around my person. How could I get out of this relationship? Would it even be possible? And what if—and this was a horrid thought—what if he actually cared about me? Was that possible? I buried my face in my hands and let out a sob. Even if that was the case, there was no way I could live with myself if I remained with somebody who so willingly hurt my friends and other innocent people so easily. He’d played me like a finely-tuned fiddle and I’d fallen into his cadence. How could I have been so stupid?

“Sherlock, get her some more tea.” A pause, and then more sternly, “Sherlock.”

I could hear Sherlock get up and move to the kitchen. Slowly, I lifted my head up and looked at John, who regarded me with sad eyes.

“You can stay with us if you need to. For as long as you need.”

I shook my head and accepted my new cup of tea from Sherlock. “Maybe after I break up with him, if that’s okay. Could I stay here for a little longer, though?”

John smiled and nodded. “Of course you can. Do you want to watch any shows? Read anything?” Sweet John, always the mediator.

Weakly, I smiled back. “No thanks,” I croaked out. “I just don’t want to be alone right now.”

“And you won’t be.” John stood to grab a blanket and wrapped it around my shoulders. He and Sherlock then took on air, pretending that everything was alright. John sat his laptop upon his lap, Sherlock picked up his violin again, and I sat, petrified, only moving to sip on my tea. Every now and then, John would look up from his work and attempt to stealthily glance at me. When I’d finished my drink, we broke one of my cookies in half so that we could share. I’d made peanut
butter cookies, the kind I’d made all those weeks ago.

Remembering how Richard, James, whoever he was brought me flour brought me to tears once more, sending poor John into a shock. He’d given me gifts, bought me coffee I never asked for, asked questions about my thesis. He’d invited me over to his house, helped me when I could hardly help myself, treated me as his equal. Were those the actions of a murderer?

And yet, all the hints were there. The murders. The smell of gunpowder that lingered on his clothes. The phone calls. The anger. I’d willingly ignored all the signs. And why? I ruminated on these thoughts, remembering them over and over for what felt like hours on end.

It was only until John shook my shoulder two hours later that I’d realized I’d fallen asleep out of tearful fatigue and anxiety. I was glad he woke me up, but disappointed at the prospect of being awake once more.

“Why don’t I walk you home?” John suggested. “It’s dark out.”

I gladly agreed to his suggestion. If James—the name still felt foreign in my thoughts—was as cunning as they alluded to, then there was a chance that he, or somebody else, was waiting for me to come out alone. Maybe Richard would want to surprise me to finally let me know that he was back from his trip. But if John was there, maybe nothing would happen. At least, not for a while.

I had no desire to see him whatsoever at this moment. I had to regain my confidence, practice my break-up speech…or if we did see each other, I had to be prepared to pretend that I knew nothing of him being James.

John and I left 221B after I’d said goodbye and thanks to Sherlock, and slowly made our way to my apartment building. Rain splashed on the sidewalk, and the streetlights gave the road an eerie look. For a quick moment, I was glad that I was wearing sweatpants, until I realized that it was the pair that he’d lent me, and all I wanted to do was rip them off and wash my legs until they were raw. We stood awkwardly in front of the door, and I found myself not really knowing what to say.

Finally, “Sherry, I need to ask you something. As a doctor, and as a friend.”

My head shot up. I knew what he was about to ask, but let him ask it anyways.

“Did he…ever make you do anything you didn’t want to do?” John grimaced, and his face held a pained expression.

I shook my head. “No. We never even…no.” Relief and disappointment welled up in my throat.

He nodded, and leaned in for a hug. We stood there for a while, and I let go only when I felt tears prick at my eyes again. “If you ever need anything Sherry, I’m only a phone call away.”


We went our separate ways, and I found myself in my apartment once more. All alone. Thank god. I didn’t know what I’d do if I wasn’t. Violently, I threw my purse down onto my couch and let out a short scream.

God. I liked Richard so much. More than liked. And he wasn’t even real. He’d never been real. And I was none the wiser. He took me out, enchanted me with his voice, brought me
home. He’d touched me in ways I’d never dreamt of being touched before. Had he only asked, I would have easily given him—I would have given him so much more.

Slowly, anger built in my heart. When I originally thought that he’d been too good to be true, I never expected an actual criminal. I expected a jerk, somebody who only wanted to use women for their bodies as though they were the prize for all the effort he put into a relationship. But no. He’d preyed on me for some reason, and I wanted to know what that reason was. A decision had been formed in my mind. I’d break up with him, but only after I discovered the reason behind his actions. Was I a game? Did he truly enjoy playing house? Maybe he was bored?

It was entirely possible that discovering the reason would be dangerous, but I’d have Sherlock and John to help me, and those two had plenty of connections themselves. I needed to find out this reason for myself, and at the moment, I could only see one way of getting the information. James held the deck, but I still had a card up my sleeve. There was a way to get him alone and vulnerable, or at the very least on equal playing ground. James Moriarty may have been a consulting criminal, and one of the smartest men in the world. But he was still a man—a businessman for that matter. And businessmen loved making deals. What better trade could there be than to give information in exchange for a pretty woman? He was a man with a mind, and I was a woman with a body.
A Fair Thought

Waiting for James—Richard—to tell me that he was back from his business trip (despite him possibly never having departed) left me at odds with myself. One moment, I was patient, relieved that I had a few days to think about the predicament I was in, and what my plan of action would be. The next moment, I’d be on edge, starting at each text notification. In the meantime, I found myself strangely motivated to work on my second draft. The motivation, I thought, came from spite. He let me talk to passionately about my paper and my fascination with Shakespeare to the point where he himself bothered to reacquaint himself with the tragedies, all the while using this newfound knowledge to his advantage when he ordered to have people killed. Jesus. And now, all of that passion I once had discussing my paper turned into passion for writing my paper. If there was one thing that was going to come of this whole trainwreck, it was going to be me graduating.

Currently, it was late Sunday afternoon. And currently, I was saving my second draft and uploading it to the USB drive that hung from my keyring. I was done. For now, at least. Come Tuesday, I’d turn it in, and hopefully by the next weekend, I’d be working on my final draft and I’d be that much closer to having my degree, and going back home, and leaving James, and leaving Sherlock and John… I sighed. Maybe there’d be a way to extend my visa, or stay as a tourist, even if it was just for a little longer.

I shut down my computer, and decided that I needed a much deserved break, one where I actually read for fun, and ate something besides pasta. But before I could even look in the fridge, my phone beeped. My heart skipped a beat, and finally, it was with reason. The name that appeared on my phone’s lock screen (which was still set to the selfie I’d taken with him—ugh) was Richard Brook, followed by three heart emojis. I had half a mind to change them to knives and skulls, but if he happened to somehow know that I changed them so drastically, it was possible that it wouldn’t end well for me.

His message read: ‘Back in London. Currently unpacking. Care to come over? -RB’

My breath hitched. How to respond? I mean, I was already planning on going over there to get closure in one way or another, but how did I respond without alerting him to a change in my motivations? Worry took me over, and I scanned through my previous texts trying to study my linguistics and punctuation usage. Okay, clearly I was overthinking this. Just…text natural. And so: ‘Sounds good! Just let me know when :) -ST’ Because smiley faces never had ulterior motives.

Richard—James—texted back that he arranged for somebody to pick me up in half an hour and that the door would be open for me, which gave me just enough time to change into matching underwear and put on some nice make-up. Tonight was going to be the night. Because I missed him, I kept telling myself. Because I missed him, and it made me realize just how in a-lot-of-like I was with him (I refused to say the actual four-letter L-word). Definitely not because I was planning on getting personal information for my own personal gain and then trying not to be killed. Not that at all.

When the driver arrived and I sat myself in the back seat, we drove the whole way to his house nearly silent. Anxiety plagued my mind. I thought that I had thought this through. But now the consequences of my actions were going to become very apparent. I wished that Sherlock and John had told me sooner. I wished that they’d never told me at all.

Now, I had to pretend that everything was alright, that nothing was the matter, and I’d certainly not received any new information about my boyfriend. Maybe I could play it off as stress
—after all, he didn’t know that I just finished my second draft. It was possible I could feign anxiety over that, especially since I had yet to figure out what I wanted to do with myself after I graduated. That was, if I graduated.

We pulled up to his house, and after a quick ‘thank you’ to the driver, I exited the car and made my way to the front door. I knocked loudly before entering, and then called out, “Hey, I’m here!” in my most friendly tone of voice.

From upstairs, “In the bedroom!” He couldn’t still be unpacking, could he?

He was still unpacking. He was taking his time hanging up suits and placing shoes into his closet with precision. James? Richard? Whoever he was, had dressed into more casual clothes, probably glad to be in the comfort of his own home. At the moment, I wish I could’ve said the same. I took a breath and did my best to play it cool. “How was your trip?” I asked, walking up to him to give him a hug.

I relaxed despite my better judgement. My mind had alarms going off, but my body had missed him. His arms were firm around my back, and I couldn’t smell any gunpowder on his clothes. A small pang of hope and sadness resounded in my heart, thinking that maybe it was possible Sherlock and John had gotten it all wrong, but knowing that they were correct.

“Long. Boring. I met with some businessmen who clearly didn’t do any research. That was annoying.” We pulled away from each other, and I sat down on the bed, watching him work. “How have you been, Sherry?”

“Good,” I affirmed, trying to make sure my voice neither boomed nor wavered. “I finished my second draft a little early, which was entirely unexpected, so now I have time for just… whatever. At least, until Tuesday.”

He snapped his suitcase shut, and I lifted my legs so he could slide it under the bed. I looked toward his nightstand, and saw the framed selfie I’d taken of us just a few weeks prior. Another pang of hope. Maybe I’d just read into it too much. Doesn’t matter. Sherlock and John are still right. James—I was just going to start calling him James in an effort to distance myself from him—looked up at me, still kneeling. “That gives us plenty of time to make up for those lost two weeks.” An impish grin appeared on his face.

My stomach churned with nervousness, and I gave a little laugh in response. “What did you have in mind?” If I seemed nervous to him, I was hopeful that it’d be remedied later by what I was going to do. First time nerves, cold feet…definitely not because I wanted information.

He shrugged as though he was thinking, as though he wasn’t entirely sure before coming directly upon his suggestion: “A movie?”

I blinked a few times, having expected his response to be something along the lines of dinner, or a late night walk in the park. Or something sexual. “That sounds good,” I confirmed. “What did you want to watch?”

“We’ll have to see what’s on Netflix,” was his only response. He took my hand and led me out of the bedroom, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. “Ice cream?”

“What flavor?” Another surprise. He was acting normal. Too normal. I felt that he’d normally suggest wine, but maybe he could tell that I was nervous about something. Even if food didn’t necessarily calm me down, there was something about the repetitive motions and lack of conversation that food provided that helped. He told me he only had vanilla, and I said that was
fine, and so we made our bowls and topped it off with caramel sauce and pecans. We settled on the couch, and I found myself looking more at my surroundings than at what movie he was choosing (he had one of those super technical televisions that was able to access the internet and various apps). I’d barely been in the living room before, and I was glad to say that it was more lived in than the rest of his house, save for the office. There was an old newspaper laying on the kitchen counter, and a vase of dying flowers rested in the middle of his coffee table.

I waited for him to choose a movie before I dug in. I hardly paid any attention to what he chose, and forced myself to eat at a slow pace. My mind was elsewhere, racing through all the different ways I could begin what I was about to do, the possible outcomes of what I was about to do, and not only how I would feel after what I was about to do, but how he would feel after what I was about to do.

When done with my ice cream, I sat the bowl on the coffee table, and leaned further back into the couch, trying to make myself comfortable. It was the least I could do for myself for the time being. I shifted toward my right, resting up against his arm which snaked it way around my shoulders. This was so comfortable, and it felt so right. Why did everything have to change? I accidentally let a little sigh slip.

James set his bowl next to mine and looked pointedly down at me. “Is everything alright?” His glance, while it held concern, also held a layer of caution.

I looked up at him and gave him the sweetest smile I could, given how tired I was. “I just missed you, is all.”

“I missed you, too.” He looked at me as though he was taking my whole face into consideration, and finally rested his gaze upon my lips. He rested his right hand upon my thigh and closed the gap by pressing his lips against mine, lingering just a moment too long for it to be an average kiss. James pulled back, hovering just enough so that I could feel his breath on my face.

I brought my hands up and rested them on the back of his head, and pulled him to my lips once more. His hair was soft in my fingers, and my palms could feel the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow on his face. This sole kiss was the most meaningful I’d ever had. My heart skipped a beat, and I began to feel gooseflesh form on my skin. Why couldn’t he have just been who he said he was? When I released him, my breath was shaky, and my eyes were half-lidded. If he didn’t know I was nervous before, he certainly did now.

His eyebrow raised as he began to speak. “You know, I’m not interested in this movie anymore. I was thinking of going to bed.”

“What a coincidence,” I agreed, “So was I.”

He stood up and took me by the hand, leading me up the stairs and to his room. He didn’t bother to turn the lights on. The streetlamp from outside lit up the room just enough to see where we were going and what we were doing. Still holding my hand, he led me onto the bed, took my face into his hands, and kissed me. His lips were soft, and when he pulled away to look at me, he held a small smile on his face and his eyes held what looked like adoration.

James kissed me again, and dropped one hand from my face to the bottom hem of my shirt, playing with it, then beginning to pull it upwards. I’d seen this done in the movies before, read about it in books, but I found myself lacking in all knowledge of what to do next. I mimicked his moves, tugging at his shirt, and before we knew it, we took a break from kissing to pull our shirts upward and to toss them aside. He took a moment to look at my body, admiring it, and I felt exposed and unsure of myself.
Peppering my clavicle with kisses, he lowered us both down so that we were lying horizontally, with me under him. He rested a hand on my stomach, feeling the skin, working its way upward to my right breast. Only a thin layer of fabric rested between our skin, and with the way he was looking at me now, I could only imagine it wouldn’t last for much longer in that position. Heat pounded from between my thighs: I was getting wetter each minute. I readjusted my legs, wanting him to rest easier on me, wanting to feel the hardness growing beneath his jeans.

He let his hand slip from my breast to the beginning of my jeans, tracing the area where skin and fabric met. I wanted him. I wanted him so bad and he made me feel so good. I wrapped my hands around his head and pulled him down for another kiss, and another, and another. Moments like these had infinities inside them. There would always be a time and place out in the universe where Richard—James—and I would roll around like this, even if it was only in our memories.

James pressed his hips into my middle, a sigh escaped from my lips, and I cursed the existence of pants. I didn’t want to be the first to move, for I didn’t want to seem too eager, and he seemed perfectly content to be the one in control. Finally, he began fiddling with the button on my jeans, so I brought my hands down from his head and undid it myself, giving him time to undo his own pants button.

Taking his sweet time, he slowly undid my zipper, and sat up even slower to take both of our pants off. Now, we were sitting up, staring in each other’s eyes, remaining only in our underwear. He leaned into me, and kissed where my neck met my shoulder. His fingers hooked under one of my bra straps, and lifted it up so that it snapped onto my shoulder. “Ah! You prick!” I stared at him wide-eyed, laughing.

He smiled, little crow’s feet forming at the edge of his eyes. “There she is,” he mused before kissing me on the lips, this time lowering my bra straps without a scene.

I didn’t know whether he had intended to or not (though I supposed that with someone like James everything was intentional), but he’d successfully lightened the mood from something bordering on just a little too serious. With that action, he’d let me know that he could tell I was nervous. With his current action of working on my bra clasps, I suddenly felt powerless and exposed. He tossed my bra aside, and I scooped my breasts into my arms, feeling self-conscious.

James took one quick and serious look at me before saying, “You’re a virgin.” It was a statement, not a question.

