The Slash Man

by Engazed

Summary

Sequel to Ten Days

After ten days of unspeakable torture at the hands of Sherlock's worst enemies, John Watson has returned to Baker Street to live with a man whose death, no matter how fake, still haunts him. But his recovery is not easy, his friendship with Sherlock is strained, and a dangerous but hidden menace continues to threaten them both.

Notes

This story begins approximately two weeks after Ten Days.
CHAPTER 1: THE ST MARY'S ABDUCTIONS

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 2015

Lights flashed and bulbs popped as Sally Donovan—straight-backed and stiff-necked—crossed the platform behind a long table and its two empty chairs. She took the one on the left, as always, and doggedly ignored the vacant seat beside her. The cameras were rolling and the reporters were rocking in their seats, eyes tracking her every movement. Her own eyes were lowered, fixed on the page in her hand, reciting the words in her head, yet again. She could feel the dryness in her throat and so, stalling, she sipped slowly from the glass of water that had been left there for her. Then she raised her chin, and the steady murmur of voices hushed.

She let the silence hang for a few seconds longer than necessary while she recalibrated her baseline of composure. Then she cleared her throat, squared her shoulders, and began.

‘New Scotland Yard has issued the following statement,’ she said in the perfunctory manner as she had long ago perfected. Nevertheless, she took another long, palliative breath through her nose. ‘As we continue our investigations, the Metropolitan Police announce that Mr Sherlock Holmes has been absolved of all suspicion connecting him to the murder of Ms Mary S Morstan, as well as to the abductions of Ms Morstan and Dr John H Watson, that occurred in October of last year. Additionally, and in light of new evidence, Mr Holmes has been acquitted of the posthumous charge of homicide in the case of the fatal shooting of Mr Richard Brook back in June of 2011.’

The reporters stirred on the edges of their chairs as they leaned forward, some with outstretched
arms holding audio recorders and microphones, others with pad and pen perched on a stabilising knee. One or two tutted, but they all waited for her to finish.

‘The Yard wishes to convey its’—she powered through the next part, hesitating only slightly on next word—‘sincerest apologies to Mr Holmes and to his loved ones who were in any way affected by these false charges.

‘Finally, New Scotland Yard expresses its deepest regret regarding certain of its officers’ criminal involvement in the events that led to murder, abduction, and torture of London citizens, as well as to the obfuscation of evidence, the hindering of an investigation, and the corruption that took place at various levels of law enforcement; and, as officers of the law, we declare our dedication to enforcing the laws of this city and ensuring the protection of its people. The public may rest assured that we are doing everything within our legal power to ensure that such corruption is purged from this organisation and punished to the fullest extent of the law.’

She laid the page upon the table and lifted her eyes to meet the gathered men and women of the press. Familiar faces stared back at her, reporters and journalists and bloggers and analysts who had covered the Boffin Holmes Murder-Suicide three-and-a-half years before, in tandem with the flurry of interest over Holmes’ supposedly orchestrated cases from the months and years prior. The public had chewed, swallowed, and asked for second helpings of everything. Now they were back for more—she could see the hunger in their eyes, could practically hear them licking their lips with salivating tongues. She found herself agreeing with DI Lestrade’s characterisation of the press: vultures, hyenas. Sickos.

But the seat beside her was empty.

Pushing down the resentment that began to stir anew while she sat there on her own, she prepared to lift the latch that would break open the floodgates.

‘I will take questions only as they relate to the Yard’s statement,’ she said.

At once, the room swelled with the cacophony of voices.

‘Sgt Donovan.’ A woman’s sharp voice cut like a razor through the din, and Donovan’s attention turned to Ida Fedezco of The Daily Telegraph, who had shot to her feet, though her eyes were still scanning her notes. ‘How is it that the Yard could have been so ignorant of the subterfuge taking place within its own walls, and how can you be confident that all double agents have been exposed?’

They were going straight for the jugular, but Donovan didn’t even wince. This was the very reason she was chosen time and time again to act as NSY spokesperson: she had mastered the art of the unfluffled, and she knew how to stick to a script.

So she answered succinctly and without passion: ‘The majority of the double agents were not plants but were officers, once in good standing, but recruited to engage in crimes through bribery and threats. During the course of our interrogations, these agents not only implicated themselves but also identified one another. Furthermore, the perpetrators of all suspicious and criminal activities have been accounted for. We are confident that all secret operatives have been uncovered.’

‘Sergeant, you say most of the double agents were not plants.’

She gave a shallow but conceding nod. ‘It is not clear how long Chief Superintendent Pitts had been working as a spy, and we never had the chance to interrogate him on the matter. Very few of the others were aware of his involvement, it seems.’

A man just behind Ms Fedezco stood and inserted his own question before The Daily Telegraph could slip in another. ‘How many officers, then, were uncovered?’

‘Ten,’ said Donovan crisply. They couldn’t know how deeply the thought rankled her. ‘Their names have already been released. All nine living have pled guilty to the charges brought against them. We cannot know how Tony Pitts would have answered those charges, and I’ll not speculate on that.’

‘Ms Donovan,’ said Alvin Saunders, BBC News. ‘What can you tell us about Everett Stubbins’ most recent claim that Sherlock Holmes was aware of the subterfuge three years ago, and that he even had a hand in organising it?’

‘His claims are groundless,’ she replied tersely.

‘Given Mr Holmes’ questionable history and dangerous character, why is the Yard so quick to dismiss the claim?’

Your insight into the inner workings of the Yard’s investigations is astounding, she thought, in a voice that echoed Lestrade’s own sarcastic lilts and cadences. Instead, she answered with a politician’s brevity and tact. ‘We treat no claims with levity, I assure you, especially none as grave as that.’

‘And yet you have dismissed the charges brought against Sherlock Holmes, a known fraud, a criminal conspirator—’

Donovan shifted forward in her seat. ‘I would like to reiterate the Yard’s position concerning Mr Holmes,’ she said, reining in a huff of irritation. ‘Sherlock Holmes has been fully exonerated by this institution. There is insufficient evidence to support any claim that he was in any way criminally involved in the deaths surrounding this case. Past charges have been dismissed in light of new evidence. And any characterisations of the man as dangerous can be attributed not to Scotland Yard but to various media outlets and are considered by this organisation to be greatly exaggerated.’

She was on the edge of losing her cool. She unballed her hands and flattened them on the table.
‘Ms Donovan,’ the newest petulant voice belonged to Sandra Hitchens of The Daily Mail. She held an audio recorder in an outstretched hand to capture the exact proceedings sans bias, but her eyes were incredulous, her head shaking with disapproval. ‘Surely Scotland Yard isn’t ignoring the common element in all these tragedies! Kidnappings, the “Moriarty crimes”, Richard Brook’s death, and now the St Mary’s Abductions! These were all clearly planned well in advance of their execution and resulted in multiple deaths, and Sherlock Holmes has been at the centre of all of it. In fact, The Daily Mail attributes no fewer than seven deaths to Mr Holmes: Mary Morstan, Frank Vander Maten, Hugh Freemont, Tony Pitts, Peter Caldwell, Alexander Slough, and Richard Brook. And these latest six, all in the name of Sherlock Holmes’ miraculous return from the dead!’

‘That’s a gross mischaracterisation—’

‘How can Scotland Yard honestly seek to deny Holmes’ involvement?’

‘The Yard makes no effort to deny anything that is true . . .’

‘And yet you refuse to hold a murderer accountable!’

‘How can Londoners feel safe with Sherlock Holmes on the loose?’ shouted the reporter from The Daily Star.

‘The Independent, ‘What about justice for Ms Morstan, Mr Freemont—?’

‘How can you let Richard Brook’s killer go free without standing trial?’ said The Observer.

‘Richard Brook wasn’t real!’

The room hushed again, but for the sudden resurgence of flashing lights and popping bulbs.

‘I’m sorry, sergeant, could you say that again?’ Michaela Warner, The Guardian.

Donovan couldn’t believe what she had just done, and she blinked, stunned, into the eyes of the cameras. In all the years she had spent addressing the press, she had never blundered, never moved more than an inch away from the prescribed script. Stick to the statement, Donovan, Chief Superintendent Gregson had told her in the seconds before she entered the room. The manhunt continues, Sherlock Holmes is innocent, and the Yard is seeking severest punitive measures against those who acted as double agents. Details can wait.

‘Did you say that Richard Brook wasn’t . . . real?’

She swallowed, resisting the urge to reach for the glass again and delay her response. ‘I’m afraid I misspoke,’ she said carefully. She knew she would be reprimanded for this later, but it was either explicate her slip-up now or allow the false stories to fester longer in the public mind like an infected wound. ‘Richard Brook was real,’ she said, ‘but he was not the man who died on the rooftop of St Bartholomew’s. That was a man named James Moriarty.’

‘Kitty Riley for The Sun!’ a woman with fiery hair in the very front row sprang to her feet and nearly toppled over on her expensive court shoes. But she righted herself, straightened her green tweed blazer, and said, ‘James Moriarty was an invention of Sherlock Holmes, a fact that has been well documented.’ She stabbed a pencil into the centre of her notepad as though the evidence were in her hand.

‘Sit down, Ms Riley, before you hurt yourself,’ said Donovan. Again, she was shocked by the words leaving her mouth. As free as she was with the insults in other venues, she had always maintained careful check on them in settings where her professionalism was being monitored.

Ms Riley riled but did not sit down. ‘On what basis does the Yard justify its reopening of a case that was solved three-and-a-half years ago?’

Donovan gritted her teeth as she said, ‘We were wrong.’

‘Or perhaps, Ms Donovan, you are wrong now. I met Richard Brook. I spoke with his family, with friends and associates. He was an actor Sherlock Holmes hired—’

With elevated voice, Donovan overtook her: ‘Mr Richard Brook of Sussex was an out-of-work actor who disappeared from his home in Crawley in early June of 2011. Days later, James Moriarty—the same master criminal who stood trial for breaking into the Tower of London, Pentonville Prison, and the Bank of London two months before—re-emerged in London, calling himself Richard Brook and giving fake interviews under that guise. Using the real Mr Brook’s credentials and bearing a passing resemblance to the man—in striking resemblance, she thought to herself—he was able to fool—here she glared as Ms Riley and wasn’t sorry for it—some palpable and credulous aspiring journalist into lapping up his every defaming word against Mr Holmes and committing it to print.’

Shamefully, Donovan had to admit that Moriarty’s plan was embarrassingly simple, but effective.

‘Detectives from the Yard have re-evaluated the evidence pertaining to Mr Moriarty’s death and have considered new testimony, and they have determined that the only explanation of all the facts is that Moriarty committed suicide. That is all I will say of James Moriarty at present.’

She wouldn’t mention that the new testimony had come from Sherlock Holmes. Nor would she confess that it had also been Sherlock Holmes who had prodded them into looking more deeply into the character of Richard Brook, whom he had long suspected to be a true figure. In fact, the less she actually said the word Holmes, the better.

‘Then what of Richard Brook?’ said Ms Warner.

‘The real Richard Brook,’ said Donovan with great reticence (oh, she was going to be flogged when Gregson got hold of her!), ‘has not been seen or heard from since 2011. He has officially
been declared a missing person.’

Donovan heard Ms Riley mutter, ‘That’s convenient,’ but she ignored her.

_The Guardian_ persisted: ‘Is he presumed dead?’

_Not officially. Not yet. ‘No comment.’_

‘What actions are being taken to recover him?’

_We’re applying to the Secretary of State for Justice for an inquest in the absence of a body. He’ll be declared dead before the week is out. ‘No comment at this time. You’ll have to take that question to the Sussex Police. It’s their jurisdiction.’_

‘Sgt Donovan,’ said Ms Fedezco again, ‘are you telling us that no charges will be brought against Sherlock Holmes?’

‘None.’

‘What about deceiving law enforcement officers? What about resisting arrest? Was he not, at that time, in possession of an officer’s handgun?’

Donovan’s nostrils flared as she took yet another long breath through her nose. ‘I repeat, Mr Holmes has been fully exonerated. No charges stand against him.’

The murmur of disbelief and disapproval was growing louder.

‘Will the Met be watching him?’ asked _The Times_.

‘We do not make a habit of monitoring the innocent,’ Donovan snapped.

‘And what about Mr Watson? Are you not concerned for his safety?’

Donovan nodded. Perhaps they were back on track. ‘Yes, the Yard’s concern for Dr Watson’s safety is paramount, and the manhunt for the _actual_ perpetrators of this crime continues—’

‘But is he safe from Sherlock Holmes?’

For the first time, Donovan was flummoxed, and all she could do was gape. Safe from Sherlock? John Watson?

‘Is it true,’ said _The Daily Mail_, taking advantage of her pause, ‘that Mr Holmes and Mr Watson have again taken residence together?’

‘I’ll not comment on that,’ said Donovan, rather weakly.

‘Sergeant, what can you tell us about the nature of their relationship?’

‘No comment.’

‘Are they co-conspirators? What about the speculations that Holmes has a firm, psychological grip on Watson?’

‘No comment.’

‘What is Mr Watson’s current condition?’

‘That’s a matter for Doctor Watson and his physicians.’

‘Is it true that he has refused psychological counselling? Was the trauma he experienced not as grave as initially reported?’

‘Why won’t he speak to the press?’

‘Could it be that Sherlock Holmes is silencing him?’

‘Is it possible that Mr Watson was in on the St Mary’s Abductions from the start?’

‘All right, I’m shutting this down.’ Donovan was suddenly on her feet, all but shaking with fury. ‘I will not entertain this _speculative_ journalism. The Yard has made its statement. Follow-up questions can be addressed to the office of Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade. Good day.’

With that, she snatched the page off the table and strode from the room, back still straight, head still held high, but her tongue was bleeding from where her teeth bit mercilessly into it.

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Sally Donovan bent over at the sink, splashing her warm face with water and suppressing a groan deep, deep down. Instead, she sighed out a great breath. She gripped either side of the sink and let the droplets stream from her nose and chin and slip down the drain. Then she lifted her head to stare at her reflection in the glass. At least she didn’t look as haggard as she felt. Her eyes looked a little more tired than normal, perhaps, but her dark skin hid any flush well enough. Hopefully, the cameras hadn’t picked up on her near-explosion.

It was supposed to have been a simple press conference. Exonerate Holmes in the eyes of the press, ensure the public that the true criminals would be found and punished, and leave everyone confident in the knowledge that Scotland Yard had everything well in hand. How had she managed to bungle every single one of those things? She felt like she had lost her footing. For the last three years, her confidence in herself and her career had soared. All those years of griping about Holmes’ involvement in her cases, writing him off as a psychopath, and even predicting his turn of fortunes had been validated. Strange, then, how _victorious_ was not at all the emotion she
experienced when she had learnt he had committed suicide. In fact, she couldn’t name the emotion at all, so she settled on anger, anger at the way he had made her, made them all, into fools. Anger had always been a comfortable guise for her to wear.

In the following weeks and months, and stretching on into years, she had fastidiously avoided conversations of which Holmes was the subject, and she ignored all other passing mentions of the man. Anderson still got off on verbally abusing him, but Lestrade seemed to have taken her stance and preferred never to mention him. The man was dead and gone; the criminal class was not, and there was work to be done.

Almost, she erased the memory of him from existence. It took time, but eventually she stopped seeing him in the corner of her eye, lurking in the shadows at crime scenes or striding down the halls of the Yard like he owned the place. The holes he had left—that he had had no right to create, to begin with—had been filled.

And then the day came when Donovan saw John Watson’s face on the wall. Her first thought had been, to her consternation, not Watson, but Sherlock. And in that moment, it was like those three years had collapsed into nothing, as if he had never left the shadows of her mind after all, just hadn’t moved, so she had forgotten he was there. And this latest case, Watson’s disappearance, the one she had urged Lestrade to ignore, was slowly resurrecting him. It came as almost no surprise, then—almost no surprise—to find him alive in the waiting room of St Bart’s, only two short days after recovering his half-dead friend from the condemned convent.

The St Mary’s Abductions. That’s what the press was calling it, and Donovan disdained the moniker. Compared to the true breadth and scope of it, it seemed so inadequate, almost innocuous, and therefore offensive. Still, it was preferable to the name that had attached itself to the lips of the officers of the Metropolitan Police: the Sherlock Holmes Mess, they were calling it. A mess? Absolutely. But that moniker implied that all the murders, violence, and subterfuge were a mere annoyance, a hiccup in the day-to-day workings of a copper’s beat, and not the serious criminal affront that it was.

It was one of those days where she thought she might have been better off following in her father’s profession and studying contract law. He’d never had a day quite like this one.