I nodded, more gingerly than I wanted to. Hearing the words out loud embarrassed me, and I was nervous to meet his eyes. Was I really going to do this? Betray his trust after he betrayed mine? Wouldn’t it be easier to just pretend that there was nothing wrong through this whole ordeal? Or maybe to just quit while we were ahead? He was a high-class criminal, somebody who stole, threatened, murdered—and here I was, in his bed. But I made this bed, so I’d have to lie in it, wouldn’t I? Besides, I’d be lying if I said at this point I didn’t want to.

There were too many thoughts running through my head, too many about what-ifs and hypotheticals. For the moment, just for the moment, I wanted to not worry about anything else. I wanted this to happen between him and me, with both of us present throughout the whole process.

James gripped my chin and planted a kiss on my lips, then on my neck, then on my clavicle. His hands cupped my breasts, then began to slowly travel to my stomach, my sides, my back, feeling all of the dips and crevices my torso had to offer. I myself felt paralysed from anxiousness, hardly knowing what to do with my hands. He laid us both back down again, and let one of his hands trace my skin down to my thighs and back up again. His fingers played with the
hem of my underwear, dancing just on top of the fabric.

“You’re on birth control,” he stated, not asking, once more.

I nodded again. This was really happening, wasn’t it?

He rolled my underwear down, leaving my fully exposed now. He crawled backwards, looking at me before leaning down and kissing my clit. I was already so wet for him. I was ready—he could have me at any moment he wanted. He licked me once, then twice, eliciting moans from between my lips. With one hand, he parted my folds and easily inserted a finger inside me, then another, slowly pumping.

My body writhed beneath his. I would relinquish anything if it meant that we could finally be together. Whimpers escaped my throat, and I clutched the bedsheets. To my disappointment, he removed his fingers and placed them in his mouth. “You taste so good, Sherry.” He leaned over to kiss me with a smug look. “Just like the drink.”

A smile formed on my face, glad that he cared enough to break the tension. The only problem was that I didn’t know if I was in bed with James or with Richard. For the moment though, I supposed that it didn’t matter. I became bold. My fingers rested on his chest, then grazed his stomach, then finally rested on the hem of his boxers. My moment of boldness was fleeting though, so once my hands arrived there, I only fiddled with the hem instead of outright pulling his boxers down. The tent that had formed there was totally natural, yet it still embarrassed me, so I let James take the hint to pull them down himself.

Now we were both nude, able to see each other with the glow from the lamppost outside. He hovered over me, one hand near my head, the other helping to position himself against my entrance. My heart felt light and I felt faint. James kissed me once more, before staring into my eyes as a lover should, waiting for my consent. I smiled nervously and nodded, kissing him once more. Shakily, I whispered, “I want you.” I looked up into his dark eyes with adoration, taking in his five o’clock shadow, his now-dishevelled hair. The light tinted his pale skin with orange, and he smelled of cologne and sweat. Whoever it was that was in bed with me, I loved him, though I’d never admit it out loud and out of this bed. That was why this was going to be so hard.

Slowly, and with a steady hand, he guided himself into me, eliciting a gasp from between my lips. Words were caught in my throat as James rested inside me, pausing, placing his forehead on mine. I gave him a little nod to tell him that it was okay, it was alright, he could continue. He took his time, sliding in and out of me, giving my body some time to readjust and get used to his size. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my head in his shoulder, waiting for the discomfort to pass.

He continued rhythmically, letting out the tiniest of grunts, holding himself back. Finally, once the discomfort had faded, I found myself unsatisfied with the slow pace we had set for ourselves. “Faster, please, faster.” I was hardly able to choke out these words, too focused on my pleasure to think of anything else.

Picking up on my cue, he began to thrust faster. He brought his hand to my throat, placing it gently on my clavicle, pressing it ever so slightly, as though he wanted to choke me but had to hold back. I looked up at him, and his eyes bore into mine like he was a different person. He closed his eyes and looked down, focusing on his actions. “God, you’re so tight, Sherry.” He looked back up at me, and lowered himself to place sloppy kisses along my jawline. His stubble scratched my neck, and I could hear his panting in my ear, his heavy exhales almost turning into grunts.
He took a brief pause to readjust and lift my right leg to his shoulder. This allowed him a new angle, a better angle. He was deeper in me than I thought was possible. The smell of sex and sweat hung in the air like a low musk, and each new thrust left me writhing beneath him. I felt like I had nothing to hold onto—our bodies were slick with a mixture of the other’s sweat, my mindless moans ringing out to an empty room. I gripped his back with my nails, pulling them further down the quicker he went.

His hand moved from my throat and to the side of my face. His thumb played with my lips, parting them, entering my mouth, and coating my chin with my own saliva. His touch felt like electricity, sparking new life into me wherever he traced his fingers, dragged his hands.

I reached down between my legs, beginning to play with my clit. I wanted this to last forever, but I was inexperienced and my legs were growing sore. My hand was swatted away by James, who pressed his thumb, still slick with my saliva, and rubbed it gently. “Look at me.” His voice was firm, though a tad breathless.

I opened my eyes, staring at him and his silhouette in the darkness. The orange tint from the lamppost had disappeared, leaving only remnants of moonlight. I was in the darkness, too. Yet here we were, naked, sweating, and James, pulling me ever closer to the light with every thrust into me and with every flick to my clit. He stared at me back, watching my every move, how my face contorted each time he filled me up. It felt so good, and he looked so beautiful decorated in the shreds of moonlight. Words I wanted to say threatened to spill from my tongue, but I controlled them and pushed them back into my throat, just behind my sternum. Those were words that would never see the light of day, and would never be vocalized for the Gemini, the Pollux, above me.

Church bells rang faintly in the background. My legs tensed, and my toes curled. My breathy moans were transformed into gasps of air, and I wrapped my arms around him and placed my head in the crook of his neck. “Oh, god, I’m going to—oh god, James, James.” And with the echo of his name—his real name—I knew that my plan had been enacted, and the damage had been done. The man above me was at his most powerful and at his most vulnerable. If Sherlock and John were correct in their accusation, then I had no idea how he’d react, and I’d have to be on my best guard pretending as though nothing had happened, waiting to see if he chose to correct me or not.

James still continued to thrust into me, then slowing, then stopping. I had elicited a moan from his lips, and as he stopped, I felt him pulse inside of me. He lowered himself onto me, panting, still inside me. My body couldn’t decide on fight or flight, so it froze. Alarm bells were distantly going off in my mind, but my body was too tired and blissful to move or worry. I was exhausted, and I’d only laid there.

I ran a hand through James’ hair, conflicted between feeling glad to feel how hot he was, to feel our sweat comingle, and how I likely wouldn’t be able to move, even if I tried. Slowly, he moved himself off of me, collapsing just to the right of me, still breathing heavily. Though we were lying next to each other, I began to feel emptiness creep in. He was missing from me, and I was afraid of being right and wrong. I wanted answers—the truth—but I wanted to pretend for a little longer, to imagine that there was nothing the matter, and that my first time had been sweet and romantic, and without any traces of me using my virginity as a bargaining tool for information.

Not that I didn’t enjoy it, of course. But now, as he lay there saying nothing, guilt crept into my core, and I wondered if I had made a grave mistake.

To my surprise, James reached out for me, and pulled me into an embrace. He still said
nothing. My head rested against his chest, and we both were far too hot to begin to go underneath
the covers. I waited for him to ask me, “Who’s James?” as though he was still Richard, or even a
more threatening, “How do you know who I am?” I waited to be accused by him, to be
condemned for violating his trust by slithering into his bed. And still, nothing. All he did was lean
over and give me one more solid kiss on my forehead. Instead of any accusatory utterances, he
simply mumbled, “Night, Sherry,” while rubbing my cheek with his thumb, leaving me to ponder
and worry in his arms.
Spoken in Jest

Chapter Notes

Sorry about my little hiatus! Life got in the way, but I'm back in business :)

Ticking sounds fluttered in my ears until I peeled my eyes open. Unlike the previous two times James and I had shared a bed together, he was right beside me, with one arm wrapped around me, keeping me in my place, the other extended in front of both of us. He was texting someone. As my eyes focused, coming out of their sleep, I began to read what he had been typing: ‘Bring the arms to the pier at 2300. My men will meet you there. Don’t be late. -JM’

Oh. Oh, no. This was bad. Very bad. I didn’t know whether to pretend to still be asleep, or to figure out a way to slither out of his arms and put my clothes on and leave unscathed, or what. And with the grip he had around my middle, I wasn’t even sure I could move without alerting him somehow.

“Sherry-like-the-drink, you’re awake,” he mused. Too late. “How did you sleep?”

Not the topic starter I was expecting. “Fine,” I responded, trying to keep my wits about me. “How about you?”

“Very well, very well indeed. Tell me, Sherry,” he kissed my right shoulder, leaving a burning sensation, “how long have you known?”

I was nude, and had no way of escaping, so I decided to play the fool. “Known what?”

He tutted. “Come now, Sherry, don’t be rude. You know precisely what I mean.”

There was no going back now. I wished that I hadn’t been so reckless, that I had either broken it off with him or continued pretending. Not…not this. What I had done was harmful and reckless, and left an emotional quarry in my chest. I gave myself what I had thought I had wanted for so long, and now there was no way out. “Um,” I began shakily, “for a few days. Three.”

“Did you figure it all out on your own, or did Sherlock and his live-in help you?” His phone vibrated, but he ignored it.

I wished that I could have seen his face, to better gauge how I should respond. I opened my mouth to speak and—

“Hold that thought. Let’s discuss this over breakfast. It’s never good to talk on an empty stomach.” He released me from his hold. “Go on, get dressed.”

Pushing the covers aside, I began to rise to get dressed. He reached out and smacked my arse, echoing slightly in the bare room. I whipped my head around to stare at him, horrified. James simply placed both hands behind his head, sporting a smug look on his face. I had half a mind to slap that smug look off, but I figured that he probably had a smaller smug look hiding underneath it. Instead, I took my time finding my garments, knowing that he derived pleasure in watching me self-surveil each action and movement I made. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of watching me rush. When I’d finished putting my clothes on, he had made no effort
“Why don’t you make us some coffee? I’ll be down in just a moment.” He winked at me, then made a ‘shoo’ motion with his hand.

I acquiesced, not knowing anything better to do with myself. I knew that James and Richard were going to be different, but I never expected them to be this different. But I supposed that I’d take this new, strange personality over a harsh, cold one. If he had wanted to murder me, he would have already done it, right? Unless he wanted to play with his food… I felt sick, and wanted nothing to do with us having breakfast. I briefly thought about making a run for it, but he knew where I lived, where Sherlock and John lived—he could track me down in no time. And here, so long as I could be of use and entertaining, I’d be safe. Or, as safe as one could be in a spider’s web.

Our ice cream bowls were still in the same spot as we left them. I placed coffee grounds into a filter and began the coffee-making process. While it was brewing, I picked up the dishes and began to wash them, trying to make myself useful, likeable, unkillable. When the coffee was done, I picked out the same mugs that we used the last time, trying to connect any sort of dots. We had a good time the last time, we’d made memories, we took that selfie—anything to link myself to the happy joys of the past. I just hoped that they were happy memories for him, too.

James sauntered down the stairs slowly, finally dressed in an undershirt and some sweats. He wasn’t wearing any slippers. “I do so love the scent of coffee in the mornings,” he said, taking a seat next to me at the table. “Thanks for making it. You always were so kind like that. So tell me. Sherlock helped you, did he not?”

“Yes,” I said, staring into my coffee. I’d made it myself, so I knew it wasn’t poisoned. But I was worried for some reason that if I drank it, I’d be indebted to him somehow. “But I had my suspicions,” I mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” I muttered, wanting to take back what I had added.

“Nothing comes from nothing, Sherry.” He smiled, toying with me. I refused to look into his eyes. I wanted to do nothing else but leave unscathed. He let out a low whistle. “Not amused by Shakespeare this morning, are we? I never thought I’d see the day. But do speak up.”

I supposed that I had no other choice. I’d have to pick my words carefully from here on out. “I said I had my suspicions. About you.”

“Oh?” He raised his eyebrows. “Pray tell, what were they?”

My hands wrapped around the coffee mug, absorbing the heat. The room felt cold, as though it had suddenly dropped a couple degrees. “The Shakespeare murders.”

He nodded.

“Your clothes sometimes smelled like gunpowder. You got so angry sometimes, like you were a different person. I mean, you did end up being different, in the end. And…I found your suitcase, under your bed. I—I wasn’t snooping, I swear. I’d just kicked a shoe underneath your bed last time.”

He scoffed. “All those warning signs…and you chose to ignore them all. Sherry, I thought you were smarter than that. Those are all red flags.”
“Don’t mock me,” I whispered. He was right.

James shrugged. “I suppose all the red flags just look like flags through rose-tinted glasses.” He paused, taking a sip of his coffee. “Drink, drink,” he urged me.

I took a sip, not wanting to anger him. I hated myself for doing what I did last night. I had been too bold, too brave, too willing to take a risk. And now I was quite literally facing my consequences. Regret flushed my cheeks, though I didn’t know whether I regretted my actions, or whether I regretted that he wasn’t who he said he was. My heart sunk, breaking minute by minute. I was no longer fearful—for the time being, I didn’t think he would do anything. All that filled my heart was despair.

He set his mug back down on the table. He reached over, and I tensed up, unaware of what he was going to do next. But, he simply pushed my hair behind my ear. “I have to admit though, last night surprised me, and I’m not often surprised. I never guessed that you’d actually use your virginity as a way to elicit information from me. And in such a…such a sneaky way.” An arrogant grin appeared on his face. “I don’t know whether I should be proud or offended. I never even bothered to wonder which name you’d be calling out.” Another sip of his coffee.

“After all this, I’m wondering if I should have called you Dick instead of Richard,” I said, finally turning to meet his eyes.

A small huff of laughter. “What am I going to do with you, Sherry?”

My face fell. I’d miscalculated again. My breath became uneven, and my heart began pounding. “You’re going to kill me,” I stated. It wasn’t a question. I shut my eyes, wanting it to be done with. At least, if I was dead, I wouldn’t be worrying about being killed anymore.

A large bout of laughter, this time. “Kill you? By God, Sherry, that’s much too complicated. No, no,” he drawled out. “You’re free to leave at any time. Though I do have to kick you out at one o’ clock, I’m afraid. Business meetings, you know how they can be, always taking up the best part of the day.”

I nearly spilled my coffee. “You’re joking.”

He hummed. “You should see the look of shock on your face. If you keep it like that for too long, it’ll get stuck. It’s not a very forthcoming face, that one.” He stood up abruptly, the squeak of the chair against the floor startling me. “Well, I have to get ready. You know the way out.” He began to walk away, then turned on the balls of his feet, facing me once more. “You know, you amuse me Sherry. Why don’t I leave you with a parting gift?”

“What is it?” I half expected that it would be the gifts I had given him a couple weeks prior, as a way to show that we were finished, and that he never truly liked me anyways.

James moseyed over to me, placing one hand on the back of my chair and the other in front of me. I couldn’t escape or move. “Three questions. Ask me any three questions you’d like, and I’ll answer truthfully. Just ring me up whenever you think of them.” He let go of the chair and table, waving at me before turning around again.

“I know what I want to ask,” I told him before he’d gotten too far, making him turn around once more. I figured that he had expected me to think long and hard about my questions, in a way to make myself seem smarter than I truly was. To think of really good questions. But in all honesty, after I exited these doors, I had no intention of ever seeing him or talking to him again. He looked at me expectantly. “Why me? Why are you just letting me go? And—that counts as
one question.”

He looked offended. “Since when do two questions count as one?”

James was letting me go free, so I figured it was okay to get him a little riled up. “Well, I don’t know, you used to be a professor. Don’t tell me you didn’t assign questions one through five only to have your students realize that each question had four parts to it. Don’t look at me like that—with your beady little eyes—you know you did exactly what I described,” I accused, faintly remembering my math class terrors.

He rolled his eyes. “Fine.” He paused. “You, Sherry Thompson, are average. That’s a good thing in a situation like this, so don’t be insulted. You don’t have a lot of money, you don’t have a glamorous job; you’re not famous. In other words: you have a low profile. And,” he smiled, “you live right next door to the one and only Sherlock Holmes. What better way to keep tabs on him than by dating his neighbor? And right under his nose, too. Rather slow on the uptake, isn’t he? Besides, I was bored and I hadn’t played domestic in a while. You were the perfect candidate, Sherry.”

“And why are you letting me go? You haven’t answered that part yet.”

“Because everybody will think you’re lying. Making things up. Do you really think that people would believe that a Shakespeare student attracted the sights of the most dangerous man in the world? I don’t think they would.”

I let my eyes fall down. He was right. If I ever so much as breathed a word about this, about having dated a consulting criminal, to anybody, it’d come off as a story. A falsehood. I’d be seen as melodramatic and overexaggerating. A pathological liar. Four months of my life I’d have to keep under lockdown, I realized.

“They’ll never believe you, Sherry. You’re not a threat to me. I know who you are, I know who you know. Even Sherlock can’t get to me. Nobody can. And nobody ever will.” He looked at me softly, with a pitying face. “And, Sherry?”

I looked up at him, waiting to hear his final thoughts on the matter.

“Close the door on your way out.” With that, he turned around a final time and left. This was it. I’d never see him again. It was for the best, all things given.

His footsteps thumped on the floor above. I waited a few minutes, finishing my coffee and taking our mugs to the sink to wash them. I hardly knew what to feel, so I settled for feeling numb until I could get back home. Maybe I’d call John to see if I could come over. To tell him and Sherlock that I’d done it, I’d gone and done it, and now James wouldn’t bother me ever again. I grabbed my purse and left his house, closing the door behind me as he instructed.

I began walking down the street, not knowing where I was headed. My thighs hurt, and I wanted nothing more than to sit down again. But, for the time being, it didn’t matter. I didn’t know where I was, but there had to be a metro station around here somewhere. Luckily, I’d brought my oyster card with me, so I wouldn’t have to walk all the way back to Baker Street, at least. Maybe I’d just go home, instead. Talk to John and Sherlock tomorrow. I wanted to rest my head, to go to sleep and not wake up. I wondered what a normal break up felt like. Surely it couldn’t possibly be like this. I was alone again, after all those months. But had I really ever been in a relationship? Could I say it was a real relationship if it ended up being fake? I rubbed my eyes. This was too much, far too much.
A black car slowed down next to me. Maybe one of James’ drivers, maybe a taxi, I didn’t know and I didn’t much care. I wiped a tear from my face, and silently walked on. To my surprise, two men jumped out of the car, causing my heart to jump and a scream to escape my lips. One grabbed my arms and another brought a cloth to my face. James said that he wasn’t going to kill me, and he had been right: he was going to have somebody else kill me, wasn’t he?

Something pricked my neck. My stomach churned, and darkness crept into my vision. I struggled, trying to fight it as long as I could, but in less than a minute, I had succumbed and allowed myself to slip under.
Dim lights emanated a dull glow. That was the first thing I noticed when I woke up. My head was dizzy, and I felt nauseous. I didn’t know where I was. There was a window, high above the door. Two men were talking about some game that had recently been on, football, maybe. Many hours must have passed. It was night, now. I tried to get up to look around, try to figure a way out of here, but my hands and feet were bound to the chair I was sitting in. I couldn’t move. Panic began to build in my throat as I regained more and more control over my body. A short scream came from my throat, and though it was involuntary, I regretted it as soon as it happened.

Two men were standing by the door, and turned to look at me. “Ah, so she’s awake,” the taller one commented, striding over to where I was sitting. He squatted down so he could be at eye level with me. I tried to pull a Sherlock and memorize everything I could about this man, but my eyes flitted over everything they could, trying to take in too much information at once. They were wearing sweats, had the smallest of beards, and looked incredibly dirty. “How did you sleep, love?”

I didn’t respond, and I didn’t think that I could even if I wanted to. The only thing that came out from between my lips were shaky breaths.

“Oh,” the man gasped, looking at his friend, “We’re scaring her. That’s not very nice of us, now is it?”

The other man frowned and shook his head, and walked closer to me. The two of them, even with the one who was squatting, seemed to tower over me. They stared at me, as if they were waiting for something. “Can she speak?”

“Let me go.” The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them. “Please,” I added, shakily. “Whatever you want, I’ll do anything. I’ll give you anything.” The cold air of wherever we were began to bite at my skin. It was raining outside, but when didn’t it rain, in London? There was no identifiable feature, no logos, nothing that could help me even pinpoint my location to a London neighborhood—if we were still in London, that was.

The squatting one tutted. “We’re going to let you go, don’t worry. Just, after we ask a few questions and have a little fun.” He brought out a knife and brought it eye-level, dangling it between us. My breath hitched in my throat. “See, your boyfriend screwed us out of a pretty nice deal. That wasn’t very nice of him. But Mr. Moriarty, being the man he is—we can’t touch him. We’re smart enough to know that, you and I. That’s why we need your help.”

Moriarty—James? They clearly hadn’t gotten the memo that we’d broken up just before they abducted me. Tears pricked at my eyes. There was no way that they’d believe me if I told them that we’d broken up. I could feel gooseflesh wash over my skin and my breath getting caught in my throat. I had to think while I still had time. What would Sherlock do? What would—what would James do? As far as they knew, we were still together. It was possible I could play the...
defenseless victim to get a message out. But how?

The man poked the sharp end of the knife onto my hand. “This is how it’s going to work. We ask questions, you answer them. If we don’t like your answers, then you might get a little roughed up, you know what I’m saying?” I didn’t say anything, too engrossed in my thoughts, too afraid to speak up. “You know what I’m saying?” He repeated.

I nodded my head vigorously.

“Let’s begin, then. Do you know where he was on February the seventeenth?”

I jerked my head up at him. I had no idea—I didn’t even know what day of the week that was. I racked my mind for an answer, but we didn’t spend any part of the day together, so I didn’t know how to respond. “I don’t know,” I said, finally.

“Too bad.” A cut on my forearm.

I cried out in pain, out of shock. It wasn’t too deep, but blood began to form, little droplets appearing on the thin line that was now on my arm.

“What’s his waist measurement?”

I balked. “I don’t know.” Another cut.

“Are his shoelaces flat or round?”

“What?” I gaped at him, trying to remember the shape of his shoelaces. “I don’t know—round, probably?”

Another cut, another cry for help. There was no way I could answer these questions, which meant that there was no way that I’d get out of here alive. They didn’t want any information, they just wanted to see me hurt as a way to hurt James. Little did they know that he probably wouldn’t even care if my body was found. Or would he? It was a long shot, but if I could somehow call him… My mind was racing with possibilities and variables, anything to get me out of here. There was no way I could break out with my body—I was far too weak for that. The only thing I could rely on now was my mind.

A few more questions, a few more cuts, crisscrossing, getting deeper with each question I didn’t know how to answer. They ignored my wrists—probably saving those for the grand finale, I thought, grimacing.

One of them forced open one of my hands so the other could cut into my palm if I didn’t know the answer to the next question. I barely listened to what they asked, knowing that I wouldn’t be able to answer it anyways. Once again, “I don’t know,” then quickly, “Wait, wait!” I cried out. It was the first thing I’d said with coherence aside from ‘I don’t know.’ For the time being, I had gained myself some time, as the man with the knife raised it from my palm, looking at me expectantly.

“Can I—can I call my boyfriend one last time? Please? Please,” I begged. Tears were freshly streaming down my face now. Even if he didn’t come to my rescue, even if he chose to let me die, I’d at least have died hearing a familiar voice. “I won’t say anything about this, I swear. I just want to hear his voice one last time.”

“We’re nice guys,” they repeated for the umpteenth time. “So we’ll play nice with you. It’s only fair, since the next time you’ll see him is in hell.” They were nice guys, sure, but I hoped that they were stupid. My life depended on it.
One of them walked over to where they’d dumped my purse, and I knew I had to think fast. I wasn’t smart enough to devise some sort of code, nor to remember one and think up a message. The only good thing about this situation was that James was more intelligent than most, and that meant that he should be able to take a hint. My mind raced, trying to think of how I could say things and which words to emphasize in order to make it clear that I was in danger. But—god—what if he didn’t help me?

The taller one found my phone, and began scrolling through the contacts list. “Richard Brook,” I choked out. “That’s who he is in my phone.”

He nodded, and dialed the number, putting my phone on speaker.

James picked up. “I didn’t expect you’d call so soon,” he sang. I panicked for a moment, then remembered that I had to pretend everything was alright. … While also trying to convey the fact that I was being held hostage and was about to be murdered, but that was beside the point. I had to focus, regulate my breathing. “Hi, Jim.” I’d never called him Jim before. Then again, I’d hardly called him James, too. “You’re on speaker, just so you know.”

A pause. “Is anyone else there?”

“No, no,” I lied.

He hummed. “Are you calling about your questions?”

I began to shake, my nerves finally affecting my body. “No, uh, actually, I just wanted to apologize.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I know we got into a really big argument earlier, and we both said some things that we didn’t quite mean.” I had to choose my words carefully, now. “I wanted to invite you out on a date, since you’re always inviting me on dates. I was hoping to suggest a walk in the park, but it sounds like it’ll be raining for a while. Can you hear that—the rain on my roof?” I paused, pretending to give him a chance to hear. He knew I lived on the first floor in a two-story building. “Anyways, remember that one time I had to bake all those cookies, and I ran out of flour? And you came and helped me?”

Slowly, “Yes. Sherry, I don’t—”

“No no no, let me talk.” I laughed, trying to make it seem like I was recalling a funny memory instead of stopping my voice from wavering. “I’m actually out of flour right now.” I paused, and prayed that he understood. “Basically, what I’m trying to get at is that I really appreciated that, and that I should be appreciate you more.”

The shorter man twirled his finger, telling me to wrap it up.

I could hear James shuffling in the background. “Sherry—do you need me to bring flour to you?” I wish I could’ve seen his face. His voice sounded a little concerned, but I wasn’t too certain. Who could tell with a man like James?

“Well, anyways. I just wanted to tell you that before I finish up and get ready for the big sleep. I have one last thing to say though, before I go. I know you prefer sharing important things over the phone, so you have to pay attention.” Another cry for help, about to be followed by
another. “Okay, are you ready?” I tried to be as pleasant as possible, pretending everything was alright.

“Yes, Sherry.”

My mouth felt dry, and I struggled to let the words come out. These thoughts had come into my mind only recently, but I felt them necessary to say at the end of the line like this. If my life were to end in a few minutes, they’d at least give me some sort of closure as an end to my relationship with Richard, as an end to my life indirectly because of James. The words came out shaky and breathless. “I love you.”

With that, the taller one hung up the phone, and tossed it over to where my purse was. It landed with a crack. He shrugged. “You won’t be needing that anymore. That was sweet, I have to say. He’s very lucky. I’m sure he’ll miss you.”

I swallowed, trying to accumulate some saliva in my cotton-mouth. My life depended on ifs right now. If James understood my message, if he decided to help me, if he got here in time. My arms ached, and my body was fatigued from the stress the two men put me through. I just wanted it to be over, the stupid questions, the pain. My life was in the hands of three different men, all of them psychopaths, it seemed.

They stared at me. Another question.

I sat, silent, trying to bide my time. He flipped my palm over, dug his knife in, and repeated the question. Tears began falling down my face, and my heart became heavy. There was no way I was getting out of here alive. “I don’t know,” I whispered.

A cut, deeper than the rest. My hand burned, and my screams rang out. I closed my eyes and tried to mentally will myself away.

He gripped my other hand this time. “You know,” he began, “this really does hurt us more than it hurts you. We don’t like doing this. We’re nice guys. It’s his fault you’re here, really.”

But it wasn’t his fault. James wasn’t the one who tied me up in the chair, and he wasn’t the one cutting into my flesh. I didn’t care about the deal that didn’t go through, or whose feelings were hurt. I began to cry harder. It was their fault, and I hated them, and I wanted them dead. They were the reason why I was here, and in pain, and cold, and alone. They were the reason I’d never see anybody that I’d love ever again, the reason I’d never go home, or graduate. It was their fault and they deserved to rot.

Another question.

I didn’t answer, but I wasn’t brave enough to look up at him defiantly. I closed my eyes, simply waiting for what was to come next. He repeated it, and I stayed silent.

The pain that I experienced next took me by surprise. He’d punched me square in the face once, then twice. My eyes flew open and I gasped for air, tasting copper. My lip was split, I was sure of it, and I could feel blood trickle out of my nose.

“When I ask a question, I expect that you answer that, do you understand me?” The one with the knife squatted down to look me in the eye. “You don’t get to pick and choose what questions you get to answer, and which ones you don’t. If you keep this act up after we so nicely let you talk to your boyfriend one last time, you’ll keep getting the same treatment.” He stared at me as if what he was saying was obvious.
“But I don’t know the answers to your questions!” I cried out. “I haven’t known a single one! Please let me go, please, please,” I pleaded with them, begging them to let me go. I thought my heart would beat out of my chest, and as the pain turned dull in my face, I began to feel my arms and hand again.

He sighed. “Sorry, no can do. Let’s try this one more time.”

He repeated the question, and I burst into tears once more. He waited for me to gather myself and come to what senses I had left, tapping his toe. My breathing slowed down and I bargained with myself. I could handle one more cut, couldn’t I? I wasn’t dead yet. There was still time for James to decide to find me.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.” I was tired of saying that. I was tired of not knowing anything.

With all the other wounds he’d inflicted upon me, I could ignore them, or block out the pain, or tell myself that they weren’t as deep as I thought they were. But this one—it was deep, and my palm was covered in my own blood within seconds. The sight left me breathless and sick to my stomach. My wrists were still bare, and I knew what would come after the next question. I vowed to dedicate my life to whoever came and saved me. My head pounded, and I could feel myself tremble. For a moment I wondered if I was going to die before they could kill me themselves. I almost wished I did, because at least that way, they wouldn’t be able to do it, and it’d be rather disappointing for them after everything they went through to put me in this position.

Doors swung open at the front of the warehouse with a bang. “Hello, boys!” A familiar voice echoed. James.

I looked up to see him, my vision blurred with what I thought was a black eye. It was him, truly him. I allowed a smile to grace my face, and a sigh of relief escaped my lips. Thank god, thank god.

“I heard you were a little upset after our deal. You know how business can be. It’s always so changeable. Stocks are up, then they’re down.” He shrugged in an exaggerated manner. “In fact, I’m a little upset, too. I really thought you had better manners than this. But you’re disappointing, just like the others. Oh well.” A grin appeared on his face as he snapped his fingers.

The next thing I knew, my ears were ringing and the men were dead on the ground. They’d been shot, but not by James. The longer I sat there, the more I realized what I’d just witnessed. I’d wanted them dead and gone, and I’d gotten my wish. There was no happiness in my body. Only fatigue, pain, and abject horror over what I’d just seen. I couldn’t scream or cry, I simply sat there like a rag doll while James began untying my restraints, humming a little tune. “Oh, little Lavinia, why don’t you sing?”
A Madness Most Discreet

Chapter Notes

Hello all! It's my birthday today, so I thought I'd give you all the latest chapter a few days earlier than expected :) As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts!!

James extended his hand to me once he'd finished untying my restraints. It took me a moment to process what he was offering, but once my mind began to work again, I lightly placed my hand in his, not wanting to agitate the fresh wound. My hands were red, slick, covered in my own blood. They were shaking. I silently regarded him, still shocked that he had really truly come to my rescue. I tried to stand up, but my legs betrayed me, causing me to fall back into the chair.

He tutted, and bent down. He wrapped one arm behind my legs, and another behind my shoulders, and lifted me up, cradling me against his chest. One step forward, then another. More and more steps until we were out of the warehouse. I was glad to be rid of the place. I wanted nothing more to do with it.