When she was ready, she patted her face dry, rolled her shoulders back, and walked steadily toward the door. She had to stuff down the urge to kick it open.

Anderson, arms folded and head slack, leant against the wall beside the door to the ladies’ loo where she had left him. Or rather, where he had stopped tailing her. She hadn’t spoken a word to him as she sped herself away from the conference room, and he’d had the good sense to keep his mouth shut.

Her feet came to a stop in the middle of the hallway. Shaking her head and worrying her fingertips into her furrowed brow, she said, ‘I can’t believe I did that.’

‘Which part?’ asked Anderson, pushing himself off the wall. ‘The part where you lost your composure, or the part where you defended Sherlock Holmes?’

She turned a glaring eye on him. ‘The part where I blabbed about Richard Brook.’

He shrugged. ‘It’s not like it’s classified.’

‘Yeah, well that lot were hardly ready for it. I sounded like a conspiracy nutter. Now they think Sherlock’s pulled another one on us.’

‘Hasn’t he, thought?’ Anderson muttered under his breath.

Folding her arms and assuming her severest posture, she challenged him. ‘What’s that?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You have a problem with Holmes, take it up with Lestrade.’

‘Oh right, Lestrade. As if he hasn’t been in bed with Sherlock from the start.’

‘Then take your whinging to Gregson.’

‘There you go again. Defending the freak. Never thought you for a fangirl, Sally.’

‘Hey. Hey.’ She stuck a finger in his chest until he had the balls to raise his eyes to look at her properly. ‘I never said he wasn’t a tosser. Most days, I wish I’d never met the sorry son of a bitch. But that doesn’t make him a criminal. Stop being such a berk and use your brain some days, okay?’

She spun around, intending to storm all the way back to Lestrade’s office, when she stopped short and found herself nose to nose with Kitty Riley, reporter for The Sun, who held an audio recorder in her hand. The button glowed red.

‘Excuse me, Ms Riley,’ she said curtly, ‘but the press conference ended five minutes ago.’

‘Just some follow-up questions, Sgt Donovan, if you don’t mind.’

‘I do mind, in fact.’

‘Won’t take a moment.’

But Donovan was in no mood to bantam back and forth with the likes of Ms Riley. Without a word, she started away, but the reporter followed on her heels, Anderson trailing behind. ‘If Richard Brook really had gone missing in early June three years ago,’ she asked, ‘why was it not reported?’
'Take it up in Sussex, Ms Riley.'

'It seems odd that the family didn’t realise they were burying the wrong man. How do you account for that, if he were not, in fact, Richard Brook?'

Grinding her teeth, Donovan rounded the corner. At the end of the hall stood two security guards, or, as she silently dubbed them, Ms Riley’s escorts.

The questions kept coming: ‘Has Sherlock Holmes been questioned regarding Mr Brook’s disappearance? Has he been subjected to lie detector tests? How will the Yard answer the public if he does prove dangerous?’

But Kitty must have, at that moment, noticed the guards, because she suddenly stopped; Anderson had to dance around her to avoid collision. But Donovan kept striding, satisfied to be putting the pesky reporter behind her. But the woman wasn’t finished with Donovan.

‘Is it true,’ Kitty said, nearly shouting, ‘that evidence in the St Mary’s Abductions has gone missing?’

Donovan halted. How the hell could she know a thing like that! That was strictly confidential. Not even Anderson knew that. Well, he did now.

Kitty seemed to realise that she had struck a nerve. Her voice drew nearer, and Donovan heard a distinct sing-songy swagger colouring her every syllable as she read down a short list in her notepad. ‘A pair of grey underwear. A red dog dish. And something called a barbed cilice, though to be honest, I’m not entirely sure what that one is . . .’

Donovan rounded on her. She snatched the recorder from Kitty’s hand, pushed the off button, and threw it to the ground. Kitty's eyes went wide with a mix of affront and delight.

‘The press has been told nothing about evidence,’ Donovan said.

‘I’m sure my readers will be curious about what all those things were used for. We’ve been told so little about what went on in that place, after all. Offer a statement? Or let them draw their own conclusions—they’re an imaginative lot.’

‘Who is your source?’ said Donovan.

‘So it is true.’

‘Your source!’

‘Grant me an interview. The inside scoop.’

‘That’s extortion. I can have you arrested. If you have information involving a crime—’

‘I do not. My source does, and I cannot be forced to reveal my source. But I’m sure I don’t need to educate you on the tenets of freedom of the press, or on a journalist’s professional integrity.’

‘Integrity? That’s a laugh.’

‘I’m trustworthy. People know they can rely on me to be discreet.’

Donovan took a menacing step closer, the tips of her flats knocking against Ms Riley’s too-shiny court shoes; their noses nearly bumped, but Kitty didn’t so much as flinch. In heels, she came up to Donovan’s level. But Donovan had always known how to make other people feel small. Most people.

‘This isn’t about integrity with you. It’s about fear. You’re afraid. Afraid that the biggest story of your life, the one that made your career, was all a lie. Moriarty was real, Sherlock Holmes is alive, and you were played for a fool. Where does that leave you now?’

Feeling calmer than she had all morning, Donovan stepped back. ‘You can’t hide under a cloak of freedom-of-the-press rhetoric for long. It’s thinner than you think.’ She gave Kitty Riley one final, scornful appraisal, turned, and walked away, kicking the recorder aside as she went.

Anderson watched her go, befuddled and agitated. Then he glanced down to where Kitty was bending over to retrieve her digital recorder. The battery cover had popped open, but it seemed otherwise undamaged. Kitty pushed the batteries back into position, closed the cover, and hit play. ‘. . . something called a barbed cilice . . .’ they heard. Kitty smiled and hit stop. Then she lifted her eyes to him.

‘You’re not fooled, though. Are you?’

He shook himself as though from a daze. ‘Pardon?’

Kitty shrugged, brushing the imaginary lint Donovan had left in her wake from her jacket sleeves. ‘Must be hard. Being the lone voice of reason. Being the only man left in the Yard that can see him for what he really is.’ She stilled, making sure that Anderson’s eyes were locked on hers. ‘A liar. A manipulator. A master criminal.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Anderson, feeling a bit dodgy about talking to her. He had received an official censure for giving an interview back in November, and he wasn’t keen on receiving another.

‘You’re very brave. After all, you were the one who exposed him the first time. Given his popularity back then, that couldn’t have been easy.’

Well, that had mostly been Donovan, he thought, but he said, ‘Not easy, no. But one has a duty. To, you know. The law. Justice.’

‘Mm,’ said Kitty by way of agreement. ‘Never you fear, Mr Anderson. We exposed him once. It
won’t be easy for him to keep wearing the mantle of hero after all that. You’ll keep an eye on him. She slipped her card into the pocket of his suit coat. ‘Won’t you.’

She started away, and there was definitely a little more sway in her hips than before. ‘I’ll be in touch,’ she said.

Playlist for The Slash Man
The clock on the wall was stuck in a time warp. It claimed that only forty minutes had passed, but surely they had been sitting there for hours already.

‘And how are you sleeping these days?’

He dragged his eyes from the wall. The question was slow to register. ‘Pardon?’

‘Are you still having nightmares?’

He chewed his tongue a moment. Twenty more minutes. He had to endure just twenty more minutes. ‘Just the one.’

‘Let’s talk about that.’

‘There’s nothing to talk about. It’s the same as always.’

He wanted to fidget—to tug on his coat sleeves, cross his legs, shift his back to get rid of the fold of fabric he could feel pressing into his spine—but he remained still. These were the types that read far too much into body language: how the hands were positioned, how often the legs moved, where the eyes wandered. Stare too intently back, they read it as challenge. Look at one’s hands, shame. Watch the world through the closed window, entrapment. Monitor the door, paranoia. Keep an eye on the clock: anger.

Well, they got that one right.

‘Sometimes talking about it, talking through it, helps. It gives you power over what you feel is out of your control.’

‘I’m sure.’

‘I know I don’t need to tell you this again, but some things bear repeating often: this is a safe zone. A place free of judgement, expectations, or demands.’

‘Mm.’

‘Nothing leaves this room.’

‘So you’ve said.’

‘But you don’t trust what I say.’

In response, he said nothing at all.

‘When you say the dream is the same, you mean the one about . . . about Mary?’

He glared from his spot on the sofa.

‘The one where you watch her die?’

‘I said I’m not talking about it.’

‘Greg.’ Dr Quinton leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees and adopting his most sincere I’m-here-for-you expression. It made Lestrade want to throw something at his face. ‘It’s normal, perfectly normal, for a person in your line of work to feel guilt when working a case and someone gets . . . hurt.’

‘She didn’t just get hurt. She died.’ Lestrade’s eyes were back on the clock. His leg began to bounce incessantly on the ball of his foot. When he noticed, he stopped.

‘What we need to remember, though, is that even those of us committed to helping people, protecting people, aren’t superheroes. We can’t save everyone.’

‘Is that so? Huh. Well, that solves it, then.’

‘Greg—’

‘Why don’t we talk about Anderson again? About what an impertinent dickhead he’s become over the last few weeks—that was fun. Or hell, let’s have another go at Angela. We can talk about more ways I failed her as a husband. I’ve thought of a few more, thanks to our last meeting.’

Dr Quinton nodded sagely, if not sardonically. ‘Or maybe we could talk about Molly, how you’re getting on with her.’

Lestrade scowled and looked at his hands. Shut up, moron, he thought. Eighteen minutes.

‘But what I think we should really talk about is Mary.’

‘No,’ said Lestrade, ‘what you want to talk about is me, and what a bungling copper I really am.’

‘I never said bungling. Why do you say bungling?’

Huffing out a sigh, Lestrade cast his eyes to the window.

‘Do you know why we’re still doing this, Greg? Why we’re still having these sessions?’

‘Because I’d rather like to keep my job.’
Let me rephrase. Yes, your employment is currently contingent on whether I deem you of fit enough mind to continue without our little sessions. So why do you think I haven’t yet?"

'I’ve been asking myself that for weeks.’

Have you had a go yet at answering yourself?’

Lestrade stared at Dr Quinton long and hard. He didn’t deserve this. Any officer had to meet with one of the Yard’s counsellors for a minimum of three one-hour sessions after being shot or otherwise gravely injured in the line of duty, and he hadn’t complained about a single one of them. He had even welcomed the chance to unload a little and spoke openly of all the burdens he had lately felt himself beset with (burdens aside from taking a bullet to the gut and watching Pitts’ head explode six inches away from his own). Well, perhaps not all. But enough. Enough to make any therapist worth his salt believe he was being an entirely forthcoming and willing participant in what Dr Quinton called a shared recovery.

But that was until Dr Quinton’s first official review at the end of November: Patient’s psychology not entirely stable; may be suffering acute stress disorder. Strongly recommending continued sessions. And so Gregson had given him probationary status. As a consolation prize, he told Lestrade that he could go about his duties as normal, provided that he continued to meet with Dr Quinton for an hour a week until it was determined that further sessions were no longer necessary.

After thirty days, Dr Quinton began to scribble words like psychological trauma and behavioural shifts into his notes. Lestrade understood the implications and regarded them with derision. PTSD? Hardly. A couple of nightmares, and Dr Quinton was trumping it all up to psychological trauma? Someone needed to recheck that man’s credentials.

So no. He was done talking about Sherlock and John. He wouldn’t say another word about himself and Molly. And he sure as hell wouldn’t talk about Mary, the dream, and how he—above everyone else—had failed her.

Seventeen minutes.

The tinny trill of a mobile sounded. Without breaking eye contact with the therapist, Lestrade reached into the front pocket of his jacket and extracted his phone.

‘Lestrade.’

‘Homicide.’ Donovan’s voice came across so clearly Dr Quinton could hear every consonant. ‘Lower Clapton.’

‘On my way.’

He closed the phone with a snap and offered a devil-may-care sort of a shrug. ‘Duty calls,’ he said. He pushed himself from the sunken sofa seat and to his feet. With an eagerness that a homicide should not have instilled, he turned toward the door.

‘Greg.’

He stopped but did not turn back. There was a long pause.

‘Same time next week.’

He let the door fall shut behind him with a bang.

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‘Inside scoop my arse,’ he said, striding across the crunchy grass so quickly Donovan practically had to run to keep up. ‘First thing tomorrow, I want that woman down at the Yard for questioning.’

He was in a bad temper, one that had only worsened since leaving Dr Quinton’s office, and Donovan’s report on the press conference—which she’d begun the moment he’d stepped from the car and into a puddle—did nothing but aggravate it further. Despite the cold, the sun was out (a rarity in London at this time of year), glaring too brightly for his winter-adjusted eyes, and he hadn’t brought his sunglasses. And to cap it all off, some damn reporter knew about the missing evidence. There was a leak.

Another one!

‘I’ll find a reason to arrest her, if I have to,’ said Donovan bitterly, passing him a pair of latex gloves. ‘I’m sure I can dig something up. She’s no nun.’

‘I want to question her myself.’ The hem of one glove snapped his wrist painfully as he dug his fingers toward the tips.

‘Fine, but you’ll get the same freedom-of-the-press crap she gave me.’

‘It’s Kitty Riley, for chrissake, and we’re Scotland bloody Yard. Won’t take much to scare her so bad she pisses herself and starts spilling the beans from her arse.’

As he huffed along, Donovan discreetly allowed herself to fall a pace or two behind. Lestrade didn’t fail to notice, nor did he fail to discern her reason, and he instantly regretted not keeping better rein on his tongue. Though he’d been known to run his mouth with the best of them, he was never crude, even when he was upset. He didn’t quite know what was the matter with him. And Donovan was unimpressed.

Pretending it was nothing, he slowed as they approached the yellow tape wrapped around the trunks of scots elms and horse chestnuts, sectioning off this stretch of the park. Other officers already on the scene parted to let them pass. Speaking to Donovan over his shoulder in far more measured tones, he said, ‘What do we know?’
She nodded subtly in acknowledgement of his decisive return to professionalism. ‘No identification found on the body,’ she said as together they passed under the yellow tape. ‘Male, Caucasian, looks to be between thirty-five and forty-five . . .’

A forensics officer was crouched beside the body, and two others stood over him, comparing notes. When they saw Lestrade approaching, using a hand as a visor to shield his eyes from the sun glaring through the tree limbs, they all moved aside, and Lestrade got his first look at the vic. He stopped short, several steps away.

The man was lying prostrate, his nose in the earth, his hands pinned beneath him. He had been divested of a winter coat and wore only a torn t-shirt, rustled halfway up his torso. His jeans and underwear were wrangling his knees. He wore socks but only one shoe. A dirty, white trainer.

‘Jesus,’ he said under his breath.

‘Body was found by a woman, Lisbeth Owens, while she was out walking her dog. Initial assessment puts time of death within the last twelve hours, probably before dawn.’

Her words were slow to process, as if he were listening to them under water: he had been unexpectedly flooded with unaccountable rage, perilously mixed with fear, that engulfed his body from head to toe and muffled Donovan’s report. For one passing moment, he felt that he might be sick. So he breathed, deeply, and when the chill air filled his lungs and he could feel his feet sinking into the cold mud beneath the patchy grass, the vision of John Watson lying dead on the ground receded from his eyes.

Pull it together, DI, he thought.

‘Cause of death?’

‘Possibly asphyxiation, sir,’ said one of the forensics officers, returning to his crouched position by the body. ‘Clear signs of bruising around the throat, which may be from a belt or rope.’ He indicated with a latexed finger. ‘Can’t say for sure, of course, ’til we get the results of the autopsy.’

So Molly and I will get that date tonight after all. The thought made him morose.

‘Sexual assault, was it?’ A bitter taste filled his mouth at the utterance. He wanted to spit.

‘Looks like it, yeah,’ said another officer. ‘Bruising on the thighs and buttocks, bleeding from the anus, probably from a torn rectum. Most of the blood’s been washed away, though.’

‘It hasn’t rained,’ said Lestrade.

‘No, but can you smell it?’

Both Lestrade and Donovan leant a little closer and sniffed.

‘What is that? Bleach?’

‘Sodium hypochlorite. For swimming pools. We found an empty four-litre bottle just over there. We’ve bagged it. Whoever did this is trying to destroy DNA evidence.’

‘He can’t’ve destroyed it all,’ said Lestrade grimly. ‘You’ve got all the photos of the scene as you found it?’ he asked Donovan.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Roll him.’

The team took hold of the body by the head, shoulders, and hips. As they turned it over, Lestrade caught sight of several deep scratches along the victim’s waist and thighs. His torso was badly bruised. His hands were bound tightly in front of him.

‘What is that?’ asked Donovan. ‘Shoelace?’