Somebody—Sebastian, maybe?—opened a car door for James, who then placed me in the backseat. My mind began to grow fuzzy, blank, as I was finally able to rest on my back. Something was placed over my torso, and my legs were lifted off the seat. I rolled my head forward, trying to see what was happening. My legs were now on his lap, and he was no longer wearing his jacket. I rested my head back onto the seat, feeling the car come to life and begin to move.

By the time the car had slowed to a full stop, I’d regained some of my senses, though I didn’t know for how long we’d been driving, or where we were. When I was helped out of the car and learned I could stand on my feet with some assistance, I realized that we were at James’ house. I didn’t know if that was good or bad, but I didn’t care. I was alive. Sebastian opened the door for James, who was helping me stay upright. He helped James take me upstairs when I couldn’t move my feet, and after he’d guided me into the bathroom, he said goodbye and left.

James gingerly let go of my body, at which point I discovered I could stand if I really put effort into it. He gave me a look-over, and nodded. “When you’re done taking a shower, come find me and I’ll patch you up. This is a no-hospital household,” he explained. Then, “I’ll set a pair of pajamas outside the door for you.”

So I was spending the night. I nodded, and as he made his way to the door I tried to take my shirt off. I couldn’t move my fingers the way I wanted them to, and manipulating my palms created the worst burning sensation I’d ever felt. There was no way I could take off my clothes, much less bathe myself. The soap would sting my hands and arms, and besides the burning sensation, I was afraid I’d cause my wounds to bleed again. They hadn’t scabbed over yet, but the blood had stopped flowing with such great intensity. This was something I couldn’t do on my own, and the embarrassment of it made my cheeks flush. “James,” I whispered.

He paused.

I couldn’t bear to make eye contact with him. Instead, I shut my eyes as I told him, “I can’t move my hands. I can’t…”
He seemed to understand what I was gesturing towards, and I was relieved that I didn’t have to say it out loud. He sauntered over, and stood in front of me. “Lift your arms,” was all he said. I did as he requested, ignoring the pain, and he lifted my shirt up over my head. He must have seen how embarrassed I was. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

I still couldn’t bear to make eye contact with him. When he’d finished undressing me, he reached into the shower to turn the hot water on, then began undressing himself. His body was nothing new to me after last night—god, had it really been only one day?—but I flushed and turned my head away. When he was finally nude, he grabbed my hips from behind and waddled us into the shower.

James was being kinder than usual, and I didn’t know what to make of it. Richard might have done something along these lines, but James? I didn’t know how to react, or whether to wonder whether he wanted something out of it or not. But he didn’t seem angry or annoyed, simply neutral. I couldn’t read him if he didn’t show any emotion. Still, he washed my hair and lathered conditioner in it before doing his own. Then, “This is going to hurt.” He took hold of my left wrist and extended it towards the water, allowing it to cleanse my arm, let the blood wash off.

I let out a gasp of shock but refused to cry. I didn’t want to cry in front of him and show my weakness. As suds and blood pooled at the bottom of the shower, I refused to make a noise. My arms burned like the water was acid, but all I could do was wait as James finished dousing my arms with soap and rinsing my blood off of his body, too. After what felt like hours with my arms and hands throbbing, he finally turned off the water, reached out of the shower and grabbed two towels. He wrapped one around himself, then on me. I let him do what he wanted with my body. I simply closed my eyes and tried not to focus on my wounds. They were all I could think about.

His fingers wrapped around mine, careful to avoid my palm, as he began to tug me along. I followed him, only opening my eyes once I felt carpet under my feet. We were in his room. He sat me down on his bed and opened up his dresser to find undershirts and boxers for the two of us. As he helped me put mine on, I looked over his shoulder to what was his side of the bed the past few times I was here. The picture I’d given him of us was still there. I looked so happy and ignorant. I wished I could go back to those times. I looked to him, the real him, now. He was putting on his own set of pajamas. Had he always been sentimental, or was this another façade?

He left for the bathroom briefly, without saying a word, then returned. “This is going to hurt, too,” James said, pulling out cotton and medical tape. He kneeled down next to me, and began examining each of my cuts, wrapping the ones he deemed too deep to air-heal and scab over on their own. My palms hurt the most. I still willed myself not to cry. He took a good look at my face and held my chin. “Your face should heal in about a week. They did a number to you, didn’t they?” Then, he put the medical supplies back where he had found them, and before he left the room he told me that he’d be right back, and to begin tucking myself in.

Without him surveilling me, I found that manipulating blankets was easier than taking off my clothes. I was able to move the blankets how I wanted them to by using my feet and legs. When he returned, he was holding two pills and a glass of water. One was ibuprofen and the other was a sleeping pill. I was able to place the pills in my mouth, but he had to lift the glass for me. He said it should help combat any fevers or swelling that might happen while I was asleep.

And then, he turned off the overhead light, leaving me alone in his bed. “Goodnight, Sherry.” Where would he be sleeping? I couldn’t remember whether he had a guest room or not.

All I knew was that I didn’t want to be alone. My arms hurt, and they hurt, and they hurt. My face ached. The men who had hurt me were dead, but what if someone else came and tried to
hurt me in the middle of the night? And I couldn’t do anything about it? “James,” I whispered. The only thing I’d said to him since he’d come and got me was his name. His real name.

“Yes, Sherry?” He was shrouded in darkness, only illuminated by the hall light.

“Stay with me?” I asked. If he had made up his mind, he wouldn’t stay, but…it was worth asking, right? And suddenly, I was reminded by how fucked all of this was. I was asking the man who had murdered the men who were going to kill me to share the bed with me. He was a murderer, a con-artist, a usurer. But he could protect me and make me feel safe.

He stared at me, then nodded. He reached towards the hall and turned off the light, then crawled into his bed. James stayed on his own side, not daring to cross the invisible border between us. I rolled closer to him. He opened his arms and granted me passage to his chest. I hardly knew who he was, but I knew his body, and his body gave me comfort. He was warm, and I could feel his heart beat. Neither of us said anything.

My shoulders began to slump, and I felt all the tension that I had been holding in my body begin to release. Tears leaked from my eyes until it seemed like a flood had burst from them. I cried and I couldn’t stop. He still said nothing.

A note was left for me on his nightstand. It was the first time I’d really seen his handwriting, and so the first thing I noticed was how small it was. There were no frills, nothing extravagant, nothing to make his handwriting more complicated than it needed to be. All it said was that he was out for business and to make myself at home, otherwise there was a key by the front door and I could let myself out whenever I wanted to, so long as I threw out the key if I didn’t plan on returning. It was nice to see that he trusted me.

I looked down at my arms, regarding the blood-stained cotton against my wounds. So everything last night had been real, everything had really happened. I’d given up my virginity, and within the same twenty-four hours, I’d been tortured. What a day. I remained in bed, only leaving to refill my glass of water and use the toilet. I wasn’t hungry, my paper wasn’t due until tomorrow (though that was now the least of my problems, but the most easily fixable), and I had no desire to leave when somebody else out there could have been planning to kidnap James Moriarty’s girlfriend. I shuddered at the thought and curled back up in bed, hoping to fall asleep. Sleep washed over me in no time.

The front door opened and shut, and I woke up with a start, fearing for the worst. It was dark out, about eight o’clock. Instead, it was only James, who was surprisingly no longer what I considered to be the worst. I wondered if maybe I should have left, gone back home. But he’d said that it was okay to stay here, however indirectly. Why was he letting me stay here?

I could hear him saunter up the stairs, and then into the bedroom. He regarded me with an almost disappointed expression on his face. “Had a lazy day, did we?”

“Yes,” I said. It was the first time I’d spoken all day. I didn’t want to provide him with any more detail than was necessary.

“Have you eaten?”

Why would he care if I’d eaten? I shook my head. “No.”

He bowed his head, and left the room. I wondered if it was something I’d left unsaid, but
then I could hear noises coming from the kitchen. Some minutes later, he returned carrying a purple smoothie with a straw in it. “Drink up, drink up,” he commanded.

So I did. The cold felt nice going down my throat, and I just then realized how empty my stomach was. I continued taking sips. When I was halfway done, I set it down and stared at him. “Why are you being so nice to me?” Nothing he’d done made sense. He took me back to his place, and took care of me, and fed me. Let me stay here while he was away. I knew I wasn’t a threat to him, as per our last conversation, but why all this? What made me so special? There was nothing I could offer him in return, and he knew that better than anybody else.

James gripped my chin and forced me to look into his eyes. “Because you’re a good liar.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. “I can’t give you anything in return,” was what I decided on saying a few moments later.

“Don’t think so lowly of yourself, Sherry-like-the-drink. We both know that’s not quite true. Think of it as an IOU,” he said as though he already knew what he wanted. I shuddered. I didn’t want to be at the hands of another man ever again.

He released his grip on my chin. “Now, let’s clean your bandages, shall we? Watch a few episodes of something—Vicar of Dibley, maybe?” Everything he said was a question, but we both knew that we’d do whatever it was he suggested. James took my fingers (still avoiding my palm) and led me downstairs to the flatscreen television in the living room. He turned it on and changed my bandages, and I still didn’t say anything. I just wanted to go back to bed. I was tired.

We watched one episode, then two, then three. I didn’t know whether he put this show on because he liked it or because he wanted to make me laugh, but neither seemed like a good answer. Two hours passed as we sat on the couch, watching the television. I couldn’t get past how normal this felt, the two of us, just sitting there. I was supposed to be resting, healing from what I’d just been through. And wasn’t he supposed to be setting up meetings in the middle of the night, orchestrating murders and arms deals? Yet, we just sat.

One episode later, and he turned to me. “Do you want to go to bed?”

I nodded, relieved. In any other situation, the show would have made me laugh. But rather, it just depressed me. Having fun seemed out of the question for the time being. Besides, it wasn’t as though I was being forced to watch The Vicar of Dibley, it was just that I was too tired to object to his wishes.

James took my fingers and led me upstairs once more. He was very good at that, I noted, taking the lead and getting me to do what he wanted. Though I supposed that at this moment in time, it wasn’t exactly difficult. I wondered when I’d leave—he wasn’t holding me captive, and he’d practically given me a key. But I didn’t want to walk outside, and I didn’t want to call for John or Sherlock, and I didn’t want to deal with this all by myself. But I couldn’t just continue living with a murderer, could I?

As he got ready to go to sleep, I sat on the mattress, and placed my head in my hands as gingerly as I could. The wounds that weren’t bandaged were red and puffy, and although he’d just replaced the dressing on those that were, they already had bits of blood on them. I was going to be reminded of what happened every time I looked at my arms, each time I so much as glanced at my palms. This whole thing was a nightmare, and I’d thought it had been a dream at the beginning.

To my surprise, James took my wrists into his hands, and pulled them towards him so that I couldn’t hide my face any longer. He stared at me with bored eyes, and I looked at him, expecting
him to say something. Anything. He said nothing, instead letting go of my wrists, then turning off the lights.

The same as the previous night, as soon as he crawled into bed, I scooted over closer to him, wanting to be held. And, the same as the previous night, he opened his arms to me once more. He still didn’t say anything. I didn’t know why he was being so nice to me. He said he was doing it in exchange for an IOU, but I never asked him to do all this for me—I just wanted him to save my life. I only ever wanted him to be Richard. I supposed that he was Richard, in a way. Just not the way that I wanted.

“James,” I whispered. The name still felt foreign on my tongue. “I want to ask my second question.”

He shifted so that he could look at me. “What is it?”

“Was any of it real?”

James looked as though he was thinking. “Sure, some parts,” he said finally. “I told you that I like playing domestic. Besides, how could I possibly pretend for four months with somebody I didn’t at least mildly like?”

I tried to keep my face neutral as he said that. I hoped that it worked. I didn’t know whether to feel relieved or disappointed or what. “Which parts?”

“Is that your third question?”

Defeated, “No, I guess not.” I wasn’t planning on even using my second question, but now that I had, I wanted to make sure my third one was for something really good, if need be.

“I have a question for you, now.”

I looked up at him, wide-eyed and confused. What could he possibly have wanted to ask me? My heart began pounding, and I became hyperaware of the cuts on my arms. What if I didn’t know the answer?

Not again not again not again.

His expression was illuminated by the orange glow of the streetlamp outside. And, whatever expression it was, I couldn’t read it. Something in the crossroads of curiosity, seriousness, and amusement. “Did you mean it?”

I didn’t know what he was referring to. “Mean what?”

James tilted his head, eyebrows furrowed, a small smile resting on his lips. He hummed, looking at me as though he was playing with his food. “Don’t play stupid, Sherry. It’s not very forthcoming. What you said before you hung up the phone last night. Did you mean it? Or was it just a clever ruse to get my attention undetected from those men?” He placed a hand on my waist. It seemed like it was the natural place for him to put his hand, but it was a way to keep me in place.

Oh. Oh. I didn’t know if he could see how quickly my face was turning red. It was a clever ruse, yes, but it was a little bit of the truth, too. I loved Richard Brook, but he never even existed. I didn’t know how to respond.

“Sherry?”

I opened my mouth, hoping that if I just started talking that all the right words would fall out. “In a way, yes, but—”
He cut me off, tutting me. I was going to tell him about the complexity of the situation, that I loved him for who he wasn’t, that it was situational, that I had been emotionally manipulated by him. “No buts. A straight answer only, please.”

My eyes, my body, and my heart were tired. I looked up at him, then looked away feeling the shame color my cheeks. “Yes,” I finally admitted in a weary whisper. “I loved you so much. You were the best thing to have happened to me in a long time.”

“Don’t you want to know if I feel the same way? Hmm?” James asked, amusement dripping out of his voice like honey. I could almost imagine the smug smile that rested on his face.

“No,” I said with such firmness that I surprised myself. “That’s not my third question.”

A short huff of laughter. Instead of saying anything else, he simply wrapped his arms around me and pulled himself closer. A kiss on my forehead.

As I drifted off to sleep, I tried to convince myself that his love was something that I neither needed nor wanted. Besides, for a relationship that was built on a foundation of lies, how could he feel anything towards me? How could the Napoleon of crime love a mousy Shakespeare scholar? And why would I even want to know his answer when it was certain to harm me? But, I was too tired to gauge how successful I was in convincing myself, and ended up drifting off to sleep, dreaming only of the color black.
Tuesday morning filtered in through the windows, and I woke up alone once more. Another note on the nightstand told me he had more business to attend to. He didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t want him to. I had to get out of here. I didn’t want any more mind games, and I didn’t want to be convinced to do things that I didn’t want to do. Besides—it was Tuesday, and that meant I had to turn in my paper, anyways. At all cost.

I had no desire to go on campus, print my paper, and turn it in. Not looking the way I did. Not feeling the way I did. I’d have to walk, then take the metro, then walk some more. Go into the computer lab. People would see me—people I knew would see me. And what would they say? What would I say? And, oh god, what if I saw my professor? I became hyperaware of my arms and how quickly my heart began beating. I tried to convince myself that the worst part about this paper was over, that I’d already written it, and now all I had to do was turn it in. It was simple. Easy. It could be done in no time. It was just a shame that my professor required a physical copy.

Half an hour passed, and I continued sitting on James’ bed, biting my nails. I just had to go. I had to do it, no excuses. A deep breath in. A deep breath out. I could do this.

I begrudgingly put my clothes on, feeling no desire to do so. Save for a few spots on my jacket, blood stains prevailed, dried and starchy on my shirt and pants. If my beat up face didn’t give anything away, the stains definitely would. I let a short huff of laughter out as I thought up my cover story—after all, the first rule of fight club was to not talk about fight club.

Slowly, I made my way downstairs, thinking that if maybe I went as the same speed as molasses, all my problems would somehow be solved for me. They weren’t, of course, and that was made apparent as I picked up the key James had left the day before. It felt red-hot in my hand, and because of the bandages and where the cuts were, it was rather difficult to attach it to my keychain. Before leaving the house, I took one last good look at the dining room and the foyer. I hadn’t decided whether I’d come back or not, as that was a problem for future me.