Lestrade crouched down to examine it. The black shoelace had been wrapped around the victim’s wrist several times and knotted doubly. He carefully fingered the split aglet at one end of the string, then glanced down at the one shoed foot. It was a match, though the black laces were no counterpart to the white trainer. ‘Where’s the other shoe?’ he asked.

‘We haven’t found it, sir,’ said one officer.

‘Keep looking.’

As he stood and removed the gloves, he directed the officers to bag the body and deliver it to St Bartholomew’s morgue, finish collecting evidence from the crime scene, and get to work on identifying the sorry son of a bitch. Then, removing himself from the centre of the action, he gestured to Donovan with his head for her to join him.

‘Whoever he was, he was homeless,’ he said.

‘How do you know?’

‘The shoelaces.’ He didn’t explicate further on that point. ‘And I did wager my career that we’re looking at the work of the Slash Man.’

‘Darren Hirsch?’

‘Yes.’
Donovan shook her head, not in disagreement but disgust. ‘He’d be mad to draw attention to himself like this, so soon after . . .’

‘We need to find the bugger, Donovan, and lock him up. Yesterday, if not today.’

She folded her arms resolutely, her nostrils flaring. ‘Send a unit to Baker Street?’

‘I’ll go myself.’

‘You won’t . . .’ She hesitated, but Donovan was never one not to speak her mind. ‘. . . let him get involved. Will you? Warn them, fine, but we can handle this.’

But Lestrade was of no mind to argue with her. ‘I wouldn’t let him on if he begged me,’ he said.
Unwarranted Conclusions

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 2015

Sherlock’s feet pounded the pavement, sending shocks of pain up through his knees and into his skull. He’d been running so long he could barely breathe anymore and his lungs ached as though on fire, but he dared not slow. He dodged men and women, left and right, figures as stationary and immobile as bollards, placed in his path only to encumber him, and when he darted across the street, cars streaked by so closely they whipped against his coat and sent shivers across his skin. The pale morning light, filtered through a thin layer of gauzy cloud, stung his eyes as he cast them upwards, scouring the rooftops for a lone figure, a dark silhouette against the sky.

He found him on a precipice.

Sherlock’s feet came to a sudden and jarring halt. In a panic, he patted his pockets—trouser, coat, breast—only to discover he didn’t have his phone. Where had he left it? How was it possible he had left it? His phone was more than an accessory; it was a second brain, a second mouth, a third eye. Only once had he willfully abandoned it, and never again. He would sooner leave behind his right hand than his phone.

Cupping his hands instead, he tilted his head to the wavering crag of white stone, and shouted. His words were lost in the blaring of a car horn. He shouted again, and the wind carried his voice away. Again, throat straining, he cried into the sky, but all the world had fallen deaf. All he could hear was the erratic rush of blood across his eardrums.

Look at me, he thought.

From far away (it felt like such a terrible distance), he saw John’s head lower as though in slow motion. He felt, rather than saw, those pale blue eyes find him, and tether him. But Sherlock also felt the eye of a sniper, fixed not on him, but on John.

He couldn’t warn him; there was no time, he had no means. But he had to save him. He had to.

From the grave-cold pavement where he could stand no longer, Sherlock jumped.

But it was John who fell.

The sky was grey and the stone was white and John was shrouded in black—but he blazed like a falling star. Sherlock was blinded by searing white only moments before John’s body reached the earth, and when it did, the impact in his bones drove him to his knees. Palms flat against the rough concrete, he trembled. His mouth formed the word John as he struggled to find his feet and move again. He pushed forward to cross the street, a gap a mile wide, but moved arrested, as though through water. His vision was clearing, but slowly. He’s my friend, he said, his voice weak as though from long disuse, but there was no one to hear him. The street was empty, deserted—he was the only one to have witnessed John’s fall.

But no. Not quite the only one.

He reached the edge of the pavement. Only a short distance away, John lay on his side, small and naked and broken as a fallen bird. The skin of his back was shredded, but he could make out one vicious inscription: the letters I O U sliced large and deep between the bony wings of his shoulder blades. And kneeling over him, the shadow of a man with a gleaming scalpel.

Devil, Sherlock said. His voice echoed and diminished.

Moriarty lifted his face. A white, slanted smile slashed across his dark countenance like a jack-o-lantern. He winked at Sherlock but returned his attention to John, to pet his cracked head with the backside of his fingers, the ones still holding the scalpel. Then Moriarty rolled him onto his back, revealing a tattered chest, bleeding freely. Sherlock saw that John was alive, but only just: beneath the translucent skin stretched across his sunken ribs, a glowing red heart beat faintly.

‘Sherlock,’ said Moriarty silkily, stroking John’s face. ‘Sherlock.’

Sherlock couldn’t move, couldn’t scream, could do nothing. He stood like a statue and felt just as cold.

Moriarty laughed, a dark chuckle deep inside his chest. ‘This is how I burn you.’

Then he lifted the scalpel like a dagger. With devastating force, he drove it into John’s heart.

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Every muscle jumped, and Sherlock awoke with a gasp. His eyes flew open to blackness. For uncounted minutes, he lay still, trying to regain his breath. Gradually, his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and he recognised the faint glow of the streetlamps pushing through the curtained window. But his heart continued to race, and the pain in his chest refused to subside. It felt like something long and sharp was lodged there, an imagined something, he knew, and he didn’t approve of this kind of imagination. It was illogical. Like the dream, the lingering feeling of being afraid when there was nothing to fear. Unfounded response. He was determined to think past it.

When he was once again certain of his mental faculties, he pushed back the covers and sat on the edge of the mattress, elbows to knees, until a sharp pain across the back of his left hand drew him out of deep contemplation. He was scratching again. He balled his fingers into fists and reproached himself for the anxiety that persisted in the form of adrenaline in his system. Briefly he wondered: why always that dream? But he gave little credence to psychoanalysis and even less to dream interpretation. So he pushed the thought away, pushed the feelings down, down, and reached for his phone on the bedside table. Here the whole time, he thought, his inner voice scornful and annoyed.
The screen read 04.42. He knew he wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep and didn’t want to bother pretending. So he stood, grabbed his dressing gown from the hook on the bedroom door, and stepped out into the hallway. He weaved quietly through the kitchen and peeked into the sitting room—which was even brighter than his bedroom because, despite the curtains, the windows were larger and faced the street directly—to where John lay sleeping on the sofa.

It was where he had slept ever since returning to Baker Street, and Sherlock couldn’t quite figure why. Thinking the stairs were a problem, what with his leg still healing and all, he offered to switch rooms and leave John the one on the first storey so he would have to negotiate only one flight. But the offer was declined and returned with firm indication that the sofa would be fine, for a couple of nights. Those couple of nights stretched into weeks, going on a month and a half, with no sign of change.

As always, John slept on his right side, favouring his left leg and facing out toward the room. He was never on his back anymore (the skin and deeper tissue had been too severely damaged and was still recovering), never faced inward toward the back of the sofa (because one does not sleep with his back to the enemy), and never, ever did he lie on his stomach (the position was far too vulnerable). Whether asleep or awake, his was a bearing of vigilance, and at night, John always slept like this: one arm hung over the side, fingertips nearly touching the grip of the pistol tucked just beneath the sofa, almost but not entirely out of sight; and the blanket was hitched up a little, exposing the toes of his socks, so that his feet would be free if he needed to move quickly and not be tangled up in the blanket.

Sherlock stood still for a long moment, watching him sleep, listening to his steady breathing, until he was entirely satisfied that the dream was not some sort of augury (not that such an idea wasn’t pure twaddle—but he had to make sure). Five days had passed since John’s last nocturnal attack, seven days since his last daytime terror—it was the longest stretch so far, and by this Sherlock was greatly encouraged. At the same time, he was becoming ever more anxious for the next one, not believing they were yet clear of them. But tonight, apparently, was not the night. He softly retreated, back down the hall, and closed himself into the bathroom.

The first thing he did was run his hands under cold water. He had drawn blood this time—not much, a deep scratch, a shallow cut, but it was bleeding all the same—and the surrounding skin was red and raw. Huffing out his breath with irritation, he turned the tap warmer and scrubbed his face. Clearly, the dream had upset him, and he despised not being able to rein in that particular emotion. He understood why some men took to drinking as a way to blot out these thoughts and alter such moods, but all he wanted was a cigarette, and desperately. Instead, he peeled off his clothes, let them fall where they landed, and stepped into the shower.

The shower was hot, but he wanted it hotter, and he kept twisting the knob by tiny increments until the heat was almost intolerable and his skin turned lobster red and the steam made his head swim. But he stood with his head beneath the spray, feeling the hot water flatten his curls and massage the tension from the muscles of his shoulders and back. It felt cleansing, almost, but no matter how long he stood there simmering, he couldn’t shake the image of John dying on the ground outside of St Bart’s, in the very spot he himself had once died. When he couldn’t take it anymore, this inaction, he twisted the knob hard to the right, killing the shower, and dried himself off with a towel. Then he redressed in his pyjamas, dressing gown, and slippers, flicked off the light switch, and stepped back into the darkened hallway. He noticed the soft lamplight now coming from the sitting room.

It was barely five in the morning, but John was awake, sitting on the edge of the sofa but with his head in his hands. The blanket was half twisted around his waist, half fallen to the floor. Sherlock moved silently, so John must have felt him come into the room, because he lifted his head to see him. His eyes were still squinting, not quite accustomed to the light.

‘Good morning,’ Sherlock said, coming into the room.

‘Mm,’ John replied.

‘I wake you?’

John shrugged, so yes, he had. ‘Did you even bother to sleep?’

Sherlock didn’t want to voice the dream, so he forced a casual tone and offered a shrug of his own. ‘A bit,’ he said. ‘If you want to catch another hour or two, I’ll just take my laptop—’

‘No, I’m awake now.’

‘Breakfast?’

‘No.’

Sherlock frowned but turned away to hide it. He lifted his phone from the pocket of his dressing gown and settled himself into his armchair to scroll through the early morning news reports. From the corner of his eye, he watched John push himself to his feet and tug on his sleeves to cover his wrists. He didn’t bother with the cane, not for simply crossing a room, but his left leg moved stiffly and caused him to limp all the same. He joined Sherlock, sitting across from him in his own armchair. For a while, nothing was said; all Sherlock heard were the passing engines of early commuters and his own thumbs tapping. The silence might have been companionable, as it had once been, if not for something unspoken between them, an unidentifiable stiffness in the air. Sherlock wished John would pick up a book or even yesterday’s paper, or maybe rethink his answer about breakfast, but he just sat there, thinking about godknowswhat as he stared past Sherlock’s left ear at the curtained windows and rubbed his leg. After a few minutes, Sherlock realised he was scrolling so quickly that he wasn’t even processing the titles of the articles. He was distracted by the lack of distraction, which was John.

‘You’re bored.’
Caught off his guard, Sherlock looked up sharply but didn’t reply. So John continued.  

‘With this.’ He waved a hand in a way that might have indicated the flat but also could have meant the two of them.  

‘No . . .’ he began.  

‘I get it. I do. I saw how you were with the West End case. You were, I don’t know, on fire again.’  

He didn’t know about on fire. The case had been embarrassingly simple, once Sherlock had noted the smudge in the chorus boy’s bronze facial makeup, which indicated fingertips but couldn’t have been his own because of the placement/size/lack of makeup on the victim’s own fingertips, makeup that he matched to a smudge on the handle of the deep walk-in wardrobe stuffed with dozens upon dozens of costumes, all on hangers and pressed front to back like sardines in a tin, all but for a short row of 1920s’ flapper girl dresses hanging off askew wires, above which was a narrow trapdoor that the production manager swore she had never known existed, a door that led to a crawlspace into which the murderer—a Ms Erin Forrester, fellow chorus member—had got herself stuck nine hours before while trying to flee (well, crawl away from) the scene of the crime. In her hand she still held the murder weapon: a prop sceptre, made of ash, like a baseball bat, and stained with blood.  

Yes, simple, but he had loved every moment of it, from snapping on the latex gloves, to deducing that the boy had a side job selling fish at Borough Market, to feeling Sally Donovan’s eyes burning into the back of his head. It was the little things. But what he had loved above all was that John had been standing just off to the side, watching his every move, listening to his every word, and chiming in now and again with a question (‘Fish?’ and ‘How do you know?’ and ‘Is there no other way into the room?’), and even answering Sherlock’s rhetorical questions when no one else would (‘Because there’s no makeup on the fingertips.’) It felt like it had before: like they were the only ones in the room and the mystery was theirs alone to solve, like Sherlock’s job was to impress and John’s was to be impressed, and they were both performing admirably. Sherlock was having such fun at this dearly loved but long-missed game that he had let out an exclamation of victory upon discovering Ms Forrester at the end of the beam on the torch Lestrade passed to him as he poked his head up and into the crawlspace, a resounding ‘Ah-ha!’, to which Ms Forrester had answered, ‘Shit.’  

But as they were leaving the scene and passing out of the Queen’s Theatre, when it was just the two of them alone again, Sherlock’s swollen euphoria had been instantly deflated when upon asking, ‘What do you reckon, John? The Case of the Bloody Sceptre? Chorus Girl in the Crawlspace?’ John had only grinned, falsely and fleetingly, and said nothing at all.  

‘You need a case,’ John said. Absentmindedly, he tugged again on the ends of his sleeves, though his wrists were well covered.  

‘I’m perfectly capable of keeping myself occupied,’ said Sherlock, though he yearned for a case with the Yard. Oh, how he yearned for one. ‘We’ve enough to be getting on with at the moment.’  

‘We’ve reached a stalemate,’ said John, ‘in what we can do from here.’  

It was true. They had begun a little over two weeks ago, working together to learn all they could about Moriarty’s network, but already they had exhausted all online and hacked resources. There were only so many times Sherlock could recite the extent of his travels abroad tracking them, so many times they could review what they knew from the comfort of 221B, and Moriarty’s people were well hidden. Lestrade consistently assured them both that the Yard had things well in hand, and Mycroft was never slow to remind Sherlock what his first priority should be: helping John. Sherlock thought he had been.  

‘It won’t be long, though, I expect,’ John continued placidly. ‘The Yard is supposed to clear your name in just a few hours. A press conference, Lestrade said, announcing that all charges and suspicions have officially been dropped.’  

‘Thrilling news.’  

‘Your website will start getting proper hits again, soon enough.’  

‘Oh, but I’ve been enjoying the message board lighting up with strangers telling me to go to hell. Or Wales.’  

‘You’ll have the excuse you need to get away from here.’ He waved his hand vaguely again. ‘For a bit.’  

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. ‘You’ll come of course.’  

‘Yes,’ said John, though he was abruptly looking away. ‘Sometimes. Not always. I have this to look after’—he gestured to his leg—‘and . . .’ He motioned toward his head.  

‘John—’  

‘Tea and toast, I think,’ said John. He grunted, rising to his feet, and this time he took the cane with him into the kitchen where he made tea, not toast.  

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Standing outside of 221B and hunching his shoulders against the cold, Lestrade tucked the file in his armpit and reached for the bell: two dashes and a dot, then one dot, a dash, and two more dots. It had taken him longer than he cared to admit to learn to transmit his initials in Morse code. He had practised for days—tapping the steering wheel as he drove, clicking the mouse as he worked at the computer, patting his own elbow while standing in a lift—before he had learnt the full
alphabet, each letter in isolation. Now the initials GL came easily enough, but he’d be buggered if he had to recognise someone else’s, or manage more than two letters at a time.

In his tactlessly sensible way, Sherlock had assured him that he was not expected to: ‘At your age and level of intelligence, your proclivity for acquiring new skills has greatly diminished. Never you worry, detective inspector. This is for John’s sake, and he already knows Morse. As do I. Obviously.’

Yes, it was for John’s sake that the system had been devised. Lestrade had never seen it for himself, but according to Sherlock, in the short span of weeks since their reoccupation of their old flat, John had too often been unnerved by unannounced visitors. Well, unnerved was Lestrade’s word. Sherlock had used vexed. Whatever the right word was, it caused John a good deal of anxiety every time the buzzer sounded. There had been the occasional well-wishers and celebrity-sniffers, but also reporters in swarms and, too frequently, the malcontent hell-bent on making sure Sherlock knew he was not welcome in their city and that he deserved to be behind bars. Two bricks had made their soaring way through the sitting room windows, the first at midnight, two days before Christmas, which caused John to go into one of the worst panic attacks he’d known since his arrival at Baker Street; and the second at midday, which had managed to knock into Sherlock’s shoulder while he sat typing at his laptop. ‘They just don’t know you like I know you, love,’ said Mrs Hudson to Sherlock as they worked side by side, scrubbing away a particularly nasty spray-painted word that had been left on her front door. Lestrade could still see the shadow of it.

The unwelcome visitors more or less stopped once Lestrade had put the place on twenty-four hour visible surveillance and used local officers to drive away the reporters. However, because there had been no active threat made against the occupants, the Yard permitted only a three-day surveillance and then recommended to Sherlock and John that they hire a private firm to manage the security of the property. John had refused faster than Sherlock (the boys down at the Yard couldn’t cease the mutterings about Watson’s ‘trust issues’), but Lestrade took matters into his own hands. After all, the Yard was not his sole employer these days.

Still, John tensed whenever the buzzer sounded—whatever he was doing, he stilled, held his breath, and clenched jaw and fists. It was the uncertainty of not knowing who might be on the other side of the door, even when that someone had phoned ahead. And so Sherlock proposed that they simply wouldn’t answer an ‘uncoded buzzer’. That code, as it turned out, was Morse. And only a select few were told of it.

GL: two dashes and a dot, then one dot, a dash, and two more dots. Why did his have to be so complicated? Molly’s was two dashes followed by four dots. Sherlock’s was even simpler: three dots, four dots. But he’d tap out his entire name, if he was asked to, if doing so would ease John’s unremitting disquiet, even just a little.

Two seconds later, Sherlock buzzed him up.

He found John in his usual chair and Sherlock standing in the centre of the room, arms akimbo and staring at him as though Lestrade had stayed out past curfew and he was waiting for an explanation.

‘Mind if I sit?’ asked Lestrade, even as he dragged a chair from the desk. He positioned it to face the two armchairs and waited for Sherlock to take a seat himself.

‘Press conference ended three hours ago,’ said Sherlock mildly.

‘I take it you’ve been reading all the reports online,’ said Lestrade.

‘And my inbox crashed.’

‘Yes, well. Sally said a few things she shouldn’t have.’

‘Nothing I wouldn’t have said myself.’

‘Nevertheless, the reaction of the press—’

‘Was exactly what I had anticipated. Never a more predictable lot, journalists. Until they have a compelling reason not to, they’ll paint me as the blackest of villains, and his story picks up right where it left off. People love a good fairy tale.’

Lestrade didn’t have to ask to whom he referred. ‘The point,’ he said, ‘is that you’re a free man. As far as Scotland Yard is concerned, anyway. And also, a live one. Congratulations. You are once again officially recognised as being alive.’ He smirked. ‘The paperwork, I tell you.’

He knew for a fact that processing that paperwork had been deliberately slowed by certain someones occupying unspecific positions in the British government, and for one simple reason: a dead man could not be charged.

Neither Sherlock nor John returned the smile.

‘There’s more,’ said Sherlock.

‘Pardon?’

‘I expected you would come after the press conference was over, but you weren’t there to begin with. All reports make it clear that Sgt Donovan was the Yard’s sole representative. The conference ended three hours and twenty minutes ago. Whatever you’ve been doing in the meantime is the reason for your delay, and judging by the damp on the hem of your trousers and the mud you’ve left in our doorway, I’d say you’ve been enjoying some of this fine outdoor weather. Not a lot of mud between here and the Yard though. Furthermore, your hands are patchy with a mild rash—you never did take too well to latex. You’ve been at a crime scene.’

‘Do you never stop?’
'You’re also carrying a rather thick file of information, which you would have left in your car unless you intended to leave it here. It’s nothing to do with the conference, not a file like that. What’s more, you’ve deliberately avoided looking directly at John since the moment you crossed the threshold. This is to do with him.’

Now Lestrade did look at John, guiltily, but John was watching Sherlock, his eyes unreadable. But his fingers had curled around a knee.

‘Tell us what has happened.’

Lestrade had been hoping to ease into this, to set the tone of calm and assume an air of confidence and authority. Sherlock didn’t allow him any of that. As ever, he had waved his wand of deduction and left Lestrade in nothing but his briefs, and now it was either sit there looking like a fool or continue with the show and confess all he knew and then some.

He caught himself shifting in his chair and rubbing his nose while he thought of a place to start, so he stopped himself. Sherlock might not put much stock into psychology, but he had a rather sharp knack for interpreting human behaviour.

‘A couple things, then,’ he began, ‘that you should know. But first, listen: we’re working on it. The Yard is working on it. And we shouldn’t jump to any unwarranted conclusions . . .’

‘I’ll decide what conclusions are warranted.’

Lestrade let that one go. ‘Yesterday . . .’ Oh god, he was about to make himself sound so damned incompetent. ‘. . . yesterday, we discovered that some of the evidence recovered from . . . the convent . . . has gone missing.’

At last, John’s head came around, though his lips remained a tight, straight line.

‘Missing,’ Sherlock repeated, his tone bordering on disgust.

‘What evidence?’ asked John softly.

Lestrade wanted to hang himself. ‘Three items. Your . . . that is, a pair of pants. The’—he swallowed, catching himself before saying dog dish—‘water bowl, and the, um, metal cicle.’

Sherlock shot to his feet. ‘Damn it, Lestrade!’

‘We’re working on it, Sherlock! We’ll find it, all of it. We’ll find whoever took it. We’ll make it right.’

With a scowl, Sherlock answered, ‘I thought we agreed not to jump to unwarranted conclusions.’ He stepped away from the chair and started pacing. ‘The Yard hasn’t done any of this right, so why would you start now?’

‘That’s entirely unfair!’ Lestrade’s voice boomed. He was now on his feet, too. ‘I had ten officers working against me, people I had known for years, men I trusted, sabotaging my every move. Ten!’

‘Eleven, evidently.’ Sherlock snorted. ‘At least.’

‘We don’t know that. No, Sherlock, don’t look at me like that. We don’t know that it was someone at the Yard.’

‘Precedent, Lestrade, is a powerful indicator.’

‘You work in facts. Facts. So let’s talk facts. One: Stubbins told me nine out of ten. Pitts was the tenth. We have named all ten.’

‘Two,’ Sherlock countered, ‘Everett Stubbins was a small man in a large organisation in which the players can’t see each other. He knew nothing. Nothing important.’

‘Three: he knew enough for them to try to shut him up.’

‘Four: they didn’t shut him up, and you’ve learnt nothing from him since they tried. Five: the evidence lockers are located in the Yard. Six: only Yard personnel have access to those lockers. It is highly unlikely that any outside individual could break into it without some inside help.’

‘You could. You have.’

‘Yes, but I’m me.’

‘Look. I’m not saying it isn’t someone at the Yard. Maybe it is, god forbid. But dammit, Sherlock, we are sensitive to the possibility, the very real possibility, of infiltration. And even if we’ve been buggered again, that does not make us incapable of handling this.’

‘Who else knows?’

Lestrade released a huff of anger. ‘Dryers discovered it. He told me, I told Gregson and Donovan.’ He rubbed a hand against the back of his neck and turned slowly on the spot. ‘Anderson knows, too.’

Sherlock sniffed. ‘Of course he does. Donovan.’

‘No,’ said Lestrade. ‘Kitty Riley.’

Silence fell over the room. Lestrade had just done the near impossible and rendered Sherlock Holmes speechless. Struggling to maintain a level tone, Lestrade proceeded to relate Donovan’s story of what had transpired after the press conference when Ms Riley had cornered her outside
the women’s loo.

‘I want to be there when you question her.’

‘Not a good idea. She burns you in effigy every time she puts pen to paper. Let’s not give her more fuel for the fire.’

‘Oh please, what more can she do to me? I’ll not just sit on my hands while she twiddles her thumbs and evades giving answers when she knows the identity of some bloody sod who pillers instruments of torture?’

There was a sudden crash of glass. Both men jumped, then spun to look at John. Lestrade didn’t need Sherlock’s keenly deducing brain to work out what had just happened: John had gone for the water glass on the table beside his chair, but his hand had been shaking so badly he couldn’t hold it. He knocked it clean off the table, and it shattered against the floorboards. Water spread in all directions.

‘Jesus—’ John said hoarsely. His face flushed, and he gripped one hand in the other to keep it from trembling. He was trying to get to his feet.

‘No, no, it’s fine, leave it,’ said Sherlock, touching his shoulder with a light hand. He stepped over the puddle, angling for the kitchen.

‘John, are you okay?’ said Lestrade. ‘I’ll get you a new glass.’

‘No. Don’t.’ John stood awkwardly over the broken glass, knees slightly bent as though he were about to walk away or fall back into the chair. But he did neither. He looked as though he didn’t know what he should do.

Sherlock returned with a hand broom and dustpan, a fistful of kitchen paper, and the rubbish bin. ‘I broke a beaker just the other day, so I’ve had practice,’ he said with a smile at John as he crouched down and began sopping up the water with the kitchen paper.

‘I can clean it, Sherlock,’ said John.

‘I’m half done already.’

John took a wavering step away from the mess, and another until he had crossed the room and lowered himself onto the sofa. He looked unaccountably exhausted, and not a little . . . unnerved. Vexed came nowhere close. Lestrade didn’t know if he could bear to finish saying what he had come here to say.

When Sherlock had finished cleaning and had removed all evidence of a mishap to the kitchen, he returned wearing an intentionally calmer demeanour; clearly, it wasn’t for Lestrade’s sake. He also bore another glass of water, which he delivered wordlessly to John, who took it in two hands and drank. Lestrade could hear his exhalations sounding in the glass as he was clearly trying to remain in control but looking furious with himself.

Giving John what privacy he could, Sherlock returned his attention to Lestrade, and when he spoke his voice was a deeper tone of bass. ‘This crime scene you were at. Was it related to the missing evidence?’

Shaking his head, Lestrade said, ‘There’s no direct connection, from what we’ve gathered so far. But—he glanced briefly at John, then away and spoke more softly—’now may not be the best time.’

‘Who died?’ John asked gruffly, his voice echoing in the glass raised to his lips.

Lestrade relented. ‘A man. We’ve not identified him yet.’

‘Where?’ asked Sherlock.

‘Lower Clapton.’ He headed Sherlock off at the pass. ‘Team’s already cleared the site and the body’s on its way to the morgue. There’s nothing left to see.’

Sherlock raised a sceptical eyebrow at him but asked, ‘How did he die?’

‘Initial assessment suggests asphyxiation. I’m going to Bart’s later for the full report.’

‘We’re waiting for the punch line, inspector.’

‘It’s not conclusive yet, but—he eyes flitted once more to John, then to the floorboards—’I think our suspect is Darren Hirsch.’

He waited for the second glass to fall. It didn’t.

After a silent spell, Sherlock said methodically, ‘The victim was sexually assaulted.’

‘Yes.’

‘He had distinct scratch marks on his sides and hips.’

‘Yes.’

‘There are signs he had been homeless.’

‘Yes. All that, yes.’

‘I want to see the body.’

‘No.’
Lestrade stood and began buttoning his coat, an indication that their conversation was over. ‘I came here because you ought to know, and to put you on your guard. But I’m not involving you in this case. It’s not an issue of pride, Sherlock,’ he said in response to the look of affront, ‘it’s a matter of policy. You do not work for the Yard. And we don’t consult . . . amateurs.’ He shook his head, half in apology, half in self-derision. ‘Things aren’t what they once were, Sherlock. I’m sorry.’

‘But you need—’

‘I’ve brought you this,’ said Lestrade, holding up the file for him to. ‘I can’t bring you onto cases anymore, but I also can’t stop you from looking for them. So I’m trying to help out where I can.’

With that, he placed the file on top of the closed laptop on the desk, muttered another apology to John, and left.

Sherlock listened to his heavy footsteps travelling down the stairs, then he slowly crossed to the file, flipped it open, and scanned the first few pages. Mostly, it contained surveillance reports and intelligence on foreign spies and counter-government organisations abroad. Interesting. But perhaps not the most pressing matter at hand.

‘He’s given us this as a distraction,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said John, who was now standing behind him. He reached around, set down the glass, and grabbed the file from out of Sherlock’s hands. ‘I’ll handle it. You go. Lestrade won’t be there for a couple hours more. You’ll have plenty of time to look at the body and wait for the report.’

‘You don’t want to come?’

‘It’s a big file. Might be something important. Best one of us got on it.’

He sat himself at the desk and opened the laptop to access his password-protected notes.

‘I won’t be long,’ said Sherlock, grabbing his coat and scarf.

‘Take your time.’

Sherlock stood a moment in the open doorway, but John was already engrossed in the file, his head slightly angled away. Right then, he thought, and closed the door firmly behind himself.
FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 2015

Molly Hooper heard just three words—Lestrade told me—and let him straight in.

‘I haven’t even unbagged him yet,’ she said.

‘I’ll help.’

She wasn’t accustomed to having an assistant on these things. Or rather, she wasn’t accustomed to playing assistant, as before ten minutes had passed, Sherlock had essentially taken over the morgue. ‘Hand me that magnifying glass,’ he said to start, and before long, it was, ‘Angle that light right here. No, here’ and ‘Hold this’ and ‘Write this down. Have you written it?’ He was quick to identify the method of strangulation had been rope, not a belt, even before she had found a tiny sliver of fibre from a hemp rope embedded in a scratch on the neck, and also to declare that the bruising had occurred post-mortem, an assessment she agreed with, ruling out strangulation as the cause of death. A large gash in the back of the head was a more likely candidate.

Still, she had her own uses. The left ankle was clearly broken, as both could see, but it was she who first suggested that it had been the result of twisting, a hard clockwise wrench. He agreed that twisting was most likely, looking slightly put out that she had beaten him to the punch. She also noted that the bruising on the wrists, contrary to those on the neck, had occurred prior to death, to which he replied, ‘You’ve grown quicker, Molly.’ Together, they observed some kind of thin, dried film on the lips and at the corner of his mouth, a faint pinkish-red colour, which both initially mistook for blood but upon closer inspection they saw that it certainly was not. That would be a matter for the lab to identify.

He still let her do all the procedural things required by both law and training, and he let her take care of the cutting and organ removal (with the occasional ‘Budge over, Molly, I can’t see’ to determine the kind of internal damage the assailant had caused, but he took it upon himself to collect samples and put them in plastic bags to send to the lab. (She watched him closely, making sure he didn’t take anything for himself.) They had never worked together in this way before, and it was highly unorthodox (Dr Torrence, who was on holiday in Majorca, would have had a coronary if he’d known), but Sherlock was keen, and Molly didn’t hate it. It was rather nice, actually, having a little company while performing a post-mortem.

That wasn’t to say that either of them was particularly enjoying the work. When Molly collected fluid and tissue samples from the area of assault, Sherlock turned away. It was on the pretext of re-examining the victim’s torn shirt and jeans, and he talked the entire time, rattling off deductions about the way the man sat on trains and how he took his coffee as though he were a wind-up toy, but Molly recognised it for what it was: a way to divert other thoughts. He had managed the rest of it (the bashed up face, the bruises colouring back and torso, the signs of strangulation) with the same detachment and clinical curiosity he had always shown. But he paused and his breath faltered at the wrists, rubbed raw and red from the shoelace. He let her take samples from the slash marks at the hips. And he turned away from the evidence of rape. She understood. A little over two months ago, this had been John. No, Molly corrected herself. This only might have been John. John had survived.

When they were finished and cleaned up, Molly completed the report and got the samples labelled and ready to send off to the lab. She wanted to have them back by the time Greg showed up, and she hoped that whatever the tests revealed would be useful to him. She knew he was stressed enough as it was, what with trying to track the men who had abducted John (a practically futile search, he had told her recently, until they got more to go on) and with the aftermath of a conspiracy ring at the Yard. His nearly every waking hour was devoted to some aspect of the job, and, though he never said as much, she got the sense that his sleeping hours were none too peaceful. They had been seeing each other since November, but the reality was, they hadn’t actually seen much of each other. In fact, thinking of herself as a ‘girlfriend’ felt a little premature and presumptive, perhaps even a little juvenile. She didn’t know for sure that Greg saw her in such a light. With a pang, she knew that ‘boyfriend’ wasn’t quite how she thought of him, either, not yet, not when they hadn’t even kissed properly, just shy touches on the arm or sitting close together, hip to knee, on a park bench while they braved the cold and sipped coffees on the rare occasion her lunch breaks and his case lulls happened to coincide. Molly could count up on one hand the number of evenings they had spent together, just the two of them, that hadn’t taken place in that very morgue. The thought depressed her, but she had no solutions. She didn’t want to pressure or burden him, didn’t want to seem overly eager or needy or ungenerous or any of those things she believed she had been guilty of in the past. She liked him, respected him, believed he was doing an important work. He just seemed . . . tired. And the more time that passed, the more tired he became.