A deep breath. I turned the doorknob and let myself out. I looked both ways along the street. There were no black cars, there were no shady looking men. This time, I walked the opposite direction I did the previous time. The further I walked, in hopes of finding a metro station, the more I regretted not calling James and asking for a driver. But, the sooner I got this whole paper business over with, the sooner I could go back to my apartment and try to pretend that none of this had ever happened, the sooner I could get to packing, because there was certainly nothing left for me in England, save for a few friendships that could be remedied with letters and emails.

It took me twenty minutes to get to my university stop. Relief flooded my system as I left the metro and walked towards campus. Nobody noticed the blood stains or the cuts on my arm or how absolutely exhausted I was. The only thing to do now was print up my paper and put it in my professor’s box. I hoped I could do that quickly, though I had no idea, in all actuality. Logging into a computer and pressing commands seemed easy enough, but this time my palms were wrapped in bandages, making it difficult to control the mouse and to type. When I printed it out, my paper felt hot in my hands.

Luckily, my paper was turned in without a hitch. I didn’t see anybody I knew, and nobody commented on my appearance. I was done. All I had to do now was wait for my professor’s response as to whether I passed or failed, and I was positive that I passed. After all, I’d done
everything my professor asked me to do, no matter how begrudgingly. But I was done. Wasn’t I supposed to feel happy? Relieved?

Instead, a feeling of emptiness came over me. Now, I truly had nothing to keep me in England. All I needed to do now was buy a plane ticket to go back home. Start packing. See the sights I hadn’t had time to see. Say goodbye to Sherlock and John. I rubbed my arms. I was ready to go home. I was tired of England. I kept my head low and walked back to the metro. I fumbled with my oyster car as I sat down in my seat. I didn’t know whether to go to my place or James’. I weighed the pros and cons of each option, until I realized that I’d completely missed my stop. That was most certainly a sign. Back to James’ it was, then. My mind seemed to be going a mile a minute, and I wondered when it would slow down.

I arrived back at his place much more tired than how I left it. I knew I wasn’t ready to get up and actually do anything, but necessities were necessities. James wasn’t back by the time I returned, so I placed the key where I had found it, and began to try picking up the place to the best of my abilities. I didn’t think I could bear to be here one more night, especially after the previous night’s discussion.

Some minutes passed, and I found myself wandering around the first floor, nearly begging for something to do. My phone had been damaged after the last time I tried to leave, and I was without a computer. It also didn’t feel right to leave without saying goodbye and thanking him. So I moved to the second floor, figuring that I could simply take a nap until he arrived. All I seemed to do was sleep for the past few days.

On my way to the bedroom, I passed by his office. The door was wide open, and I caught sight of his bookshelf. Certainly I could borrow a book, right? So I walked in, ignoring his computer and anything else potentially incriminating, and looked at the classics that lined his walls. Next to his copy of Shakespeare’s works was the book I’d given to him as a gift a month ago. After everything that had happened, I thought that he would have erased all memory of me from his house. I pulled it out, and began leafing through it, feeling nostalgic over it, despite having turned in my final paper not even an hour ago.

What I saw on the inside made my heart plummet and my eyes fill up with tears. He’d read it. And not only that, he’d annotated it. Sentences were underlined, there were stars next to charts, and he’d written little responses in the margins. I told him all that time ago that this was the main book for my thesis, that it was an important book for my studies and for me. And he’d actually read it. Anyone else would have simply put it on their bookshelf and left it to gather dust.

My thoughts began to race. What did it mean? And why, exactly, was I putting meaning on something as silly as an annotated book? So he’d annotated it. Either that meant that he truly cared about me and my studies, or that he studied it so that he could pretend to be interested in it in order to manipulate me further. I thought that the latter was more likely, but part of me wanted to cling to the hope that it was the former.

I put the book back where I saw it, walked to the bedroom, and promptly took a nap. If I was asleep, I couldn’t worry about his undecipherable actions.

I rose out of bed as soon as I heard the front door open and shut. I sat up, smoothing my hair and straightening my clothes. I flattened out the sheets and comforter, and sat patiently, waiting for James to come upstairs. It took him a few minutes, but he finally came. He entered the room, and leaned up against the doorframe, hands shoved in his pockets. “I see you left today.”

“My paper was due,” I replied, nodding my head.
“And you came back.” He stared at me, his gaze boring into my person.

I wrung my hands together and nodded once more. “I wanted to say goodbye to you. Properly.” I looked down at his shoes. His laces were round. Then, mumbling, “So I guessed correctly.”

His eyebrows raised. “Excuse me?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to say goodbye, is all. And to thank you. You’ve done a lot for me.” I rubbed my arms. “If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be alive right now. So, thank you.”

He smiled and hummed. “Don’t forget about the IOU. I still don’t know what it’ll be.”

“You’re lying.”

Our eyes locked, and his smile only appeared to grow in size. “Yeah, I am. Do you want to know what I want you to do?”

I shook my head. “No. That’s not my third question, either.” I stood up and walked to James, stopping just where he stood. I fixed his lapels, taking him in. His suit was still as expensive as ever, and he didn’t smell of gunpowder. The expression he held on his face was soft, as though he had shifted back into Richard. But he hadn’t, of course. He was different, and so was I. And the second I stepped out of this house, my story with him was over.

I used to like detective novels. I didn’t think I much liked them anymore, what with rugged detectives breaking the rules. The rules were there for a reason, I realized. Whatever exceptions there were…well, they weren’t worth the consequences. Not one bit. My hands still resting on his lapels, I looked up at him, and gave him one last chaste kiss. His lips were cold from the outdoors. “Thank you, James.” I let my hands fall to my sides as I began leaving the room. “I’ll show myself out.” I walked down the hall with my head held high, willing myself to continue looking forward. If I looked back, it’d all be over. Though, I wanted to know more than anything what he looked like as I walked away.

The house felt cold to me now. I didn’t linger, and I didn’t want to stick around to see if he’d come after me, though something in me wanted him to. I couldn’t hear him moving upstairs. I shut the door behind me, rested against the door, and let out a big breath. It was done. It was over. Well, that was if I could make it home in one piece…for a brief moment, I thought about walking back inside and asking for a driver. But that would have meant that I might have to owe him something else. My oyster card was poking my thigh, so I picked it out of my pocket and began to walk. Save for the IOU, I’d never have to see him again. It felt good. Liberating. A little bittersweet, too. I wrung my hands together, slowly beginning to fret about the IOU. What could it possibly be? Maybe I should have used my third question… Oh well—it was too little too late, I figured. If this IOU was so important, I’d certainly see him again, right?

As I made my way into the metro, I’d realized that James had ensnared me once more in his web: he was a paradox, the embodiment of a juxtaposition. I knew it would be best to never see him again, never hear his voice, never speak to him for the rest of my days. After all, he was a murderer. But he was also the man that saved my life. And that made up for it, a little bit. At least in part. My head was swirling with contradictions, and my arms began to hurt.

I looked up. It was almost my stop. I was glad that I didn’t miss this stop, too. I’d rebandage my wounds and then go to sleep, I told myself. And then I’d wake up and pretend like none of this had ever happened. And then I’d go back to the states and start my life there, far from
everything that had happened here. Far from him.

The next day, a package arrived on my doorstep. Inside the box was a note—no doubt from James. ‘A parting gift. –JM,’ was what it read. I opened the box further only to find a new phone, the latest model of the phone I used to own, before it was thrown across the warehouse floor. For a moment, I speculated whether James truly did have some good in him after all. But, I thought as I sat the box down next to me and began to turn on the new device, it wasn’t likely. Not one bit.
Small Choice in Rotten Apples

Two weeks had passed since I last heard from James. I kept telling myself that that was a good thing, but my heart begged to differ. However, today I dreaded looking at my phone—not because I knew that James hadn’t texted me a good morning message (and why would he?), but because today was the day that I found out whether I’d be graduating or sticking around for another year. I thought briefly about having Sherlock or John looking at my email for me, but I didn’t want to be ashamed if the results were bad or anywhere less than satisfactory.

It was noon, and I was still in bed, and I put off looking at my phone for another half hour. If I failed, I would have to extend my apartment lease for another year, get even more in debt, spend even more time on that horrendous paper of mine. If I succeeded, I’d have to deal with the hassle of moving back to the states, and finding some sort of career that would help me pay off my debt. I almost didn’t know which sounded worse at this point.

Finally, I took the plunge. I unlocked my phone, and dared to look at my inbox. And there it was, the email from Joanne, my professor. I pressed on the title, and looked away from the screen. My phone felt red hot in my hand. But I looked. And I let out a small scream. I’d done it. I’d passed with flying colors. I’d stick around for graduation—invite Sherlock and John in lieu of my mother, who couldn’t afford to take any time off work. I had to celebrate. I had to tell everybody I knew.

And before I knew it, I was dialing Richard Brook on my phone out of excitement. I frantically hung up before he accepted the call, and I turned my phone off so that he wouldn’t be able to reach me for the time being. My cheeks flushed with shame. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten everything that had happened in my moment of joy. Every part of my body, my arms especially, wanted to tell Richard—James—about my accomplishment. He was with me nearly every part of the way, and now that I was done with it, I wanted to celebrate it with him. My subconscious was cruel. There was something Foucaultian about it. Freudian, maybe. I didn’t know. It wasn’t my line of study.

Nonetheless, I was determined to celebrate to my heart’s content. I had the day ahead of me, and I intended to live it to my fullest.

It was seven o’clock. I was drinking champagne from the bottle, and I was watching Netflix. As it would turn out, everyone that I called upon to celebrate was busy. Other members of my cohort were celebrating with their families, and Sherlock and John were out gallivanting for some case. Which meant that I had gotten dressed up for no reason, but alas. Here I was, and here I’ll stay. Disappointment was welling up in my sternum, but I shoved that away with another swig from the bottle. I’d started alone in England, so it was only fitting that I’d end alone here, too. Besides, who said that I wouldn’t celebrate with Sherlock and John tomorrow? After all, it wasn’t their fault that somebody else had gotten murdered or something had gotten stolen. Though I had to admit—it did feel more like a personal attack against me than against the actual victim.

A knock on the door. Maybe I wouldn’t end my time here alone. Maybe Sherlock had already solved the case. I opened my door without thinking to look through my peephole, and—oh. Oh no. James Moriarty stood in front of me, holding an expensive bottle of red wine. “What are you doing here?” My voice sounded breathy and shaky, though I hadn’t meant for it to come out that way.
“I’m glad to see you’ve got some of your spunk back. May I come in?” He squeezed between me and the door into my apartment, so I closed the door behind him. I left it unlocked. “How’re your arms doing?”

“Fine. Better. What do you want?”

He offered me the bottle—it wasn’t wine, but a bottle of sherry. “To congratulate you. You passed, didn’t you?”

I took it from him and looked at the bottle before placing it down on my coffee table. “Yes. How did you know?” He walked around, taking in the suitcases that were half-packed, the moving boxes, and the empty walls, and I observed him.

“Your phone call,” he said as if it explained everything.

“I butt-dialed you,” I lied, not wanting to admit that I’d actually and willingly called him.

“No you didn’t,” he sang, wagging his finger. “You dialed for a full ring until you actually realized what you were doing. Then you panicked and hung up. If you butt-dialed me, it would’ve kept ringing and you would’ve let some undecipherable message filled with the noises of,” he looked at my computer, “television.”

“Okay, so I didn’t,” I agreed. “But why are you here?”

He stared at me with a deadpan look. “To congratulate you,” he repeated.

“And?” That couldn’t possibly be all. If he wanted to only congratulate me, he would have sent the sherry in the mail with a note. He was here for the IOU, too. I would bet on it.

James sighed dramatically. “You caught me, Sherry. I thought you would have called to use your third question about the IOU, but you’ve proven to be resilient. So I’ve come to tell you, after giving you some space.”

Mumbling, “I thought I was resilient when I almost died.”

His eyebrows raised and his mouth pulled down to form an agreeing expression. “Fair enough. What your IOU is—it’s to say ‘yes.’”

“Yes?”

“Yes, but not right now. I’ll let you know when that is.”

I let my mouth fall slightly open while I thought of all the possibilities that a yes could be used for. Sexual consent. Agreeing to lie on the stand. To be in accord with him over somebody else—somebody like Sherlock.

James must have noticed the stupid, confused look on my face as my mind ran through all the options, because he left and came back with two glasses. He popped the cork on the sherry bottle (ignoring my champagne—it was cheap anyways, so it wasn’t a big loss of money), and poured out the contents. He handed me a glass and we toasted. “Sherry for Sherry,” he said, a little too amused by his words than I’d have liked. Still, I drank. I hadn’t made it very far in my champagne bottle, so I was still upright, conscious, and present. I made a note to drink some water in a couple minutes to offset the alcohol I’d just put into my body, though. I didn’t want drunk me to get any ideas that would be bad for sober me. Especially with him around.
The sweet taste lingered in my mouth as silence settled between us. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. He rocked on his feet as he typed and scrolled. He was hard to read, but he seemed almost...nervous? The thought nearly shocked me. Finally, “Dance with me. This isn’t your IOU, by the way,” and he set his phone on the table, music ringing from it, and extending his hand to me.

The familiar introduction caused me to release a huff of laughter and a smile. Maybe I should have gone by Sherry-like-the-song. Not unenthusiastically, I reached for his hand. Yet again, he knew how to mollify my worries. Resting my head on his shoulder, I became aware of how warm he was, and how quickly his heart was beating. I was wondering if he was gauging the same thing about me. His heartbeat thumped against my ear, and I could feel his other hand sitting on my waist. No words came from my mouth. He could extract information from me if he wanted to, but I wasn’t going to say anything willingly. But at the moment, he seemed content to just sway in my living room, listening to Frankie Valli.

The song was partway through and was blaring through his phone. I caught myself singing softly to the words, and didn’t care enough to stop. “Move it nice and easy, girl, you make me lose my mind...” Just as easily as I had cast him from my life he had slithered back in. I didn’t know if I minded, so I allowed myself to simply enjoy the moment, basking one again in his body heat. I would have done anything to be involved in his life, one way or another—sans the criminality of it all, of course. It was strange to see how rapidly everything changed in a matter of weeks.

He shifted, and I looked up, expecting him to say something. Instead, he leaned down slightly, and placed a kiss on my lips. He had an air of confidence with our first kiss. Now? He looked different. My heart skipped a beat, but then my stomach became unsettled, but then I wasn’t sure if it was just the alcohol or if it was butterflies. I decided I may as well double-check and kiss him again. After all, save for the IOU, I’d never have to see him again. If he wanted to manipulate me into his bed for tonight, that was fine by me. James made me feel incredible once before—why not feel that way again?

Frankie Valli’s falsetto drifted off into nothingness, leaving us once more in silence. We were peppering the other’s mouth with kisses, suddenly taken by the fervent intimacy between us. I started to reach for his tie when he pulled away, gripping my upper arms. “Marry me, Sherry.”

I pulled back, shocked. He let my arms go with ease. It took me a moment to catch my bearings, regain my breath, and to swallow the shocked look that surely must have appeared on my face. “Yeah? You and what ring?”

James fished out a delicate ring from his pocket, holding it between his index finger and thumb. “This one. This is where you say yes, by the way.”

My head went left and right and my hands shot up in defense. “I’ve only known you for four months,” I began, stuttering on my words. “And for those four months I haven’t even known you as James Moriarty. Just—just Richard Brook.”

“And that’s who you’ll be marrying.”

“James, I’m—I’m about to start my life back in the states. You couldn’t possibly—” My mind was so blank that it was difficult to pull excuses out of thin air. Reasons why getting married was such a horrific, terrible idea. Reasons why marrying me was such a horrific, terrible idea.