But maybe, just maybe, this body represented the break in the case he needed. Maybe it would actually prove to be useful.

She had just crossed the last t when she noticed that Sherlock’s attention was once again on the body he was supposed to be zipping back into the bag. Instead, the bag was stretched wide so he could examine the deep scratches embedded in the hips. His attention had turned to them at last.

‘Something else?’ she asked.

He didn’t answer, so she tried again.

‘What are you looking for?’

‘Something I must have missed.’
“Why do you think you missed anything?”

“Because something is not right.” He moved around to the other side of the table. His fingers curled into a claw-like position and dragged through the air, just above the marks, to recreate what he supposed had caused them. There were thirteen distinct scratches on one side, eleven on the other, indicating fingernails that had raked the skin multiple times. “This mark here . . . It’s different from the others. Longer, thinner. I don’t believe it was from a fingernail. But it’s not a blade either. The cut isn’t clean enough for a blade.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know. Lestrade presumes that this is the work of the Slash Man.”

“Isn’t it?”

“It’s not an illogical assumption, given some of the evidence, but not a foregone conclusion until the DNA results confirm it.”

“It shouldn’t be long.”

“But the differences. The differences, Molly. Prior victims reported the deep scratching, like this, the Slash Man’s hallmark sign. I’ve seen some of that for myself. The fact that this man was homeless fits the profile of all known victims but John. Yet this is the first time one of the Slash Man’s victims has been killed—no one ever died before. That’s not all. According to reports, the Slash Man always stripped his victims bare before raping them, let them get cold; this man was still partially clothed. And the strangulation? That’s new. The sodium hypochlorite—that’s new too. If he’s going to leave such obvious markers, why bother even trying to destroy DNA evidence?”

“Do you mean that this wasn’t him? A copycat, maybe?”

“Conceivable. But not likely. There are too many similarities. Not with his prior victims, but with John.”

She gasped a little and clutched the clipboard to her chest.

“The bleach. They poured bleach into John’s wounds. The same thing happened to this man.” He walked up to the dead man’s head, re-examining the bruising on the neck and collarbone. “And they strangled John, too. Repeatedly. But the bruising here . . . Why strangle a man after he’s dead?”

Having never considered the mind of a madman, she had no answer to give.

“These differences mean something,” he continued. “Someone playing a game. And if this is a game, then this—he gestured urgently at the whole body—is a message. I need to decode it.”

Molly was at a loss. She had never been one to question Sherlock’s reasoning, let alone his conclusions. But now, she wasn’t so sure. To her, a dead body was message enough. In any case, she just wanted this one to be simple, straightforward, easily cracked. But Sherlock stood with his hands on his hips, glaring down in annoyance at the exposed corpse of a man who had been beaten, raped, and murdered within the past twenty-four hours as if it were still holding something back.

“Are you okay?” she asked delicately.

“What? Me? I’m fine, Molly.”

“Is John?”

He looked up sharply. “Why shouldn’t he be?”

“It’s just . . . with all this.” Her eyes flitted to the body. “I notice he didn’t come with you today. Sorry, it’s not my business. I’ll just, you know”—she indicated the report and samples in her hand—“be back in a tick.”

She made a quick job of the delivery and ensured that the lab technicians saw that everything had been marked as urgent. By the time she returned to the morgue, Sherlock had zipped the body bag and was sitting on a chair beside it, fingers drumming the silver table a little impatiently.

The door had only just swung shut behind her when he said, “Not good.”

She halted. “Sorry? Something she had done?”

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She halted. “Sorry? Something she had done?”

“John.” He rolled his shoulders a little as though to release some building tension. “He’s not good.”

“Oh.” Molly stood awkwardly a moment, staring at him, cleaning one fingernail with another.

For the first time since he had arrived, he looked tired, though she doubted that a good night’s sleep could solve this kind of tired. It was the kind of enervation that came from not knowing what to do, and she had never known him to be in such a state. She crossed the room to another rolling operator chair and sat herself on the edge of it. “Not good how?” she asked gently.

His face was like stone and his eyes just as hard. Had he been looking at her, she might have felt the need to back away. As it was, however, he was looking at the floor, his jaw hard-set. And Molly knew: he was worried about John and didn’t know how to say it, didn’t even know if he should.

“Maybe just one thing,” she suggested, “that’s not so good.”

For a long moment, she thought he wouldn’t or couldn’t answer. Then, “There isn’t just one thing. It’s a thousand things, all tangled together in a wretched skein. Everything hurts. All the time. Everything.”
'You mean . . .'

'Every part of him. Skin, muscle, bone, head to foot, real pains and imagined ones, it's all the same, there's no point in drawing lines. And what's to be done? His meds work only when he takes them, when he doesn't refuse to take them, and even then the pain is only dulled. I think he prefers to hurt. When he doesn't, he thinks about . . . things. So it's a choice. He just hurts, all day long, all through the night. He can't get away from any of it.'

'Do you talk to him about it? Getting help, I mean.'

In answer, he stared even harder at the floor, as though his eyes alone could bore holes through it. She watched him bring his hands together, to clasp them, she thought, but instead he started scratching the skin there. Slowly.

'If he'll listen to anyone about it, Sherlock, it's you.'

He laughed shortly, bitterly.

'Really, he will. He trusts you.'

'He can't stand me.'

Whatever she had expected him to say in response—of John’s physical condition or mental health or handling of grief—she had not expected that. 'I'm sure that's not true.'

'It's true.'

The stone cracked and the mask slipped, just a fraction, and Molly saw the expression of deepest self-loathing before the stone settled again.

'I don't blame him. I'm no good for him.'

'Has he said—?'

'He doesn't have to. I walk into a room and he holds his breath. That is, if he doesn't find some reason to leave. He'll spend an hour in the bathroom with the shower running, or long hours in his bedroom, just to stay away from me. We take meals together, out of custom or because Mrs Hudson has prepared it, but he'll hardly say a word, and when we're working, it's all business. This morning he sat with me only long enough to tell me I needed to get out of the flat more but that he wouldn't come with me, and when I did leave he told me not to hurry back. He's poorly in every way one can imagine, but he doesn't want my help, or anyone's. He never smiles, not unless he has to, and then it's a chore and fades quickly. I haven't heard him laugh since . . . I don't ever hear him laugh. Not that he has anything to laugh about these days.' He sighed out a great breath. 'I don't know what's going on up here.' He tapped a fingernail roughly into his temple. 'I used to be able to tell, but now it's all walls.'

'He's going through a lot,' said Molly. She knew the weakness of the hackneyed phrase the moment it left her lips, and Sherlock scowled at it. 'He needs time.'

'He needs her. He has me instead.'

She answered shyly, 'He needs you, too, Sherlock.'

Again, he looked disgusted by her attempt at consolation and answered, 'Yes, to find them. And I will. I swear to god I will. And once I have . . . That'll be that.'

She was startled by how alarmed she felt on his behalf. 'That'll be what?'

'He'll have no reason to stay.'

He was suddenly on his feet. The heart-to-heart was over.

'Text me the details, once the results are in. I want confirmation that this is the Slash Man we're dealing with, and I need the identity of the vic—'”

At that moment, the door to the morgue swung inward, emitting Greg Lestrade. Molly shot to her feet, already smiling and wondering a little foolishly how her hair looked. But the smile slipped a little when she saw how Greg's eyes skipped right past her and narrowed in aggravation at the sight of Sherlock Holmes.

He made her no greeting but said instead to Sherlock, 'What the bloody hell are you doing here?'

'Afternoon, Lestrade,' said Sherlock mildly.

'You told him to come,' said Molly, but she was suddenly uncertain. 'Didn't you?'

'Like hell I did.'

'You didn't really expect me to stay away,' said Sherlock. 'Not on a case like this.'

'Jesus.' Lestrade pinched the bridge of his nose and screwed up his eyes as though he had a headache.

'Sorry, Greg,' Molly said, contrite. It hadn't even crossed her mind that letting Sherlock in wouldn't be all right.

'Don't be. He knew what he was doing.' He dropped his hand to his side. 'All right then. Fine. Let's have it. What did you find?'

'Nothing of importance,' said Sherlock. His tone was mild, but his expression could have
shattered glass. He was fitting his scarf around his neck.

‘Oh, come on now, don’t be like that.’

Sherlock yanked indignantly on the scarf, almost choking himself, and swung on Greg. ‘There was nothing. Nothing Molly wouldn’t have found on her own. You should have had me at the crime scene.’

‘You know I can’t. Not anymore.’

‘What, because of the newspapers? Afraid of what the public might think?’

She saw Greg control an eye roll. ‘You may not care about public opinion, but the Yard does. But even that doesn’t matter when it comes down to it. I’ve already told you—it’s policy. It’s out of my hands!’

‘Policy never bothered you before. What you cared about were results.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock agreed. ‘The stakes are higher, and you need me now more than ever.’

Greg stepped forward a few paces. His body language beseeched Sherlock to listen to reason. ‘I want you there working cases with me. This case. I do! I just—’ He shook his head in frustration. ‘You can’t, Sherlock.’

Sherlock rolled his shoulders into his coat. His eyes burned with anger and his movements were jerky as he pulled on his gloves. Molly felt miserable watching him. She wished something would relieve the awful tension in the room—that Sherlock would understand or that Lestrade would relent—but neither man yielded any ground.

As he stalked toward the exit, Sherlock, without sparing another glance on either of them, said, ‘I’m on this case, inspector. Find a way to make it right with the Yard.’ Then he threw the double doors wide and disappeared.

Alone with each other now, Lestrade groaned and dropped his head into his hands. ‘God, what am I doing?’

Molly came closer and placed a tentative hand on his upper arm, rubbing gently. She was on the cusp of excusing Sherlock’s behaviour by relating his concern over John, but she believed that the things he had told her had been spoken in confidence, and she knew it wasn’t her place to pass them along. Instead, she said, ‘It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have let him help me with the autopsy.’

Regretfully, she shook her head no. ‘He thought there might have been some sort of message on the corpse, but no, nothing.’

‘When do you expect the lab work to be done?’

‘It’ll be a couple hours. I only just dropped off the samples.’

‘Bad timing, I guess.’ He grinned apologetically.

‘Maybe not so bad,’ she said, matching his smile. Again, she touched his arm, teasingly, rubbing the fabric between two fingers and wishing they had reached a point where they could be more familiar with each other. But she felt foolish and stopped. ‘If you need to wait for the results, we could, I don’t know, grab an early dinner?’

‘I’d like that,’ he said. ‘I can’t tell you how much. But . . .’ He winced. ‘I can’t. I think we may have an identity on the victim. Someone recognised a photograph and, well, I need to go talk to the family.’

Her smile dimmed as she failed to hide her disappointment.

‘Damn. I’m always doing this, aren’t I?’

‘It’s fine,’ she said. ‘You’ve got an important job.’

‘We’ve all got important jobs,’ he said. ‘I don’t want you to think I’m hiding behind mine.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Things will let up.’ He touched a loose strand behind her ear. ‘Soon. I promise.’

She nodded and inclined her head slightly toward his hand, but she wasn’t greatly encouraged. Their plans always seemed to exist in the realm of soon and someday.

His phone went off, and he sighed out his disappointment and dropped his hand. ‘Excuse me,’ he murmured, reaching inside his pocket. ‘Lestrade,’ he said into his phone. Molly couldn’t make out the words on the other line, but the voice sounded like Donovan’s. ‘Yes. Yes, good. Good. I’m on my way.’

Dropping the mobile back inside his pocket, he said helplessly, ‘I have to go.’

‘Good news, is it?’ She tried not to sound too hopeful.

‘Maybe. Three separate people identified our victim’s photograph.’
‘Who is he?’

‘Sam Jefferies.’ He spelt it for her, for the report. ‘I’ll bring the family in to positively ID the body later today. You’ll still be here?’

She inserted a light-hearted laugh. ‘Always.’

His return smile was a little pained. ‘Great. Then . . . I’ll see you then.’

He squeezed her hand lightly and turned to go. By the time the door had swung closed her smile was gone. Shaking away the negative thoughts, she pulled out her own mobile and began to text.

Sam Jefferies, presumably.

Not yet confirmed. No word yet on the perp.

A moment later, the text alert sounded on her mobile.

Thank you.

SH

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John closed the bathroom door, locked it, and set the gun beside the sink. Then he leant the cane against the wall between toilet and bath, propped himself against the wall with one arm, and lowered his zip as he stood over the bowl. Nothing happened.

‘Stop it, stop it, don’t be ridiculous,’ he coaxed himself under his breath. ‘Just go. Just go.’

But he couldn’t. He felt the pressure, the need to urinate. The muscles in his body were tensed and his bladder felt like it was being squeezed from all directions, but he couldn’t relax enough to release. Breathe, he told himself, resting his forehead into the arm now pressed against the wall. But every time he began to relax, even just a little, he shivered, and the muscles seized up again and prevented anything from happening.

‘Damn it,’ he said, still in little more than a whisper. Every damn time.

He zipped his flies back up, lowered the lid, and sat. He commanded himself to breathe again, slow breaths in, slow breaths out, but the sound of it made him want to scream. Since the convent, he couldn’t stand silence punctuated only by the sound of his own miserable breathing. So he reached for the knob on the shower and twisted, letting the water run cold as it slapped noisily against the bottom of the bath. It would do.

Lestrade’s visit had unsettled him more than he wanted to admit. Things had been going . . . all right. He had begun to feel stable, more in control of his thoughts and emotions than he had since the whole thing started. Not good. God no, far from good. But he had been managing the intrusive images well enough without having to rely on Sherlock to bring him back from the brink of insanity every few hours. And yes, he still had nightmares, though not the kind that brought Sherlock running. Then Lestrade had mentioned the underwear. The dish. The cilice. His mouth had run dry. A frigid, invisible hand clutched at his chest, squeezed, stole his breath. Moran’s voice drifted into the room, muffled and distant-sounding at first, but as Lestrade and Sherlock continued to argue and his thirst became unbearable, the words had grown louder, clearer, until it was a voice booming in his skull:

Just a dog. Just a dog. Just a dog.

And the glass shattered.

With the crash, Moran’s voice disappeared too. He realised he was sweating, shaking, and he felt like he might throw up. You’re fine, you’re fine, you’re fine, he repeated in his head, trying to drown out the echo. But he was unable to convince himself it was true; he was barely able to push himself from the chair. He was humiliated. Jesus, the way Lestrade had looked at him, with such concern, regret, pity. Sherlock was already in the kitchen, making things right. John had to move, just to prove that he could.

He didn’t want to consider why those three items had been stolen from evidence. Plenty of things had been recovered from the basement of the abandoned convent: a carbon-steel knife, steel pliers, brass knuckles, a lighter, bottles of chemicals, his wristwatch, shoes, socks, trousers, vest, shirt, coat, leather belt. . . . Even the taser had been found on the grounds of the convent. All were now in police storage lockers, labelled as evidence for the open criminal case, and under lock and key. All but the scalpel. Moran must have had that on him when he fled. But those three items . . . he didn’t want to consider them. But he knew. Those were the tools they had used to break him. Sexual degradation, animalistic shaming, and unrelenting pain. All three had ravaged his body, spoilt his mind, and left him a whimpering mess of a man.

And if John knew it, Sherlock surely did.

‘You bastard, you miserable bastard,’ he said to himself between arduous breaths. He despised himself. For feeling so weak. For feeling trapped inside so damaged a body, a body that would forever carry the marks of his captivity, the reminders of his loss. He hated how the mere memories reawakened physical pain in every scar, burned open every wound. He felt it now, and in distress, he pushed off his slippers and socks, set a shaving mirror on the floor, and held his right foot over the glass.

He half expected to see three lines of blood at the ball, arch, and heel. Instead, he saw three parallel scars, slightly raised pink strokes of pinched, perfectly sealed new skin. When he walked, however, no matter what he wore on his feet, he could still feel the pressure of tender skin threatening to split beneath his weight. As a doctor, he knew it was an irrational fear; but it was one he was unable to shake.
Seeing that the skin of both feet was still intact, he hitched up his left trouser leg and ran a finger across the stab wound in his calf. There were mornings when he woke up convinced that the tip of the scalpel had broken off and lodged itself there; he could still feel the sharp blade deep inside the muscle tissue. But this, too, was a ridiculous notion, as his brain should have been able to figure out. Had the blade really broken off in his leg, Moran would not have been able to leave other marks.

Working his way higher up the leg, he came to the puckered scar of a bullet wound, deep purple and ugly. He was no longer wearing the wrappings because the skin had sealed and infection was no longer a concern. However, the bullet had grazed the bone, and the muscle damage still caused him pain when he walked, or even when he didn’t walk but left his leg too long inert. He had missed his last two therapy sessions intended to strengthen it. To the physical therapist, he had lied and said he was going on holiday, and to Sherlock he had lied and said the therapist was on holiday. He was fairly sure Sherlock had seen right through him, but he hadn’t called his bluff, only taken it upon himself to refill his meds.