“You’re starting your life, and I will support you every step of the way. Besides, don’t I recall you saying that you’d do anything to have the life I had?” His dark eyes bored into mine. I could’ve kicked myself for having said that to him when I first saw his house. A soft smile
appeared on his face. “Mrs. Sherry Brook. That has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t care one bit for the nice ring that name supposedly had. I scavenged my brain for something—anything—that would make him want to remain in England without me. “But what about your game with Sherlock?”

He pretended to think for a moment, and said, “That’s ending soon,” with a nonchalant tone. Ending soon? “Give or take a month or so. Then I’ll be done with England for a while.”

It all made sense now. “I’m your green card into the United States.”

James shrugged. “I could get a green card without all the legalities of your native land. This way’s much more fun.”

I stared at him, incredulous. Then, softly, “I don’t have a choice, do I, if it’s my IOU.”

He shook his head, and as softly as I had spoken, “No.” A pause. “Unless you’d rather this be a tragedy than a comedy.”

With that, I threw my head back and let out a bark of laughter. “That’s what you think we are? A sort of…Shakespearean couple? That’s cute, James, but do you know what we really are?” A comedy meant marriage. A tragedy meant death. He wasn’t entirely wrong about his analogy, but in tests, you were always supposed to circle the best answer, not just the correct one. That was a rule.

A dangerous glint appeared in his eye, and I knew that I received the upper hand for the briefest of moments. I’d use it to the best of my abilities.

“James,” I began, chuckling. “What we have…it’s not Shakespearean in the slightest. It’s Faustian. Which is by Marlowe, by the way.”

He glowered. “I know.”

“You know what that’s all about, right? Because you just love making shady deals. Faust makes a deal with the devil. He gets all the knowledge he’s ever wanted in exchange for his soul at the end of his life.” I paused. If he was proposing, there had to be something he wanted from me, right? Something besides domestic living and talks about Shakespeare…right? “Although, I’m not too sure I know who’s the devil in this metaphor. Do you?”

A smile reappeared on his face. “Of course I do. Now, for the IOU. Sherry, will you marry me?”

There was no way that I could possibly get out of this. Not without dying, or without my family dying in lieu of me. Pins and needles began prickling with my face. I wish I had drank more, so then the next morning I could blame everything on a person not quite myself. It would have been her fault, not mine. After a moment, I built up the courage to respond to him. “Yes.”

And with that, he slipped the ring onto my right ring finger, and leaned forward for a kiss. I pulled back.

“First, some ground rules.”

He rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “I’m listening.”

“I’ll start this in Shakespearean terms so that you can understand. I’m not a shrew that
needs to be tamed. I will go to work and come home when I please. You will not starve me or deprive me of sleep. You will not force me to do anything that I do not want to do, including domestic chores and work-related events for you. You will not bring your work home, but if you must, you will contain it to your office. I will not take blame and be knowledgeable of your crimes for when you inevitably—” And then it dawned on me. I stared at him in equal parts amazement and disgust. “I’m not your green card.” Then, softer, “I’m your contingency plan.”

A smug expression lit up his eyes. “So you’ve finally figured it out. You’d make a good assistant detective. It’s a shame Sherlock wouldn’t bring you on more cases.”

“I was an English major. I was never meant to be a detective. I just know how to read foreshadowing. Sometimes we’re right, and other times the author knows what we’re thinking, so they throw us a curveball.” A moment of silence passed between us. “That’s what kept the story fun.” I thought back to all the time we’d spent together, especially when we first met. Back then, I’d thought that he had ulterior motives. Dine, date, dump. I had no idea what I’d walked into. “How long have you known that you would do this?”

James softly placed a hand on my cheek. “Since I first met you.”

I let out a huff of laughter and looked at the ring. Regardless of the situation, it was a beautiful ring. It’d make any woman envious. Still, my heart felt heavy and my eyes began to prickle with tears. “Love at first sight, huh?”

He grabbed my wrist and turned my scarred forearm upward so he could look at it, then looked back up at me as though that explained everything. It didn’t.

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“Can you promise me one thing, James?”

“And what’s that?” He leaned forward, appearing to be genuinely interested. It was impossible to tell if he was or wasn’t, and that was dangerous. I’d thought violence was dangerous. This was worse. This was the rest of my life.

Another silence settled between us, and I nearly felt too embarrassed to say what I wanted to. But, we were engaged now, and he was in a good mood, so I figured that while it would be devastating if he said no, it was still worth it to ask. My head and my heart hurt. “Pretend that you love me so much that I forget that you’re pretending. I don’t think I could bear this any other way.” I looked up at him, eyes open and pleading.

Then, “Oh, Sherry.” He allowed a small smile to grace his face as he leaned in to kiss me tenderly. When he pulled back, I nearly expected him to say: But I do love you. But he said nothing, kissed me again, and lead me toward the bedroom.
Two James-less weeks had passed. I didn’t think that was possible, given that we were now engaged. I had thought at the beginning that he would start sending me wedding catalogs and suggesting which types of silverware he liked best, but instead he simply disappeared. As I sat in the uncomfortable folding chair, I fiddled with my ring. Every time I’d seen Sherlock or John—just two or three times in the past couple weeks—I’d taken it off, afraid that they’d know that my situation with James had gotten much worse. I thought Sherlock could read my face, the growing indentation on the finger. But if he did, he didn’t say anything. Maybe James was right. Maybe I was a good liar. Even if I was, there was no way to lie about the new scars that had formed on my arms, so I’d begun wearing longer sleeves. Luckily, this wasn’t regarded as too strange, as we’d gotten lots of rain in the past few days.

The morning after we’d gotten engaged—that word left a coppery taste in my mouth—he didn’t stay for long. He had to do some planning, he said. I didn’t know if he meant for his “business” or if he was just very interested in wedding planning or what, and I didn’t much care. He pecked me on the lips and left, almost as quickly as he entered. I had been left under the covers, still nude, and vaguely disappointed.

I raised my hand to block out the surprising amount of sun—my mortar board was doing a poor job of doing that. The home and away stands were filled to the brim with everyone’s friends and families except for my own. My mother couldn’t afford to fly over here, and Sherlock and John had a case. I’d already invited them by the time James proposed to me, and I didn’t dare invite him, on the chance that they’d see each other. So now I was alone in a sea of thousands of people, surrounded by my cohort who had bonded over the fact that they would remain in this country after they studied for two years and graduated.

And what had I accomplished in the past two years? I’d graduated, for one. That was the most important. I was still alive. Obviously the next important—in retrospect, I would have hated to die having only paid off my student loans and not paying for other things, like fun clothes. I went on a case and got to pretend to be a detective. That was the third important, for having realized a childhood dream. And then, last and certainly least, I had gotten engaged to a criminal. Grad school had certainly changed my life. I didn’t know if it was for better or for worse. I supposed I would find out when it came time to find a job back in the states, and wait for James to follow me.

Slouching lower in my seat and pulling out my phone, I began to curse my mother for insisting that I come to my own graduation. The speeches drifted off and became a list of names. She really wanted graduation photos—the kind where you only have 5 seconds to pose with your new degree and you always end up looking horrible. Thanks, mom. After she’d insisted that I come to my graduation over a long phone call, I’d acquiesced and she became so excited that I knew I couldn’t possibly disappoint her. Then, I’d had to struggle with figuring out when and where this all was, and forking over the money for a one-time use gown that was somehow simultaneously so dark that it trapped heat and so thin that it allowed the cold in. And so, I closed my eyes, hoped I wouldn’t get a sunburn, and waited for my row to stand up.

Finally. Hours of my life passed before me, and all I could do was regard it as it left. But it was over, and I looked around, pretending to be searching for my family. Instead, I was making my way to the exit in the least obvious and depressing way possible. Though I had to admit to
myself that I was craning my neck in vague hopes that Sherlock had solved the case especially quickly for me so that he and John could come. Not that Sherlock would be interested in this sort of thing anyways, but John would have been sweet enough to make him suffer through it for me.

My phone buzzed and I answered the call, noticing it was from James. “What do you want?” I wasn’t in the mood for whatever he had to say. He’d been silent for longer than I’d have liked, and he knew how important this day was. Well, to my mom, at least. In all honesty, I had expected a call or a text before the ceremony had even begun, and found it mildly uncharacteristic that he hadn’t. Then again, he was always unpredictable in that sense.

“I found you. Turn around.” Amusement dripped from his voice and he ended the call.

I turned, surprised that he was here, and my heart skipped a beat—“Mom!” I ran over and gave her the biggest hug that I could. It felt like I hadn’t seen her in years, even though I saw her just last summer. Her body was round and soft, just like I remembered it, and I was glad to smell her usual perfume. I never even realized how badly I missed her. Was it possible to be too busy to miss someone? “How are you here? I thought you couldn’t come!”

She released me from her hug and rubbed James’ arm. “Richard here called me and told me how important today was to you. And you know how much I wanted to be here but couldn’t—and I told him that—and he said that it would be taken care of.” Then, more to me than James—or Richard—whoever he was to her, “He’s a good guy, Sherry. Keep him around as long as possible.” And with that, she winked and gave me the a-okay sign.

I was tired of people who said that they were good guys. I pulled on my long sleeves, afraid my gown wasn’t enough cover my arms. The cuts had turned into scars, and though I wasn’t worried about random people seeing them here, I’d never told my mom about what had happened that night. She had no idea that James and I had broken up, that I’d nearly died, that James wasn’t Richard, that we’d gotten engaged…right? When had I stopped telling her about my life? I looked at James, confirming my answer: ever since he entered it. At least he never said he was a good guy. He knew he was bad. At least he was honest about it. I could respect that.

A momentary pause passed between all three of us, and I really realized that my mother wasn’t seeing James in front of her, but Richard, and I had to act according to that. Like I was still infatuated. “Thank you, Richard.” His alias felt foreign on my tongue, like saying hello to an ex-lover. Which is what he was, sort of. Now I had to pretend to be happy to see him. He told me that when he came to the states, he’d be going by Richard in public, and James at home. I turned to hug him, which he warmly accepted, wrapping his arms around me and squeezing tightly.

“You for coming. I didn’t know if you would be able to make it.” Translation: Thank you for bringing my mom, but what are you really getting at?

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” he said, just loud enough for my mom to hear. He pulled away and looked me over. “Besides, how could I miss this adorable get-up?” He let out a hum of laughter, as though he’d never seen students graduate in all the time that he was a professor. “Well! Now that we’re all together, why don’t we get something to eat?” Translation: I have to keep up appearances, also I like watching you squirm, also also, I’m hungry. And with that, he guided us out of the stadium and towards central London.

After lunch, we had dropped my mom off at her hotel—paid for by Richard-the-good-guy—since she was so jetlagged after travelling for fourteen hours. She’d been needing more and more time to bounce back from long trips in the past few years, and I finally found that to be a good thing now that she was here. The more time she spent sleeping during the day meant less time
she’d spend with James. I didn’t care if he made himself seem saintly in front of her, considering the whole wedding was a fake, anyways. James and I had decided that we would tell my side of the family about the engagement in a few months, after a somewhat acceptable but still incredibly short amount of time of us dating.

My mother had been bubbling with excitement to meet Richard, so it seemed that getting her stamp of approval wouldn’t be too hard when the time came. I glanced at him as he drove through Paddington (having a driver would seem less personable to my mom, I assumed he thought). I didn’t know where he’d be dropping me off, but I was too tuckered out from the ceremony and the subsequent dinner to care.

When he pulled up to his house, I decided that I did indeed care. I felt a nagging tug telling me that I should have just asked to go back to my place, but chose to ignore it in order to go with the flow. Before I could stop my mouth: “And why are we here, exactly?”

“I thought you might have wanted to clean up and change before we had your mother over here.” He said this so casually that I thought that maybe we had already discussed this.

“My mom’s coming over here?”

“Well, of course. A house can be very telling of a person. Besides, we want her to trust me before we break the news to her, don’t we?”

I shook my head. “First of all, who’s we? Do you have a mouse in your pocket? Second, it doesn’t matter if she trusts you—this whole wedding plot is fake, anyways. I mean, what are we going to do? Get married, you disappear on me for weeks at a time, and then a few years later we get divorced once you’re ready to go back to England? James,” I sat down my purse on the dining room table and turned to him, “I don’t care if you include me in your plots, but leave my mom out of it. Her heart’s going to get more broken than mine is when this all ends.” My words tumbled out of my mouth, but they were only a fraction of my thoughts and worries that had plagued my mind for the past half month.

James stared at me coolly, making sure I was finished before he began to speak. “The wedding won’t be fake, Sherry. It’ll be very real. There’ll be a license and everything,” he smiled in a way that made my stomach turn. “Besides, your mother’s heart won’t be broken if we just give her what she wants. A grandchild, right?”

I snorted. “And be tied down for another eighteen years? Right. Besides, James, there’s so much we haven’t even discussed. I’ll do what you need me to do for your end of things, and I expect that you’ll do what I need you to do for my end, but…marriage is a lot of work. And it’s a lot easier if you’re doing it with somebody who cares about you.” I stared at him, almost asking him to challenge me. If he gave me no other option than to marry him, I’d do it, but I didn’t see how a man like him could possibly deal with that level of commitment. Flying off to different countries, orchestrating murders, returning with a smile and some sort of excuse…sometimes I wondered if he even had feelings beneath the designer’s suits, or if there was just a black hole where his heart was supposed to be. How else could he easily resign himself to a contingency plan that revolved around marriage and being near someone so below him?

He grabbed a hold of my arm and rolled up the sleeves, thumbing my scars. “If I didn’t care about you, I would have left you to die. I wouldn’t be marrying you. I care about you a lot, Sherry.”

I remembered what I told him after we’d first gotten engaged. I didn’t know if I believed him or not, whether he truly cared about me or whether he was simply putting on a show for me. I
pulled my arm away from his grasp, and he let it go willingly. “Not in the way I want to be cared for.” A pause. “Besides, what will you do when you get bored of me? Because you will—you even said yourself that I’m perfectly average. What’re you going to do then?”

“I’m not going to get bored with you.” His eyebrows furrowed and he frowned.

I stared at his face. His jaw was set, and he looked at me as though he was willing me to understand something unspoken. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Sherry,” he called out, and I turned to look at him. “I’m being honest with you.”

“You’ve never been honest with me. All you do is equivocate.” I walked back up to him and began undoing his tie. “I hate that I used to love you so much. I wanted this so badly, you know?” I looked up at him with a weak smile and tears began to well up in my eyes. I was signing my life away and the only people that knew were me and him. He blurred as I blinked. “So badly I would have done anything. And now that I have it, and I don’t think I want it. I don’t know how I’ll truly want it again. You’re just using me. But try to convince me. Please tell me you’ll try to convince me.” My lower lip wobbled as I tried to remain steadfast and not allow any tears to drop.

James pressed me against his chest and kissed the top of my head. “Did you know that I taught mathematics and astronomy?” I shook my head and he broke away, holding me out at arm’s length. I didn’t know why he was telling me this now, when he’d had literal months to tell me something, anything, about himself. Something that wasn’t shrouded in shadows. “Tonight, I’m going to take you outside, and I want you to pick out your favorite star. I’ll tell you exactly how long it’ll take for us to get there. In fact, you can pick out a whole constellation, if you’d like. We’ll begin our journey tomorrow.”

“To the stars?”

“To the stars.”

I allowed a smile to appear on my face. I searched his eyes for an inkling of truth, but I wasn’t sure what I saw in them. But, if he could keep this act up, maybe our lives together wouldn’t be so bad. It could be filled with little laughs and smiles and twinkling eyes. Breakfast in bed and staying up late, too. Reading together in bed, and cooking dinner together. I knew my mind was going a mile a minute with this fantasy, but it was all I had to cling to for the future. Clearly, I wanted it to succeed more than I wanted it to fail. I had no idea what failing would bring. There was hope. I was willing to entertain this until it fell through yet again, but I hoped that it didn’t. Finally, “If we’re going tomorrow, I better start packing.”