On the other leg, he examined burn marks and minor cuts up to the knee, but when he came to the first signs of mangled skin, evidence of flesh torn apart by the cilice, he let the trouser legs fall again, covering it all up. He already knew what it looked like, the massive scarring that covered both legs, knee to crotch. He sure as hell knew what it had felt like, wearing the cilice, one leg at a time, how the barbs sank in, how they twisted and pulled and ripped tiny gashes through his flesh, even before being viciously wrenching away. How many times, he had no recollection. Too many. The hideous scarring was testimony to that.

John knew it wasn’t over. He knew Moran was still out there, as was that woman, and he knew that they had not intended for him to survive. It was the reality of his every waking moment; it plagued him even while he slept. But Lestrade’s report of a murdered man, and of the disappearance of those three pieces of evidence, had sharpened that reality.

He couldn’t fall to pieces. Not now. Not when things were happening again. He should be out there with Sherlock, not holed up in a bathroom. He knew it the moment Sherlock had walked out the door, but he had been unable to summon the strength—the courage—to call him back. And he hated himself for that, too. Once he had been the whetstone against which Sherlock sharpened his intellectual flint; now he was the millstone hanging around his neck. He wasn’t recovering the way Sherlock needed him to. Mentally, emotionally, he was just too unstable. Physically, he was weak, sleeping poorly and always tired, still taking pain meds, still relying on a cane. Of course Sherlock would be frustrated, being trapped in a flat night and day with him. When John had told him to, he had practically run out the front door.

If he didn’t straighten himself out, Sherlock would eventually become bored with him, and leave. That’s just who he was.

And oh god, what would he do if Sherlock left? He’d spent more than three years in a larger, more dangerous, more stimulating world. And now he was . . . caretaking.

*Just a dog. Just a dog. Just a—*

Stop!

He dropped his fists down on his thighs, and a burst of anger erupted from his throat, echoing loudly in that small, lonely space.

At the same moment, the doorbell sounded, a rapid buzzing: three dots, followed by four dots. *SH.*

The front door opened.

John killed the shower and put one hand on the edge of the sink and pushed himself upright. Once he’d steadied, he was recalled to his purpose in coming into this bathroom in the first place. He lifted the toilet seat and tried again. This time, after a very concerted effort to relax (he heard Sherlock’s footsteps ascending the staircase), he was finally able to piss.

Next minute, he opened the bathroom door, passed through the kitchen with his cane, and found Sherlock standing in the centre of the sitting room, staring at the open file John had left by his laptop. Despite his promise to read through the whole thing, he had lost interest quickly. It was just page after page of foreign names attached to catalogued sightings in cities he’d never heard of; lists and lists of invoices for illegal contraband—weapons, drugs, precious metals, computer equipment—being bought and sold and smuggled across borders; coded names, coded operations, coded codes. And not once, in all those thousands of words, did he ever come across the name Sebastian Moran, or even his codename, LANCE.

Maybe Sherlock could make something more of it.

John could not account for the feeling of relief that swept through him at the sight of Sherlock now, nor could he reconcile it with the anger that flooded him in the same moment—that he should be so dependent on the man for his wellbeing! He was a grown man; he shouldn’t have such a strong, visceral reaction to Sherlock’s mere presence. He shouldn’t still feel impelled to touch him, just to verify that he was real, a thing he seldom allowed himself to do.

He knew he should ask about the morgue. What had he learnt, what would he do next, and could he come along? But his throat was constricted with emotion, and his eyes burned with shame.

In the end, he could say nothing. Instead, he nodded to Sherlock, stiffly and coldly, and went to his bedroom, leaving Sherlock standing in the middle of the sitting room all alone, staring after him in bewilderment.
Lestrade called an entire day later to confirm the identity of the victim: thirty-nine-year-old Sam Leonard Jefferies of Hackney, former RAMC combat medical technician. According to his family, he had not adjusted well to civilian life upon his return from Afghanistan. He had worked as a paramedic but was sacked after a short six months after he refused to treat an injured Muslim and refused sensitivity training and other psychological counselling. Having snubbed all offers of help from family and friends, Jefferies was soon unable to pay rent, which landed him on the streets where he had been for more than three years.

‘And the assailant?’ said Sherlock into the phone.

A controlled sigh. ‘Inconclusive. The swimming pool stuff—’

’Sodium hypochlorite.’

‘Yeah, that. It did its job. Any possible DNA evidence leftover from bodily fluids has been destroyed.’

’Contaminated. The PCR analysis will have been rendered unusable.’

‘Right. That. And all hairs and skin particles match that of the victim, not the perp.’

Sherlock grunted, but whether in annoyance or acknowledgement, it was difficult to tell. ‘Cause of death? I’m guessing it was not asphyxiation?’

‘Cerebral haemorrhage. Poor sod sustained a massive blow to the back of the head. Cracked the skull pretty badly. Possibly from hitting the ground, or being driven into it, or the suspect used a large, blunt object. But yeah. That’s what did it.’

‘Brute force. Inelegant. Uninspired.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Nothing. Go on.’

‘That’s all I’ve got at the moment—’

‘Yes. Fine.’

‘You and John should—’

‘Ms Riley. Did you crack her?’

A sigh from the other end of the phone.

‘Thought not.’

‘Sherlock—’

Sherlock ended the call and looked out the window. Though still mid-afternoon, there was less than an hour of January daylight left in the sky. ‘The police,’ he said with disdain, ‘are being as useless as ever. I need to see the crime scene for myself. John, I think it’s time we . . .’

His mind was already seven steps ahead of his tongue, calculating how long it would take to get to Lower Clapton and how many minutes he’d have to look around before the sun disappeared entirely. He had entirely skipped over the part where he ascertained whether John was even in the room before beginning to speak. As it turned out, he was not, and Sherlock was talking to himself. That hadn’t happened in . . . years.

Stepping out onto the landing, he shouted up the stairs. ‘John!’

A moment later, the bedroom door whined opened and John shuffled to the top of the stair, his hand on the wall in lieu of the cane. There were no signs that he had been sleeping: his eyes were bright and alert, his hair flat, clothing unrumpled, feet slippered. But then, what else might he have been doing? John’s room was sparsely furnished—a seldom-used bed, a headboard that served also as a bedside table and bookshelf (bare), a four-drawer dresser, and a desk—and he kept little else besides clothing and shoes up there. His laptop and medical books were all in the sitting room. From what Sherlock could ascertain, John had been doing nothing at all in his room. Just thinking.

About what?

‘Well?’ asked John.

Sherlock realised he’d been standing mute at the foot of the stair while his thoughts had taken a detour from their original purpose. That distraction would have to wait.

‘I’m going to the crime scene while it’s still light. Coming?’ He didn’t dare to hope and kept his tone neutral.

‘Does Lestrade know you’re doing this?’

‘No.’

They held one another’s stares for another long breath.
'Let me get my shoes.'

***

The cab ride to Lower Clapton from Baker Street took twenty-six minutes. During the drive, Sherlock filled John in on Mr Jefferies and what little he had learnt at Bart’s and from Lestrade, who, according to Sherlock, was being more unreasonable than usual of late. Meanwhile, John listened intently, watching the driver warily through the rear-view mirror, one hand poised near the door handle, the other squeezing the grip of his cane like a stress toy. Sherlock was pretty sure John had memorised the cab number before climbing inside, which, strictly speaking, hadn’t been necessary. Sherlock had taken note himself.

‘What does it mean?’ asked John when he was finished. ‘All these homeless men. Not only Jefferies and Hugh Freemont, but Pete and Lex, too.’ Sherlock noted that he omitted Darren Hirsch but drew no attention to that.

‘I don’t know. Nor do I yet know what to make of the pattern of military history—the two overlap, though not perfectly. Freemont didn’t have any military history; instead, he was the victim of two very unclever moles from the Yard. Not part of Moran’s plot, just a consequence of it. Vander Maten, well, he was neither homeless nor military. It would seem . . .’ He let the thought play out in his head first, to see if he was right.

‘What?’

‘Think about it, John. The Slash Man went after the homeless. But each man who was a former soldier—whether victim or perpetrator—was ostensibly selected by Sebastian Moran himself. His three henchmen, including the Slash Man, all had military history in addition to being displaced, that is, homeless. Everett Stubbins, too, was a military man, wasn’t he, before he became a policeman. And, of course, there’s you.’

‘I think he had a rather different reason for going after me,’ said John tensely.

Sherlock nodded, though a little dismissively. ‘Until the pattern becomes clearer, I’ll not rule out any data points. Maybe Jefferies’ combat service is relevant, maybe not. If it is, then it seems highly probable that this is not merely the work of the Slash Man, but that Darren Hirsch is still in the employ of one Sebas—’

‘Stop saying the name,’ John said quietly. But he cleared his throat to hide his discomfort and urged the conversation onward so as to not give Sherlock a chance to respond to it. ‘So you think Jefferies was . . . selected . . . by him . . . but Daz is the one who did the deed?’

‘Maybe. Or Darren Hirsch’s . . . employer may have had a direct hand in the murder or in the . . . assault.’ He was now picking his words more carefully. ‘Or both. He’s certainly capable of both. As you know.’

‘Yes.’ John cleared his throat again and paid extra attention to the cars zipping by on his right.

‘Though, as I understand’—here he treaded very carefully indeed—‘the Slash Man was the primary offender when it came to . . .’

‘Mm.’ John offered only a grunt to verify Sherlock’s supposition.

Sherlock switched tracks. The analytical side of him needed more information on that point; the part of him that was more sensitive to John’s trauma insisted he not press it. ‘But. Like I said. I didn’t get much off the body. Hopefully, the crime scene will give us more.’

‘What does it mean?’ asked John when he was finished. ‘All these homeless men. Not only Jefferies and Hugh Freemont, but Pete and Lex, too.’ Sherlock noted that he omitted Darren Hirsch but drew no attention to that.

‘Hardly a concern. A setting sun—you’ll forgive me the pun—casts evidence in a different light. What Lestrade couldn’t see at midday may very well be revealed to us.’

They arrived in Lower Clapton with barely twenty minutes left of daylight. The sky was a darkening yellow streaked with purple from the partly overcast sky, and the buildings cast long shadows in the narrow street where Sherlock directed the cabbie to drop them off, making it seem as though night had already fallen.

‘Come, John, we have to hurry,’ he said, checking his watch.

He had already cobbled together enough information from Lestrade, Molly, the victim, and the reports in the paper to have deduced the exact location where the body had been found. Down the street and to the north lay a stretch of lawn leading to a park barely large enough to give even a small dog a decent walk. Large trees and bushes had hidden the body from passing vehicles and most passers-by who skirted the park on the perimeter, but otherwise it had been in plain sight of the path cutting through the heart of the park. Sherlock hurried there now. John laboured to keep up, a few steps behind. Sherlock could hear him huffing, and if they weren’t rapidly losing daylight, he’d slow; but John wasn’t complaining or insisting they take things at a slower pace, so he pressed them onward.

They reached the park and crossed to the stretch of grass where Mr Jefferies had been found. Sherlock turned in place, eyes raking the frozen blades, darting to trees and bushes. He dug out his phone and began snapping photo after photo, in case the dark overwhelmed them too quickly. They could always return in the morning, but already he was piqued that he stood there a day too late. Who knew what evidence would be utterly destroyed given another ten hours or more?

‘You’re sure this is where they dumped him?’ John asked, shivering a little in the cold, his breath rising as fog. He was also turning in place, more slowly. Sherlock noticed the slight crease in John’s coat; he had brought his gun.

‘Of course, I’m sure,’ he said. ‘What do you make of it, John?’ Then he registered what John had
said. ‘Wait. Dumped. Why did you say dumped?’

John looked suddenly doubtful of himself. ‘Molly said he’d been dead almost twelve hours, didn’t she?’

‘Yes.’

‘But he was found at noon.’

‘Yes.’

John nodded to the path. ‘Not a soul in the park all morning?’

‘Yes. Yes, of course. Sam Jefferies wasn’t killed here at all. They murdered him somewhere else, held the body for approximately twelve hours, and then left it here for someone to find. The questions, then: When did they snatch him?’

‘And where?’

‘And why Sam Jefferies? And why wait twelve hours to dump the body in the middle of the day when they could have more easily disposed of him at night?’

‘But no one saw him being dumped,’ said John. ‘You’d think that somebody would have noticed a dead man being dragged to the middle of a park. Bodies don’t just fall out of the sky.’

‘No. No, they don’t . . .’ Sherlock slowly turned his head skyward. ‘But there’s not a lot of sky up there to fall from.’

The air above them was crisscrossed with the long, bare arms of a horse chestnut tree. While Sherlock and John stood in the branches’ mottled shadow, the setting sun struck something high above their heads, illuminating it by contrast: something white against the dark brown bark.

‘John, do you see that?’

‘What is that? A shoe?’

‘My guess—a slow, unstoppable smile began to spread and enliven his face—‘is a white trainer.’ Instantly, he began yanking at the fingers of his gloves, and he pushed his mobile into John’s hands. ‘Hold this.’ He shoved the gloves into the pockets of his Belstaff coat.

‘You’re going to climb? Those branches are ten metres up!’

‘Nine. And we need that shoe. I’m tall, John, but I’m not that tall. Climbing seems to be the best solution.’

‘We can, I don’t know, throw things at it.’

‘There may be more up there to see than just a shoe.’

He proceeded to the base of the tree, walked around the trunk to get the measure of it and chart a path, then placed his bare hands on the cold bark. He gripped a lower branch and set his foot on a knot, hoisting himself up to the first branch, and began to climb.

‘I expect I’m not the first,’ he called out as he went. ‘This tree is quite suitable for climbing.’

‘You look like an overgrown child.’

Sherlock smiled. ‘What do you think, John? Why is there a shoe in the tree?’

‘Someone could have tossed it there.’

‘Left hand here, right foot there. ‘Maybe. Or . . . ?’ he prompted.

‘Or? Or, I don’t know. . . left it there?’

‘Getting warmer.’ Sherlock pulled himself upright onto a lower branch and, cat-like, worked his way around and up the trunk like it was a twisted ladder until he stood on the same branch as the shoe. Using a higher branch for balance, he sidestepped his way closer.

‘Keep talking, would you?’

He noted, to his own surprise, the controlled note of distress in John’s voice, and his eyes fell to the earth to see John shifting his weight in agitation as he stared up at him. Only then did it occur to him how John’s seeing him standing precariously at any sort of height might be upsetting. It was getting darker, more difficult to see each other clearly, but evidently his voice dispelled some of that distance. So he kept talking.

‘Yes, definitely a trainer,’ he said, as much to work through the evidence as to distract John from his anxiety. ‘And without laces.’

‘What?’ John was having trouble hearing him.

He raised his voice. ‘No shoelace!’

‘It was used to tie the man’s hands.’

‘Indeed. And its alternate use is exactly why this shoe is now in this tree.’

John didn’t reply straight away, and Sherlock waited while he puzzled through it on his own first. He lowered himself to straddle the branch and leant close to examine something else: a line of scored bark, as though from chafing.
At last, John answered. ‘You mean, it came off Jefferies’ foot . . . while he was still in the tree?’

‘Precisely?’

‘Fell off?’

‘Hardly.’

‘He took it off?’

‘Oh no. He was dead. Quite dead.’

‘Then . . . ?’

‘This branch forks like a Y, but the diverging branches are still relatively close together, and the trainer is tucked at the angle where the two branches meet. Also—’ he bounced a little on the branch to show its resilience—‘the branch is sturdy enough to hold the weight of a grown man. Two grown men. Jefferies and one other.’

‘You’re not saying he was killed in the tree!’

Sherlock chuckled. ‘That would be a feat. No, he was dead when he got here. Already assaulted, hands already bound. There are score marks in the wood just here, from a rope, I’d wager. He was hoisted into the tree.’

‘You mean, like a lynching?’

‘The bruising on his neck indicated that he was dead before he was strangled.’ As he spoke, Sherlock unwedged the shoe from the tree and turned it over and over in his hands, examining it as well as he could in the quickening dim. ‘Mr Jefferies did die in this park, John, as the sodium hypochlorite would suggest. They found the bottle in those bushes, and his wounds were treated with it after his assault but before his death. But he was also dumped, as you so rightly put it, twelve hours later. His attacker—or attackers, as must be the case—grabbed him, beat him, bound his hands with his own shoelace, raped him, and used the sodium hypochlorite to destroy the evidence. Then they swung a rope around this branch, fixed one end to Mr Jefferies, and hauled him up here. One of them must have climbed the tree, same as I did, to pull him onto the branch, and to keep him from falling off, he was balanced between these two branches at the fork. The gap is narrow, but not narrow enough to preclude him from eventually slipping through. Given enough time and a strong enough wind, it was inevitable.’

He leant forward to see a short, jagged twig jutting out from the side of the thicker branch. Its tip looked to have been broken off and was red with what he supposed was blood. That accounted for the scratch mark that was neither fingernail nor knife.

Sherlock continued. ‘When he slips, at midday, his foot gets caught here at the joint, twists and breaks the ankle. There was no indication of swelling because he was already long dead. But without the lace, the shoe is loose and the foot slips through. Mr Jefferies falls.’

‘But why haul him into a tree?’ John called.

‘Haven’t the faintest. Seems an unnecessary gimmick. Someone was bound to lift his or her head to see a body in a tree, even if the police insist on practicing the art of short-sightedness. John, catch.’ He tossed the shoe into the air; it arched, and John caught it in an outstretched hand.

‘Coming down now, yeah?’ John asked, working to control his tone so as not to sound anxious.

But Sherlock heard it anyway.

‘Coming down,’ he agreed. He stood, grabbed hold of the higher branch, and began footing his way back to the trunk. Up this high, the remaining light from the set sun illuminated his path just enough for him to see by, though everything below him was dark.

‘Sherlock.’

‘On my way.’

‘Sherlock.’

Casting his gaze down once again, he saw his mobile in John’s hand, illuminated and throwing the scars of John’s face into sharp relief.

‘What is it?’

‘Text.’

‘From whom?’

John’s head came up, away from the artificial glow, and his expression was lost in the shadow of the tree. ‘From me.’

Sherlock swung himself down onto a lower branch, impatiently climbing downward in the dark, trusting his memory, not his vision, to find the next foothold, knot, or limb. Nearer the ground, he jumped and landed lightly on his feet.

‘What do you mean, “from you”?’ he asked, drawing nearer.

‘My number. It’s my number, Sherlock, my old one.’ His voice was an exercise in control, but it was a thin lining sealing in the dread.

‘Did you open it?’

In answer, John just handed him the mobile with the awaiting unread text. The screen displayed a
series of digits, the number of John’s lost phone. He hit the screen, opened the text message, and read four small words:

_The cradle will fall._

Immediately, Sherlock looked around, casting his eyes to the shadows of bushes, to the path, and further to the street where headlights rolled by unassumingly.

‘He knows we’re here,’ he said under his breath.

John breathed loudly through his nose, which Sherlock recognised as an effort to calm himself. ‘Are we done here?’ he asked softly. He was shifting his weight in agitation again, and Sherlock could see he was especially relying on the cane now. His leg must have been hurting him quite a lot.

He hesitated. Whoever had sent the text knew they were at the crime scene, they must. They knew he had found the shoe. Even now, there might have been eyes on them. How could he not pursue that? Track these people out, ferret them out, make them pay—?

John’s knuckles were bloodless around the grip of his cane.

‘We’re done.’ He dragged his eyes away from the shadows and to the shoe still in John’s hand. ‘I need to take a look at that back at the flat before I give it up tomorrow.’

‘Give it up?’

‘My gift to Lestrade.’

‘Your bargaining chip, you mean.’

Sherlock couldn’t help but smirk at John’s characteristic incisiveness. It was too dark, however, to see whether John smiled in return. They turned in unison and headed back the way they had come, Sherlock casting his eyes to the shadows, searching, but he saw nothing. He dropped the phone back into his pocket, turning the text over and over again in his head.
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Though he hadn’t been positive of Sebastian Moran’s involvement in the death of Sam Jefferies before, he was damn sure now.

They didn’t speak in the cab on the way back to the flat beyond giving the street address. John’s momentary return to talkativeness had dissipated once again at the reception of the cryptic text from his old phone, and he retraced inside his own head. Sherlock did the same. There was much to think about.

Back on Baker Street, Sherlock took the shoe into his makeshift kitchen laboratory to study it, taking particular satisfaction in dismantling the bloody thing simply because it was evidence Lestrade would rather have unhandled and intact. It wasn’t the first time he’d disassembled a shoe in that kitchen, nor the first time he’d held back evidence. He had no good reason to pull it to pieces, other than curiosity (and spite), and didn’t expect to find anything beyond its rather predictable history as a homeless man’s trainer . . . but one never knew.

Around seven, Mrs Hudson showed up with a dinner of shepherd’s pie, which he declined, leaving her and John to themselves while he slid particulates from insole, midsole, and toe box onto slides and under his microscope. John must not have eaten much, because she ended up putting the greater portion of it in the fridge and reminding Sherlock to eat it before the meat turned. The telly came on afterwards, and Sherlock deliberately tuned it out. Sometime after that, she must have left, because the next time he re-engaged awareness of his surroundings, the flat was still and noiseless. He glanced at the clock on his mobile: 22:25. Perhaps that was enough for one night.

He stood, stretched his back and neck, and walked into the sitting room, prepared to summarise his findings to John (which amounted only to more traces of sodium hypochlorite), only to discover that John had fallen asleep already on the sofa, sitting upright. His head was slumped back against the cushions and faced the door. He looked wan and spent, as if sleep had taken him suddenly, so suddenly he hadn’t even had time to consider removing his shoes or lying down properly. His laptop had slid halfway off his lap, and the screen had gone dark.

Briefly, Sherlock considered waking him so he could change and settle down properly, but John’s breaths were coming long and deep, and Sherlock couldn’t bring himself to disrupt this repose. He thought, instead, that he should just leave him as he was. Surely he wouldn’t spend the whole night upright. It wasn’t so terribly late, after all, and chances were he would eventually wake on his own, work the foreseeable kink out of his neck, and ready himself for bed like he did every night. In the end, however, Sherlock couldn’t leave him like that. So he knelt down, carefully unplaced John’s shoes, and eased them off his feet, watching John’s face for any signs of waking or discomfort, but he saw none. Setting the shoes aside, he removed the laptop from his leg and placed it on the coffee table. He situated the pillow (which John kept on the floor during the day) against the armrest. Then he took John’s shoulders and gently guided him down onto his preferred side. John grunted, but only a little, and his brow furrowed; but as his head settled into the pillow, he curled his arms into himself and stretched out his legs. Finally, Sherlock opened a heavy woven blanket and spread it over him, letting the toes of his socks stick out, as was John’s new custom.

Turning away from the sofa, Sherlock flicked off the nearby lamp. With the darkening room, however, he noticed that, when setting it aside, he had nudged John’s laptop awake, and the monitor glowed. He quickly angled it away from John’s face and was on the verge of closing the screen when the open web page caught his attention, an article in The Sun, penned—predictably—by Kitty Riley: ‘Public calls for Richard Brook’s exhumation’:

**Sussex – The January 2 statement from New Scotland Yard which exonerated Mr Sherlock Holmes, London, of any wrongdoing in the death of Mr Richard Brook, Sussex, has resulted in a public outcry, not only in London but in Sussex as well, where Brook’s parents, Roger and JoAnna Brook, have been forced to relive their son’s tragic death.**

‘Three years ago, I buried my only son,’ says Mrs Brook. ‘Today, they’re telling me that it may not be my boy in the ground.’

Mr Brook adds, ‘In all this time, the only comfort I’ve found is knowing that the man who put a bullet in my son’s brain cracked his skull on the pavement and died. But it comes out that Sherlock Holmes is alive, and now I don’t even have that.’

The Brooks are horrified to learn that Holmes denies ever having met their son and insists, instead, that the man he killed on the roof of St Bartholomew’s Hospital was a different person entirely. When asked whether they would give permission to exhume Richard’s body, Mr Brook had some very choice words:

‘I already identified his body once. I don’t need a sodding scientist running a DNA test to tell me that’s my son.’

‘I hope everyone will just let my Richard rest in peace,’ adds Mrs Brook. ‘And I hope to God that Mr Holmes will be brought to justice. He should be made to pay for his horrendous crimes.’

For now, the public cry to exhume Richard Brook goes unanswered, and the Yard is taking no action to justify its problematic support of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes remains a free man, a suspect in the eye of the public, but a perilous blind spot to the Metropolitan Police.

Sherlock finished the article, scowling. Just more of Kitty Riley’s shoddy journalism at work. But as he went to click the window shut, he saw that there were several more tabs open, for The Guardian, The Daily Mail, The Independent, The Daily Telegraph. Story after story about him, iterations of Kitty’s work, and none of them favourable. Why was John reading this drivel?
He closed the laptop with a decisive snap, but John didn’t even stir. Feeling suddenly weary himself, he retired to his own room and, without bothering to ready for bed, lay down.

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But he couldn’t sleep. There was too much to think about. So he lay there, blanket pulled up to his middle and his interlaced fingers resting atop it while he stared up at the black ceiling, waiting for the night to pass. Soon, he was lost in a labyrinth of thought where everywhere he turned he encountered a dead end. Frustrated, he retraced his steps, explored new avenues, allowed for more creative turns, and sought out untested paths, only to meet another wall or impasse.

So lost was he within this tortuous labyrinth that he didn’t even notice when John came into the room until the door slammed closed behind him.

Sherlock bolted upright and twisted his head so quickly he cricked his neck. All he could see was the dark outline of John’s figure, leaning against the door.

‘John?’

But all he heard was panting: short, rapid puffs of air, inhaled, exhaled. Sherlock reached across the bed to the lamp on the nightstand. When the bulb burst into light, he winced against it, but John didn’t move at all. He stood with his back against the door and his head crooked, as though listening for noises from the front of the flat, and his face shone with sweat. In both hands, he held his SIG. It was pointed at the floor but ready to be engaged.

‘John, what—?’

‘We’ve been breached. They knew we were here, and they’re coming.’

Sherlock must have been more tired than he thought: John’s words were making no sense to him. He rubbed his eyes, trying to adjust to the light and clear his brain. He listened for any sound beyond the door, but the flat seemed still as death.

‘Who’s coming?’ he asked.

‘The defences won’t hold. Take them out the back. I’ll cover you.’

Sherlock slowly pulled back the covers and sat on the edge of the mattress. He leant forward, studying John carefully. His stance was military, his shoulders square, his hold on the gun certain and familiar. But his eyes were glazed over, unfocused. He was . . . asleep.

This was new.

And Sherlock wasn’t entirely sure how to handle it.

John’s breath came in uneven gasps, as though he’d just run a mile. ‘The line was supposed to hold. It didn’t hold. It didn’t hold. Someone ratted us out. We’ve been breached.’

‘John . . .’

‘Shh! They’ll hear! Quickly now, move, move, out the back. It isn’t safe here.’

‘You’re safe, John.’

But unlike usual, his words failed to penetrate John’s subconscious mind. Suddenly, John dropped to his knees and covered his head with both arms, pointing the pistol at the ceiling. He turned his head and spit, as though to clear his mouth of dust and falling debris from an explosion that had just rocked the air above and the earth below. Sherlock was on his feet now, but he hesitated. If John mistook him for an enemy, he would shoot. Even at this distance, he could that the safety was off.

John cried out, ‘Fall back! Fall back!’ As though in response to his own command, John sprang back up, ready to sprint away; but when all his weight fell on his bad leg, the sudden movement reignited the pain in his leg. Sherlock saw a spasm run through it like a tree branch shivering in the wind.

John collapsed to the ground again, face twisting in agony. ‘I’m shot!’ he sobbed. A trembling hand reached for the imaginary wound.

‘John, you’re dreaming!’

The shout, not the words, entered John’s dream; he rolled himself onto his back, lifted his head, and aimed the gun at the closed door. Though his leg continued to quiver from the pain, his hands were steady around the gun, waiting to take the shot at the first sign of intrusion.

With great prudence bordering on trepidation, Sherlock repositioned himself behind John, away from the possible line of fire. His mind sped through what appeared to be the facts: John thought he was a soldier again; he was dreaming that he was back in Afghanistan, on the battlefield; and he’d just been wounded in action. He wasn’t responding to his given name. Perhaps he would respond to something else.

‘Captain Watson.’

John’s head twitched slightly. ‘Sir!’ he answered.

And just like that, he was in.

Infusing his voice with as much confidence as he could, Sherlock endeavoured to play the part. ‘The enemy is retreating.’ He winced at his own bad dialogue.
The defences have held. The danger is over.’

John nodded his understanding, but his arms didn’t slacken. Sherlock could see a bead of sweat slide down his shiny face.

‘Captain. Disengage your weapon.’

With great effort, John sat upright. He lowered the pistol and slid the safety on. Forestalling his sense of relief, Sherlock took a tentative step closer, reached down, and lifted the gun from John’s hands. But John made no move to retain it. Exhaling, Sherlock placed the gun on the bed and crouched down again at John’s side, taking John’s arm. ‘On your feet,’ he ordered gruffly.

He helped John rise. John swayed and fell into him.

‘Sir, I’m shot.’ His voice quavered, his hands trembled.

‘It barely grazed you,’ said Sherlock, assuring him. ‘Superficial wound. Like a scratch.’

‘The blood—’

‘It’s already stopping. Look at it, do you see?’

John’s head dropped to examine his leg and to see exactly what Sherlock told him to see. He nodded. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘We’ll get you cleaned up in no time. Now. Can you walk?’

A long moment passed in quiet and stillness. John clung to the front of Sherlock’s shirt, staring at a spot in the middle of Sherlock’s chest but not really seeing it; Sherlock braced his arms on either side. At last, John nodded again. ‘I can walk.’

When his feet were steady under him, Sherlock served as his cane and walked him out of the room, down the hallway, through the kitchen, and back to the sitting room.

‘Shall I keep watch, sir?’ John asked as Sherlock lowered him onto the sofa he wished didn’t serve as a bed.

‘The war is over, Joh— Captain Watson.’ He grabbed a tissue from a box on the coffee table and began mopping up the shine on John’s forehead and cheeks. He touched his brow with the back of his fingers—warm, from the racing heart, but his pulse was beginning to slow again. John did not respond to any of this; his eyes were half-lidded, and as if in slow motion his shoulders began to sag. ‘That’s it,’ Sherlock said softly. ‘You’re dismissed, captain. You’ve served honourably. Return home to your family.’

As before, he helped John lie down and arranged his limbs comfortably on the sofa. John’s head once again found the pillow, and as he sank into it and Sherlock pulled the blanket over his body for the second time that night, he said, ‘They’re dead, sir.’

Sherlock’s hands froze on John’s shoulder. John’s eyes were closed and he looked perfectly asleep once more. But he was still talking, quietly, as he drifted away.

‘Sherlock and Mary. They’re both dead.’

He didn’t say a word after that, and he didn’t stir for the rest of the night. But Sherlock didn’t go back to his room. He stayed awake in his armchair, watching his friend sleep, listening to him breathe, and thinking how, in some dark part of that troubled mind, a place where wars still raged and John Watson was a fallen soldier, Sherlock was still dead. And in the morning, when he awoke and remembered that such was no longer true, he would also remember that Mary was gone. And unlike Sherlock, she could never come back.
Loopholes

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 7, 2015

‘I am sure I misheard you, detective inspector. Would you care to run that by me again?’

Greg Lestrade had been expecting this sort of a reaction—he had geared up for it, in fact, by running through every possible argument in his head again and again over the last forty-eight hours—but he wasn’t finding this conversation any less uncomfortable. Gregson was a man he respected, who he believed had a favourable opinion of him in return. Only, right now, Lestrade was making himself out to be an absolute dunderhead; the expression on the chief superintendent’s face was proof enough of that.

He spread his hands, less so in apology than in acquiescence to the absurdity of his request. ‘I know how ludicrous this sounds.’ That’s right, concede the insanity. Only the sane recognise insanity for what it is. Right? ‘And given the current . . . climate . . . the timing couldn’t seem worse. But sir, I’ve known Sherlock Holmes for years, almost half my career. I’ve worked closely with him before. I know how effective he can be.’

‘That’s hardly the point.’ Gregson managed a half-hearted laugh, his own acknowledgement that he hardly believed he was taking part in so ridiculous a conversation.

‘He’s already involving himself,’ Lestrade reasoned. ‘I couldn’t stop him from investigating if I tried.’

Gregson shrugged. ‘We could always lock him up,’ he jested.

‘What I’m telling you is, he’s good. He’s better than good. He found important evidence regarding Sam Jefferies’ murder in the dark, for Christ’s sake.’

‘Because your team didn’t have the wits enough to look up?’