A laugh spilled from his mouth—a real laugh. The kind where the crow’s feet deepened, and you could see his teeth, and his eyebrows raised. He looked back up at me and his brown eyes shone. A smile rested upon his face, and I took it all in, the cheerfulness. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen him emote true feelings besides annoyance and anger. His tie was undone, his hair was ruffled from the wind at my graduation, and he seemed to glow. It took me a moment to realize that he was showing genuine happiness, something I’d thought him nearly incapable of. He looked good happy. This was the James I wanted to see for the rest of my life, not the one who was upset and always yelling at somebody or rolling his shoulders back to give him a more authoritative stance.

“Well, come on, then.” I held out my hand to him. “It gets boring showering by myself.”
Violent Property O'erdoes Itself

The airplane had really taken a lot out of me. It was nighttime when my mom and I returned from the airport, and I was glad—I didn't want to stay up any later than I had to, what with all the jetlag and being squeezed into the economy cabin like a sardine. My mom ended up flying back a week earlier than I had, and then I’d flown back. Alone. Which was mildly unfortunate, since I needed her assistance with getting back home from the airport anyways. James had to finish things up in England, whereas my time was done. I went over to Sherlock and John’s one last time to celebrate our getting to know each other, and John promising to stay in touch, and Sherlock reluctantly agreeing that he, too, would stay in touch. I hoped so. It had rained again that night, which meant it was completely normal that I’d wear a long sleeve shirt. I was beginning to get rather accustomed to them now, and I wondered what I’d do when the weather began to heat up.

But now it was morning, and I sat with a cup of coffee, wondering what I’d do with myself. I was here permanently now, in the states, but the world was supposedly my oyster. Either way, it wasn’t as though I could stay much longer in England—my student visa expired a week after my flight back. I tried to think over my priorities. The sooner I could find a job, the sooner I could begin paying back my debts. The sooner I could save up for when James flew over and we moved in together and eventually got married and would have to deal with insurance and other adult-like things, such as taxes. I decided to put off the job search for the next few days. It was time to rest. To be at home, with my family. It would likely be the last few days of peace I’d get for a very long time. Besides, I’d had plenty of fitful nights ever since James came and saved me. Now that I was back in the states, my sleeping had calmed down. Probably due to the distance between me and the warehouse.

My mom was at work and I was left to my own devices, sipping coffee, and ignoring my suitcases that rested against the wall. Fully unpacking meant that my time in England was over for good. It wasn’t a vacation or a holiday. It was the rest of my life. And that was terrifying. I rather liked being in student-limbo. Old enough to know how to budget and cook, but young enough to make a few mistakes. To break a few rules. How little I thought of consequences back then. Now they were all I had.

I opened the newspaper and began to read it, like the adult I was supposed to be. But that didn’t quite grasp my attention. Neither did the television. Or books. So I sat, drumming my fingers against the table. I checked my phone to see if James had messaged me. No texts, no calls. The next few days passed slowly like this, only picking up when I made dinner for when my mom came home. My days seemed to revolve around James now.

A few days later, a small package came for me. There was no return address, and the label was printed. My mom was at work, which I was thankful for, for once—that meant less questions, less wondering who it was from. After searching for scissors, I opened it, and found a note and a key. The note held only an address, but was written in the methodical handwriting that was James’. The house, as far as I could tell by the address, was in a Seattle suburb, which meant that it was nearly one-hundred miles away. I threw my clothes on in a jiffy and was already in my car before I texted my mother, lying, saying that I’d be out with some old friends so if I wasn’t back by nighttime, don’t wait up.

Just as I was getting onto the freeway, I realized my mom had texted me back, letting me know she’d received my message, and have a good time, okay? I thanked whatever forces were out there for giving me such an understanding mother, but also wondered why it was so easy for
her to just believe me like that. I’d always known I was a good liar, but I didn’t think that I was an exceptional one. And why would James put so much stock in me in case I had to testify on his behalf if he was certain that he’d never get caught? Common sense and a knowledge of general human nature would lead me to believe that he’d just set all this up so that I’d feel obliged to marry him, manipulated, ensnared, trapped. But he wasn’t your average Joe—so why all this? Why all the dramatics?

I decided that I didn’t know, I didn’t care to know, and I’d turn up the radio to drown my thoughts.

When I pulled up to the house, I was pleased to find that there was a driveway. Then again, I didn’t know why I needed to be surprised. Of course James would think about street parking and parallel parking. If this house was what I thought it was…well, then I mostly just wondered how much thought and care went into finding this place, or if he had simply ordered one of his goons around. Walking closer and looking at the shrubbery, I decided that this must have been hand-picked by the consulting criminal himself.

The door didn’t creak when I opened it. Hardwood covered the floors as far as I could see, and I could tell from the outside that there was more than one story to this place. The house was lightly furnished, what with a couple shelves and a table and some chairs. It was bare, but not incomplete. It looked like the bare bones of James’ house in England. In the kitchen, the bottle of sherry he’d opened when we’d gotten engaged rested next to a note and file. The note was written by him, too, and I wondered whether he was actually here, or if he threatened somebody else to put this together. ‘Sherry, welcome to our new home. Once you’ve finally moved in, pour yourself a glass of sherry—from the same bottle we had before. It’s symbolic. As a Shakespearean scholar, I’m sure you can derive pleasure from that. Don’t wait for me. -JM’

I sat the note down and picked up the file, wondering what gruesome bits lay inside. Instead of an assassination report or a string of emails related to some horrendous crime, there was a deed, a signed contract, and a contract stating the name and password for the Wi-Fi. Everything was ready to go, and all I needed to do was move in.

We’d never even lived together before. What if we drove each other nuts? Or worse, I bored him? I sunk my head into my hands. When I was younger, I’d imagined getting married and moving into a house with my husband as a fun, sunny, momentous stepping stone in my life, placing a giant SOLD sticker over the real estate picket advertisement. Now…now. I needed to stop focusing on the negatives. Doing that would only make my perception of things worse. I’d gotten everything I’d wanted, didn’t I? James had made sure of that.

Wondering and waiting. That’s what my new life had come to. I reached over to the side of the bed—king-sized, since James was never one for subtlety in the bedroom—which was rumpled and cold. I’d been back in the states for a full month now, and I’d settled in quite well. I’d moved into a house that had already been paid off, and I was just starting my weekend, though those always felt too short. I’d found a job as the assistant artistic director at a Shakespeare company, which fell into my hands a little too easily. There was certainly a sense of James-pre-orchestration to it, but I wasn’t about to complain since it paid the bills and loans. I’d take what I could get. Besides, don’t bite the hand that feeds you, right?

It was a Saturday, and since we’d gone through our latest performance without problems for the past few days, I was safe to stay home all day, instead of standing behind the scenes of a production, watching, waiting, holding my breath. I checked my phone again. Well, at least I was
paid to wait behind the scenes. If I was paid for all the gracious waiting I’d done for James, I’d have been able to purchase my own house.

I thought about what he was doing. Probably some high-end meetings, probably something illegal. I’d sent him a few texts here and there—I even tried to call once, disregarding the kind of phone bill I’d be sent later—but I never received a response. I wanted something, anything, to let me know that he was still out there. I mean, he wouldn’t just up and abandon me after going through all the trouble to find a house and land me a job. That wasn’t like him. But what if it was, and I just never knew? What if it was his way of getting rid of me, keeping me out of his hair? He was still a bit of a mystery to me, and I hated that.

Really, I should be grateful for all the time alone, I told myself. I was suckered into this engagement, and for the time being, I could pretend that it had never even happened in the first place.

But I needed to be completely honest with myself. After everything we’d been through, despite everything that had been said and done, I found myself missing him. He was a huge presence in my life, and now he was gone without a trace. I was alone now, for the time being, and I was tired of it. I wanted him back. I wanted him with me, in this bed.

Sighing, I scratched my forehead and forced myself to get up and face the cold air of the day, to stop ruminating over when he’d reappear. I started the coffee pot, made some toast, and waited for my laptop to boot up. Once my breakfast and entertainment were ready, I logged onto Facebook, annoyed at myself for checking it first thing in the morning. I expected that most of my English friends were posting about their dinners and nights out, whereas my American ones were just beginning to post about breakfast, and how happy they were that it was a weekend.

And there, in the right column—Sherlock Holmes was trending. What case did he solve now? It had been a while since he’d been trending on various social networking sites, so I knew it must have been a big one, especially since I was thousands of miles away. Whatever he did caught the attention of Americans, too. Immediately, I opened my email and typed John’s email into the address area. It’d been too long since I’d spoken with him last. But, I hadn’t had my coffee yet, so the email would have to sit there, open with nothing written in it, idling by. Returning to Facebook, I scrolled and scrolled and—

Oh. That wasn’t possible. That was utterly and unconditionally untrue. It was written by The Guardian, and Le Monde, and The New York Times. But it couldn’t be true. I blanched, and felt my stomach cave in on itself. I stood up, almost unsure of what to do, then decided upon throwing away my breakfast. I wasn’t hungry anymore. I rubbed my eyes as I tried to construct a plan, one that didn’t involve me crying as much as I wanted to.

I called the airlines for a round-trip ticket, ran to my room, and threw open a suitcase. I was going back to England, at least for a few days. I knew John must have had a support system over there, but I couldn’t just sit by not doing anything. Not after something like this. I threw in clothes, underwear, pajamas—whatever I could think to pack between now and the plane that would be taking off in five hours. I tried to make a mental note to call my work about this. They’d understand. They’d have to. As I frantically packed in the other room, I left my laptop open on the kitchen table on the article entitled The Fake Detective’s Suicide: A Case Study.
Luckily, the flight wasn’t delayed, and had ended up landing twenty minutes sooner than expected. After crossing through customs and waiting for what seemed like forever for my suitcase, I fled to the automatic doors following the signs labeled *Taxis* and *Way Out*. The cabbie helped me shove my suitcase in the trunk and drove off to the address I gave him. I wanted him to step on it—I would have paid him extra, too—but I knew that me getting there any sooner wouldn’t have made a difference. Not anymore.

When we pulled up, I thanked the cabbie and gave him the cash I’d gotten from the airport, and noted that it was nearly five o’clock in the afternoon, which meant that he should be home. I *hoped* he would be home.

I waltzed into 221B and flew up the stairs, glad to have chosen my smaller suitcase for this trip. After a couple knocks on the door, John appeared, and I threw my arms around his neck, just glad to see him. He looked more tired than usual, which was saying something, given how often Sherlock played the violin at ungodly hours of the night.

When we pulled away, bewilderment covered his face. “Sherry—what are you doing here?”

I looked between my suitcase and him, realizing that I didn’t exactly have an answer besides the selfish one. “I saw what happened and I—I couldn’t just *not* be here. John, I’m… *fuck*, this sucks.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Well, why don’t you come on in? I’ll start some tea.”

“That’d be great, thanks.” I rolled my suitcase in and left it near the front door.

He called out from the kitchen as I sat down on the couch. “Have you got anywhere to stay?”

I shook my head, then realized he couldn’t see me. “Not yet. I was a little impulsive. I figure I can find somewhere in Paddington, maybe near Norfolk Square.” It wasn’t too far away, especially with there being only a couple stops between the Baker Street station and Paddington station. I’d just have to make sure to leave before it got dark—or simply take another cab. But preferably the former, as my bank accounts were surely taking a hit after this impromptu trip.

John brought out two cups and handed one to me as he sat down on the cushion to my left. “You can just stay here, Sherry. Free of charge,” he smiled. “I mean, we have this five-star couch as well as a,” he began to deflate, “an open room.”

A trail of steam rose up from my cup, and I tried to figure out what he had made by the smell. It was something floral, I could tell, but I was ultimately unsuccessful. “The couch would be lovely, John. Thank you. How can I make it up to you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he waved me off. “It’ll just be nice having somebody around again.”

I let out a sigh and rested my head upon his shoulder, glad for some human interaction that wasn’t me accidentally bumping someone on the airplane on the way to the bathroom.

“You know, it’s good timing to arrive today. There’ll be a memorial tomorrow.”
“That quickly?”

“Well—all of this actually happened a few days ago. Mycroft has done as good of a job as he can keeping this out of the papers, until recently. There’s only so much one can do, even if you have a minor position in the government.” With that, he wore a small smile.

“Mycroft?”

“Sherlock’s older brother,” he confirmed.

“Ah. What time tomorrow?” I didn’t feel too jetlagged, but I still selfishly hoped that the memorial wouldn’t be in the morning.

“Two o’ clock.”

*Oh thank god.* That was only, what…six o’ clock in the morning? Easy peasy.

Most certainly *not* easy peasy. It wasn’t necessarily hot outside at night, but it was definitely *sticky*. Most of my night ended up being rather fitful, mostly caused by the longsleeve I sported as my pajama top, in case John needed to use the restroom in the middle of the night and saw my arms. That was still a story that didn’t need to be divulged to others just yet. John asked me about my strange choice in pajamas only once, but I lied to him, saying that it was hotter in the states at the moment, so England felt much cooler than normal to me. He bought it, and I added another lie to my ever-growing list.

We took a cab together, sitting in near silence, unhappy at what the day had in store for us. John and I were in our darkest, most formal pieces of clothing, and we shared an unspoken conversation about just how *hot* we both were, stewing in the cab. Exiting the cab towards the graveyard proved to be less rewarding as we thought to our core temperatures. Even more disappointing to our hearts, when we saw how few people were at the memorial. Given how many cases Sherlock had solved, I would have guessed that there would be more people in attendance. But I guessed it only went to show how easily others were persuaded by newspapers and the stories in them.

I spotted a few people that I knew, mostly Mrs. Hudson and the detective I met on my birthday, though his name escaped me. “George?” I whispered to John.

John pursed his lips. “Greg.” His emotions were unreadable to me in that moment, and briefly, I felt that I misspoke.

After some minutes, we all huddled around the tombstone and listened to some family and friends say a few words. John, to my surprise, remained silent, even though I saw him place a few notecards in his pocket prior to leaving the flat. Snifflers could be heard throughout the crowd, and there was a woman who was openly but silently crying. I reached for John’s hand as Sherlock’s mother began to speak. He accepted, and we stood side by side, my head resting upon his shoulder for the rest of the service.

When it was over, most flocked over to Sherlock’s parents, who kept a tissue close to their eyes at all times. John and I drifted off, allowing the parents as much room as they could get with the crowd surrounding them. We stared at the tombstone, John and I, which was sleek and glossy. I rested my head upon his shoulder again, and he took my hand. I was glad he wasn’t alone. I was glad I wasn’t alone either. I still didn’t quite feel like I had the right to be here—surely everyone
else knew him much better than me—but I knew I would have regretted it had I stayed in the states.

“How exactly did you know Sherlock Holmes, miss?” A voice came out of nowhere from behind us.

John and I released our hands as we turned, facing a man in a three-piece suit and a tight, bemused smile on his lips. John sighed and spoke for me. “She was his neighbor.”

The man stared pointedly at John, then at me. “I think we could let her answer for herself, don’t you?”

John rolled his eyes, and gave me a look that told me to just go along with it. “I was his neighbor, yeah. I moved there for school.”

“How did you meet him?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, I met Mrs. Hudson one day, and she introduced me to her tenants. Which ended up being really helpful, you see, I sometimes got their mail, more often than not. And that’s where it all sorta began. It’s been uphill ever since. Well, for the most part.” I looked to John, not sure what kind of answer this man was looking for.

John looked pained. “Couldn’t you have just figured this out yourself with street cameras or government files? Sherry,” he turned to me, “this is Mycroft, Sherlock’s brother.”

“Oh! Nice to meet you.” The words flew out of my mouth and my hand extended in front of me. I briefly wondered why John was being so curt with him, but the two clearly had some sort of history.

Mycroft shook my hand in return.

“So, tell me,” John started, “are you doing research on everyone in attendance, or…”

A tiny and dagger-like smile appeared on Mycroft’s face. “One can never be too careful. Not even I know who my brother knew. Certainly you understand.” And then to me, “It was nice meeting you, Sherry. Perhaps we’ll meet again.”

I waved as he turned, then looked to John for guidance. That whole interaction had been strange, though I had to admit I wasn’t sure what I would have expected from Sherlock’s brother. John walked away from the tombstone and further on in the graveyard, saying he wanted to get away from everybody for the time being. I couldn’t blame him. John said that Mycroft was always like that, weirdly cryptic and intrusive, and to just let it slide. Why should it be any different on the day of the service? Minutes of silence passed between us until the question that had been stuck in my mind finally erupted from my lips. “John, what happened? I mean—I understand if you don’t want to talk about it, but…this? This isn’t like Sherlock. I know that much.”

He waited for a few moments before responding. “You’re right. Except there was no other way out. Moriarty had pinned Sherlock down as a fake in the media—you can read all about it online—and when they met on the roof of St. Bart’s to finish everything…” A vacancy of words entered John’s mouth as he looked utterly confused, searching for answers himself. “Moriarty ended up blowing his brains out and Sherlock ended up jumping. And—”

“I’m sorry, he what?” My feet planted where they were, unable to continue walking. Pins and needles freckled my arms. My head felt light. It was as if the world had sucker punched me
right in the gut. I thought that if something like this would have happened, I’d have felt free, liberated from the lies. I only felt devastated.

John stopped, noticing I was no longer next to him. He stared at me, judged the blank look on my face. “You didn’t know,” he confirmed.

I shook my head. Wasn’t I supposed to feel happy? I felt around for words in my mouth, words to pacify John, to make him think that whatever there was between James and I didn’t exist. “I didn’t. I know he was a bad man, John, I know that. But I didn’t know it for a long time.” For the second time, James Moriarty had shaken me to my core. He had made me happy, and then he’d gone and uprooted everything I thought I’d known. “None of this is fair,” I moaned, threatening to sob, fading into John’s hug, “Sherlock should still be alive.” And so should James.

If John knew what I had omitted, he didn’t say anything. He just stood there, holding me when I should have been the one comforting him. Though I couldn’t say that I wasn’t thankful for him being there, for him being the one to break the news to me. I didn’t know how I could have dealt with it on my own. And then, just low enough for only me to hear against the rumbling of his chest as he spoke, “Yeah, he should be.”

When I finished crying, having felt that I’d spent too much time doing so, John planted a kiss to the top of my head and pulled away, offering his hand once more. Softly, “Why did they do that? Why did Moriarty shoot himself and why did Sherlock jump? I just don’t get it.” I wanted to know everything. It was my own fault for not reading any of the articles before I’d left, and now I was reaping the consequences.

John chose to think before speaking. “I suppose I won’t ever really know, but I’d say that Sherlock knew exactly how to get out of Moriarty’s clutches. And then Moriarty realized the only way to get him back in was to have Sherlock kill himself. And so he did. Now, that’s just a theory, but I truly don’t believe Sherlock would have jumped for any other reason except for Moriarty doing something so dramatic. Because if Sherlock hadn’t jumped, well, he was already discredited and everybody thought that Richard Brook was real, that Sherlock just hired Richard Brook—Moriarty’s er…alter ego of sorts—so I guess Moriarty knew that if he shot himself, Sherlock would have only two options: be discredited alive and in jail or be discredited dead. And Sherlock chose the latter.” It was clear that he’d spend days thinking about this.

I thought Richard Brook was real too, once. Selfishly, I was glad that it wasn’t just me that he had tricked: he had tricked the rest of the world. He had said that his game with Sherlock was ending soon. I just wished that I had had the foresight to tell Sherlock that—he might have lived to tell the tale. My hand reached up to the chain I wore around my neck, and toyed with the ring I didn’t dare wear on my finger. I supposed I wasn’t engaged anymore.

We decided to walk back to the front of the graveyard, seeing that the crowd had greatly dissipated. We continued talking, though about fonder memories of Sherlock. Of memories where he wasn’t on a rooftop. When we finally made it back to his tombstone the few stragglers had left, leaving us be. John and I agreed to an early dinner, at the restaurant where John said Sherlock took him on their first case together. He walked a bit ahead of me, leaving me at the headstones so I could say some parting words.

“Well, this isn’t exactly how I thought we’d be saying goodbye. It was an honor to meet you and to help you solve a case. Hopefully the history books will get your story right.” I undid the clasp to my necklace and set the ring down on the headstone. “To unfinished stories,” I told him. I doubted that James would have a tombstone himself. I’d have to pay my respects to him later, but for now, I felt that the ring would be best off with the person that best matched James’
Pausing for a moment, I decided that I had said all that I wanted to say, and that there was nothing stopping me from coming back tomorrow if I realized I’d forgotten something. I began to walk back to John, feeling as satisfied as I could with a situation like that, stuffing my hands into my pockets. And then the urge filled my shoulders, filled my neck. The urge to do what I promised myself I wouldn’t do a few months ago. I looked back.
Time seemed to exist in its own strange space now. Days felt like months, and weeks felt like minutes. A month had passed between my impulsive visit to England and the time being, and I had little to show for it. I still went to work, often staying much later than I needed to, oddly thankful for my never-ending list of emails. During my second week knowing that James was dead, I cleaned the entire house from top to bottom, fingers nearly raw and cuticles bleeding. I scrubbed the floors, wiped clean every cabinet, weeded all unsightly growths from the garden. And yet it wasn’t enough to distract me.

What I did the most, though, was lay on what should have been James’ side of the bed, staring at the framed photo I’d given him months ago. He was Richard back then, but he looked happy. I stared at his eyes, at his crow’s feet, analyzing his face. Had he truly been happy, or were those small moments all an act, too?

When I was younger, I never thought that I had superpowers or special abilities of any kind. I wanted them. Something like invisibility or flying. But as I grew older, I liked to imagine myself as a heroine of some sorts, as a person who could prevent others from making horrible, rash decisions. The heroine people would fall head over heels in love with. The heroine that could make people smile despite whatever they were going through. Instead, I was the kind of heroine whose fiancé shot himself in the head. And what kind of heroine was that?

A knock on the door brought me out of my misery, forcing me to stop wallowing in my self-pity. He was gone, and there was nothing I could do about it. I needed to realize this. As I sauntered down the stairs, I allowed myself to feel hope, that maybe one of the smartest people I knew wasn’t dead, and he was here to surprise me. Instead, I was greeted by a UPS delivery person, and was handed a hand-held device to sign. In return, a medium-sized package was placed in my hands, and the man was off to complete the rest of his jobs.

There was no return address on the box. I hadn’t ordered anything online, and my mom was usually good about telling me that she’d bought me something. Yet, the name and address listed on the label was mine, so it couldn’t have been a mistake. I tried thinking of everybody who would have sent me something by surprise, and yet I still couldn’t think of anybody. So I did what anybody else would do and opened the box, careful with the scissors when cutting through the tape.

Inside were a pair of shoes, white, patent leather, with a kitten heel. Just the kind that I liked—the kind of heel to make me look just a bit taller without causing my feet too much discomfort. Though the thought of white shoes was nice, in a place like Washington, it rained too much and the white would soon be caked with mud. Unless… I pulled out the invoice, hoping to find a name, or even the last four digits of my mom’s credit card number that became so familiar to me thanks to her buying my textbooks. Nothing was there, but the date confirmed my suspicions. This pair of shoes had been bought the day after James proposed to me. These were what I was supposed to wear to the wedding.

I held the shoes in my hands, inspecting them. The sole read Louboutin, a brand much out of my price range, though not quite out of James’. They were flawless. And they were a gift from James, so of course they’d be flawless.

I didn’t know what to do with them. I wasn’t going to return them, that was for sure, but they held no value to me now. At one point, they could have served as a memory to a happier time, but now they were simply a harsh reminder of what could have been. There was no way of
telling that the future would have been bright and full of happiness, but it was a possibility. Was. And now I’d never know.

Upstairs, I set them aside in the guest room closet, not wanting them to get scuffed by the shoes I had in the master bedroom closet. That, and I didn’t want to have to look at them. Sherry Thompson. Sherry Moriarty. Sherry Brook. So many identities, so many lies. I stood, remembering the sherry that was downstairs, and decided to finish off the bottle. I’d spent so much time at work lately that I could afford to take the following morning off. I’d just say that I had a dentist appointment.

It wasn’t until I was hammered, and laying haphazardly in bed that I realized that James hadn’t bought the house yet when he’d bought the shoes. I’d looked at the contract—he bought the house just a week or so before I received the key in the mail. Begrudgingly, I sat up and went downstairs to compare the contract and the invoice from my new shoes. After sitting for a few minutes, drunkenly mulling over the two papers in my hand, my intoxicated brain making the simple information much more complex than it needed to be, I’d finally reached a conclusion: the shoes were on backorder from Louboutin, which explained why they took so long to arrive. Between him ordering the shoes and their arrival, he bought the house, called the designer, and got the address changed.

The mystery wasn’t as enrapturing as I thought it would be. I thought that maybe he had somehow sent them after he died, that maybe he wasn’t really dead. That it was a puzzle that I needed to figure out, one that only I could figure out. My imagination had gotten the best of me again. I knew he was dead, I knew that. I needed to stop creating scenarios in which he was still alive. Though, I had to admit, as I went to bed once more, I couldn’t deny the feeling I had, the feeling that told me there was something more to the story. But there wasn’t, I kept telling myself. It was a hope based on a fantasy.

Another package came the following week. It was small, but was filled with a hundred embossed RSVP cards. They were left mostly blank, probably for us to type and print our own messages, but the gold lettering spelled marriage loud and clear: ST & JB were on every card, and every card pained me. I threw out the invoice without looking at it, not wanting another false mystery.

I carried on, hyperfocusing on the backyard. Weeds were pulled, leaves were raked, and I still felt unsatisfied. Nothing I did could help the pain that hung in my heart, so I started bringing my work home, which oddly felt like homework from my grad program. I read articles, analyzed blocking from varying performances, preparing for a presentation that would be happening in a few weeks. It’d be my first, and I wanted to be as prepared as possible. James may have had a hand in helping me get my job, but I wanted to prove that I could do the work. Because, well, I could.

A few days later, I received yet another package. Once again, there was no return address, and it was again addressed to me. But this one was different. This one held a note, written in James’ tiny handwriting: ‘I couldn’t trust this to be in my suitcase. -JM’. Inside was a black tuxedo. I felt the lapels, no longer used to feeling such high quality fabric between my fingers. The label read Westwood, which didn’t exactly surprise me. Looking at the note again, I noticed something that had once again made my heart swell and drop, leaving me to my own devices alone in my king-size bed looking at the photo of us.

The date he’d written was just one day before Sherlock’s suicide, before James’. So he had planned on surviving the stupid game he was playing, the stupid game that cost my friend’s life.
He touted himself for being just so smart, but instead he was incredibly stupid. Stupid, and daft, and upsetting. How could he have done that to Sherlock, to John? How could he have done this to me?

But he was a planner, that one, always five steps in front of anybody else. Certainly, he must have known that he wasn’t going to make it off that rooftop alive, so he decided to send these wedding preparations to me as some sort of sick post-mortem joke. As a way of telling me that I was free while reminding me that I was nearly his. I wondered what sorts of sick gifts his clientele and contacts were getting. Surely they were equally morbid for their relationship.

He’d lied, manipulated, and clawed his way into my life, made me break my rules, made me yearn for him, grieve for him. And now he was gone, and now all I had was this stupid house and the responsibility of telling my mother what had happened. I had dated and gotten engaged to the James Moriarty, consulting criminal, and I’d come out of the fire scarred, quite literally, because that was who he was. His love had gotten me hurt. His love of the game had gotten Sherlock killed. He was a good-for-nothing know-it-all. I couldn’t deny it anymore.

Something welled up in me, threatening to tear my heart in two. I wanted to do something, I wanted to stop hurting, I wanted to hurt James in the way that he hurt me. But that was impossible now. I scanned the kitchen for something to do, anything to appease the feeling that had been building up for weeks in my heart. Nothing appeased it.

In a fit of rage, I threw the empty bottle of sherry on the ground. It shattered into pieces, spraying the leftover droplets of alcohol onto the ground, leaving glass remains on the tile floor. One piece had gotten the best of me and cut my calf, so despite my bitterness and my anger, I hopped into the shower and washed the wound, then scrubbing my arms raw. I wanted him and his business washed from me. He had freed me, and yet I was still surrounded by his decisions, his contracts, his purchases. He released me from his clutches and I hated him for it.

I didn’t hate him for it.

Bent over the kitchen floor, I picked up each shard, piece by piece. I’d left the mess until eleven o’ clock last night, at which point I realized I didn’t have a broom, I didn’t want to go out and get one, and I didn’t want to clean up my mess. Now, nearly twelve hours later, I had to deal with the consequences. Shards clinked against each other as I threw them into the garbage, one by one, still upset. When the kitchen floor looked nearly clean, I went over everything with a wet paper towel, not wanting to step on minute shards—the ones you never see coming.

The day had taken a cold turn. It was rather unfortunate, given that it was summer, but it was fairly normal, given that it was just your average Washington day. After checking the weather app on my phone, London wasn’t faring much better.

My weekends had calmed down by now. I was less obsessed with cleaning and gardening, allowing myself to begin to relax, to take notice of my life how it was, and not how it should have been. I stopped staying so late at work, began showering more, and generally made an effort to get my life together. James couldn’t stay at the center of my thoughts forever, now could he? In fact, in an effort to circumvent this, I’d taken up reading again—and for pleasure, this time. Who knew reading could be this much fun when it wasn’t for school?

And so I changed out of my pajamas finally, and into a pair of jeans and a light sweater. Fuzzy socks tickled my feet, and I brewed a cup of tea. A cozy day in was just what the doctor ordered, according to my last email with John. Today was calm, was just another average day on
the calendar. As I settled onto the chaise in the bay window, I decided that nothing could pull me away from my seat, not when I was halfway through my novel! It was a mystery by Anthony Horowitz—it was something within my preferred genre, something comfortable. In the bookstore, I’d made the impulse decision to honor Sherlock and try to deduce the solution before the narrator could. I had a couple theories, but knowing me, none of them would be right. Oh well—at least I tried right? That’s what mattered. All I had to do was open the book and ignore everything else that came my way for the time being.

A knock on the door.

If I received another package, I was going to scream. I wasn’t even going to open it up—it’d just go straight into the garbage. I was sick and tired of them. They only served as cruel reminders, I told myself. I opened the book. The delivery-person could just leave it on the porch.

Another knock.

So, not a delivery-person, I deduced. Groaning, I shut my book and rolled off the chaise, displeased that I’d been called upon once I’d finally settled down. I walked past the guest room, the one with the shoes and the tuxedo and the invitations, and I walked past the bedroom with the king-sized bed. Rooms that once served as painful reminders now became rooms with artifacts, like I was an anthropologist, objective and distanced from the subject matter. Down the stairs, past the kitchen, through the hallway.

I peeked through the peephole with the understanding that somebody was waiting for me. Nobody was there. Well, maybe it was a delivery-person and I’d just been too slow to catch them the second time they knocked. And now that I was already down here, I may as well double check to see if there was another package or a slip taped to the door. And then I’d get to read my book. At least I didn’t have to interact with anyone.

Mentally, I prepared myself for the difference in temperature. I kept the house nice and warm, so it was my hope that a breeze wouldn’t rush in. I unlocked the door, eyes down ready to spot a package. What I got instead was like a punch to my gut. I felt winded, pins and needles prickling my face. My mouth was slightly agape, and I had to hold onto the doorway to keep my balance.

And there he was, on his knee and holding the ring I’d left on Sherlock’s grave. The tiniest grin settled as a smirk on his lips, and his bright brown eyes locked onto mine as my body threatened to keel over. James’ voice lilted in my ears like it was the sweetest thing I’d ever heard. “Did you miss me?”

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