Lestrade didn’t let that slight derail him. ‘I could use someone like that working at my side, not ten steps behind me about to pass me up.’

‘Listen to yourself, Greg! Because it sounds like you’re saying you can’t do your own job.’

‘That’s not what I’m saying at all. You oversee me; I oversee a team, a team I am instructed to hand-select. I wasn’t meant to do this on my own. It’s in the interest of solving crimes that I assemble the best of the best, and Sherlock—’

‘—doesn’t even work for the Met!’

‘But he’s the best. If I could bring him on, on a contractual basis . . .’

‘The Yard does not consult amateur detectives. That’s all there is to say on the matter. You know that, so why we’re even having this conversation is beyond me.’

‘But we’ve worked with him before. Dozens of times.’

‘Never officially. And it was never transparent what you boys were doing—bringing him in on cases, inviting him to crime scenes, letting him look at corpses and handle evidence . . . If there were an official investigation, do you have any idea the sort of trouble we’d find ourselves in? There’s only so much we could pin on Pitts.’ At that, Gregson laughed again, rubbing his face. ‘Look. I know the bloke’s brilliant. Genius-level brilliant. And I also know he’s not a killer. But those people out there’—he indicated all of London with a jab of his finger—‘they don’t know that, and the reporters would have a field day if they learnt that we had decided to hire him on just days after clearing his name. They’d think we’ve been in bed with the man from the start. It’s impossible, don’t you see that?’

‘I don’t care what they think. And I don’t care about all those other cases. I care about this case. And this case is one that Sherlock Holmes won’t simply walk away from. For his own safety, and for John Watson’s and all the other poor bastards like Sam Jefferies out there, it seems prudent that we take full advantage of every resource at our disposal. And Sherlock is the best damn resource we’ve got.’

Gregson regarded him seriously across the desk, and silence hung between the two men for a long moment. At last, the chief superintendent let out a long breath, closed his eyes, and shook his head no. ‘I’m sorry, Lestrade. I really am. I just can’t make it happen.’

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Lestrade left the chief superintendent’s office in defeat. Being honest with himself, he hadn’t expected things to go any differently. Luke Gregson was no Tony Pitts, but he could be just as hard-nosed. All the same, Lestrade was kidding himself if he thought he would have given a different answer had he been the man behind the desk and some bumbling excuse of a detective had come begging to consult with a man formerly suspected of homicide, however wrongly.

On the one hand, he was relieved. At least he wouldn’t have to explain to Donovan why it was that Sherlock Holmes was just over there, crouched over a dead body with a magnifying glass enlarging the smile on his face. But he was more greatly disappointed. Not only would he have had far greater confidence in apprehending the sadistic bastards whose sick game of torture continued, but he was also looking forward to the day when he could show up on Sherlock and John’s doorstep with good news, rather than having another tête-à-tête devolve into a shouting match.

He was messing things up. He knew it. He was on Sherlock’s side, on John’s side, but he wasn’t doing a whole hell of a lot to prove it.
Unable to stand another second inside NSY, he grabbed his coat from his office and fled. Though there was work yet to do, forms to fill and papers to file, nothing demanded his immediate attention. He was going to see Molly.

But two steps out the front doors, his mobile sounded.

‘I see you’ve left the Yard,’ said Mycroft Holmes.

‘You know, I’m getting a little weary of you knowing my every minor move.’

‘Nonsense. I know only the major ones.’

‘If this is another assignment, I’m telling you, Mycroft, I’m full up at the moment . . .’

‘Not an assignment, Greg, I have news to relate.’

‘Good or bad?’

There was a pause. ‘That depends entirely on who’s asking. From my perspective, good. From yours, bad. Sherlock may very well agree with you, and John will most likely agree with me.’

Lestrade rolled his eyes; let the CCTVs pick up on that. ‘Well?’ He reached his car, hit the unlock button on his keychain, and slipped inside.

‘Sebastian Moran had no hand in Mr Jefferies’ murder.’

His hand stilled on the key in the ignition. ‘What? How do you know?’

‘Allow me to amend: no direct hand. He wasn’t there on the night of the murder. Someone else assisted Hirsch in the homicide—if Sherlock is to be believed that two men were involved.’

‘I wouldn’t doubt it.’ He twisted the key, and the engine roared to life. He cranked the heat to the right and waited for the car to warm properly. ‘Okay, I’ll bite. How do you know this? If Moran wasn’t there, where was he?’

‘He’s been spotted.’

‘Where?’

‘Baranavichy.’

Lestrade thought a moment, and Mycroft let him. Then it slid into place. ‘Belarus. Sherlock passed through there three years ago.’

‘October 2011, to be precise. If our recreated timeline is accurate.’

He was remembering more of the details. ‘He anonymously exposed the major players in a human trafficking crime ring, part of Moriarty’s network.’

‘And seven men went to prison. I’ll give you seven guesses, inspector, regarding which Belarusian prisoners just received early parole.’

‘Son of a bitch.’

‘Eloquently put.’

‘So this is what you call good news, is it?’

‘Inasmuch as John’s tormentor is twelve hundred miles away, yes. What do you call it?’

‘I want to put the bastard behind bars, and that’s a little difficult when the maniac is twelve-hundred miles out of my jurisdiction. We need him here. Neither Sherlock nor I would let him get anywhere near John.’

‘Nevertheless, I’m sure John will sleep just a little easier. He’s eluded us again, the slippery devil, but my people are working on apprehending him. So for now, you can focus your attention on whom Sherlock so colourfully calls the Slash Man.’

‘He didn’t come up with it.’ The car was getting comfortably warm, and he was eager to be on his way. ‘Anything else?’

‘Just pass it along. Though, as ever, no need to mention where it comes from.’

Lestrade shook his head in exasperation. ‘When’s the last time you actually saw Sherlock for yourself?’

‘I paid him a visit day after Christmas. There was, of course, no mention of the holiday. I’m sure he and John did nothing by way of celebration. I didn’t stay long.’

‘You’re really taking full advantage of his being alive again, aren’t you,’ said Lestrade sarcastically.

Mycroft’s deflection was swift. ‘Off to see the lady love, are you?’

Lestrade hung up.

***

He found her running forensics tests in the lab, bedecked in white lab coat, teal latex gloves, and oversized goggles. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, the loose strands secured with hairgrips lining her head like a crown. When she saw him, her face lit up with a smile.
‘Wasn’t expecting to see you,’ she said, peeling off the gloves. She seemed to have forgotten about the goggles, but he liked the way they sectioned off her eyes. She had such large, brown eyes.

As they crossed the room to each other, he had the impulse to offer her a hello kiss, but perhaps that was too familiar, too soon? What was the proper order of these things? What if she ducked? Swatted him away? God, he’d not dated anyone in ages. A man his age shouldn’t have to play this game anymore.

At the last second, the risk seemed too much, and he swerved straight to the question: ‘Any chance of getting away for a bit?’

They left Bart’s, and Lestrade directed them north, aiming for the Three Compasses on the other side of Smithfield Market. It was cold, but they walked slowly, side by side, gloved hands buried deep in coat pockets and taking the long way around. She didn’t ask why he had popped over but seemed only happy that he had. Soon, they were speaking lightly of London in the summer and what they would each do if they had a week free from obligations and a warmer sun and a kinder city. Lestrade learnt that Molly had never been to a show on the West End despite a lifelong dream of going, and Lestrade mentioned that he had never been on the London Eye because it had always seemed too ‘touristy’.

‘Sounds like two failings that ought to be rectified,’ she commented, grinning sideways at him.

Not once during the entire walk—he was already lamenting not having chosen a more distant destination as soon as the Three Compasses came into view—did he mention a case he was working; not once did she talk about cadavers. Not once did either of them bring up Sherlock Holmes. It was as though, for a single but ephemeral moment, they didn’t exist in a world of crime but stood apart from such heinous goings-on, as though they were two normal people, common Londoners, enjoying a normal, grey, but carefree London afternoon together.

Having arrived during the dead hours, the pub was nearly empty. They sat at a square table by the window and ordered two Bailey’s lattes. Molly continued to talk animatedly about her rows with her new landlord (regarding a faulty doorbell, the unreliable hot water, and her downstairs neighbours playing hip-hop music at three in the morning), and Lestrade would have felt guilty, having set her up in the place, except that she smiled through each story and reached each punch line with a laugh. He had an almost irrepressible urge to reach across the table and take her hand, but unaccountable shyness forestalled him.

It made no sense to him, this reticence. Not really. Molly would not withdraw her hand—he was sure she wouldn’t. In fact, he was fairly confident she would be delighted at the gesture. So he couldn’t say what was stopping him. He had been so much bolder as a younger man. He’d certainly been bold with Angela. Probably too bold there. They had rushed into things too quickly, marriage included, and he crashed and burned like a hijacked aeroplane (her metaphor, not his). Why they hadn’t walked away from that wreckage years earlier than they did still perplexed him, and when they finally did, he discovered (to his shame) that he was afraid of fire, afraid of getting burned again. And Molly—she burned so brightly. He was mesmerised, couldn’t look away . . . but couldn’t touch.

‘In fact,’ she said, and he shook his head slightly to tune back into the conversation. He grinned guiltily, realising he hadn’t caught a word from the last two minutes; he’d just been enjoying listening to her voice. But she was now looking a little uncomfortable. She hesitated, took a drink from the mug, and licked the foam from her upper lip.

‘In fact what?’ he prompted.

‘I was going to call you later today anyway. Something that happened this morning that I thought you should know. You and Sherlock.’

And the streak was broken.

‘All right,’ he said, a touch wary.

‘I had a visitor,’ she said.

‘Who?’

‘I’ve forgotten her name; I’m afraid. But she was a reporter, she said.’

Lestrade couldn’t stop the grimace. ‘Kitty Riley?’ he said between gritted teeth.

‘Yes, that was it.’

‘Damn that woman. What did she say to you? What did she want?’

‘Just to ask me some questions, she said. At first it didn’t seem like a very big deal, you know? How long had I worked at Bart’s, do I often work alone, that sort of thing. I couldn’t figure out why she was there, at first, why she was talking to me. But then she asked how long I’d known Sherlock. That’s when I realised I probably shouldn’t be saying anything at all. The papers haven’t been very kind.’

Lestrade leant eagerly into the table. ‘What all did she say, Molly? Every word you can remember.’

Her eyes went wide. ‘Why? Is she’—her voice dropped to a whisper—‘dangerous?’

‘She knows more than she ought to. And she’s drawing all the wrong conclusions to boot.’ His hope that this would be a case-free, Sherlock-free hour was dashed, but there was no possibility of returning to less dire conversation. ‘Go on, what did she say?’
‘Well, she does seem to know some things she shouldn’t.’

‘Like?’

‘She knows I had been seeing Ji— Rich—I mean, Jim. She knows my signature was on the coroner’s reports for both Sherlock and Richard Brook. She also knows I was working the night you all found John. So she kept asking me about my relationship with Sherlock. When did I first meet him? How well did I know him? Would I say we were close? Did I see John when they brought him to hospital and what was his condition? That sort of thing.’

‘Oh god.’

‘I didn’t answer her questions, Greg. Any of them.’

‘No, no, I’m not saying you did. But she’s digging in the right plots.’

‘What’s she after?’

‘She’s trying to prove that Moriarty wasn’t real and that Sherlock’s a madman. And a dangerous one. She’s not looking for truth—she’s trying to create it. Right now, she’s more a nuisance that a danger, though character assassination is never pretty. If too many people believe her, and enough already do, things could get downright ugly for Sherlock.’

‘Nothing’s ever easy where he’s concerned, is it?’

He laughed despite himself. ‘God forbid his life get too dull.’

‘Exactly. Then where would ours be?’

His lips closed over his teeth as he tried to maintain the smile. Her large eyes lifted and met his, and over nearly drained lattes they held one another’s stare. Lestrade wanted to tell her that Sherlock or no Sherlock, the course of events would very likely have worked out just the same, and he would still find himself sitting across from her in this pub, exactly where he wanted to be. But he wasn’t sure even he believed it. If it hadn’t been for Sherlock’s return, no matter how grim the circumstances . . . He felt guilty feeling that something good had come from it at all, especially when John had lost so much. But he wanted Molly to know that he had no intention of taking her for granted. He parted his lips and was on the cusp of saying this when, to his displeasure, that wretched mobile sounded in his pocket.

‘So sorry,’ he said, digging into his pocket. Her smile stayed frozen on her face even as she turned her head away, looking at the exit. Damn whoever this was, and if it was Sherlock of all people . . . ‘Lestrade,’ he said.

‘Detective, are you in the building?’

It was Gregson.

‘Not at the moment, no.’

‘Well, when you get back, pop into my office, would you?’

‘Yes, sir. I’ll be there soon.’

When he hung up, Molly said, ‘I need to get back to the lab anyway.’

‘I’m—’ he stopped himself from saying sorry; he said sorry far too often to her, it seemed—‘glad I got to spend even half an hour with you. It’s never enough.’

‘It’s never enough,’ she agreed. She stood and began redressing in scarf and gloves. ‘Walk me back?’

‘We’ll take the long way.’

She rocked a little on her heels, happily. ‘And slowly.’

When they stepped outside and met with the frigid air, Molly slipped an arm through his, and within two paces their feet were in sync.

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Two stacks of files were waiting on Gregson’s desk when Lestrade returned. One tall, one short. The chief superintendent held a single sheet of paper, and from a cursory glance, Lestrade could see that it had four columns of writing, some long, some short, all annotated in biro, but he wasn’t especially adept at reading upside down at a glance.

‘I was unhappy with our earlier conversation, detective inspector,’ he said once Lestrade had accepted the invitation to take a seat. ‘So I started reviewing the numbers.’

Lestrade’s brow furrowed in confusion. He hadn’t yet cottoned on to whatever Gregson was talking about, but rather than ask, he waited for enough of the chips to fall.

‘I was unhappy with our earlier conversation, detective inspector,’ he said once Lestrade had accepted the invitation to take a seat. ‘So I started reviewing the numbers.’

Lestrade’s brow furrowed in confusion. He hadn’t yet cottoned on to whatever Gregson was talking about, but rather than ask, he waited for enough of the chips to fall.

‘Were you the first officer ever to use Sherlock Holmes on a case?’

‘Of course, this would still be about Sherlock. He felt a censure coming. ‘I believe I was, yes,’ he said truthfully. Full disclosure then: ‘I used him more than anyone.’

‘When was that? The first time, that is.’

He thought a moment. The first time? He hadn’t exactly called the man up. Instead, Sherlock had phoned the police himself, and when he and his team showed up to the crime scene, they found this peculiar young man—god, he’d been so young then!—standing over the dead body of a
teenage girl. Lestrade had never seen anyone quite like him. He was tall, thin, angular; well-dressed and clean-shaven and yet with an air of poverty; a haughty, almost Victorian sensibility superimposed on a juvenile smarminess; a phlegmatic intelligence with a vampiric edge. Sherlock hadn’t waited two seconds before launching into a cool though rapid-fire explanation as to how it had happened, everything from the murder weapon (a wine bottle) to the colour of the murderer’s cat (calico). Then he finished, face stoc but eyes alight and awaiting their awe and adulation.

After all, he had been so thorough, so detailed, in every particular. So, naturally, they arrested him on the spot.

But it was during the subsequent car ride—Lestrade’s then-partner in the driver’s seat and Sherlock Holmes handcuffed in the back—that Lestrade began to have his doubts about this strange suspect, right about the time that Sherlock deduced his childhood overbite, morning dental appointment, and most recent failed attempt to quit smoking. He had been irritated as hell, but impressed. So he had pulled the strings he had known to pull at the time, and they held off booking him, kept him for questioning, and ultimately followed his leads, which led to the arrest—and ultimately the conviction—of the maths teacher.

Perhaps the first dozen times, Lestrade had shown up to a crime scene only to find that this Sherlock Holmes had beaten him there. But the first time Lestrade had called him?

‘Two thousand and . . . four, I think. Ten, eleven years ago, I guess.’

‘Yes, that’s what I thought.’

‘Sir, what is this about?’

‘Between 2004 and 2010, the Yard’s homicide division—and notably cases headed by you—saw a steady increase in cases solved and a dramatic decrease in cold cases. And during the years 2010 and 2011, those numbers soared.’

Two thousand and ten, Lestrade thought. That’s the year Sherlock met John.

‘These’—Gregson laid a hand on the tall stack of files—‘are all the cases headed by you from January 2010 through June 2011 that were solved, beginning with the Jeff Hope serial murders. An eighteen-month span. These’—he laid his other hand on the considerably shorter stack—‘are the unsolved ones. Do you know how many there are?’ He fanned them out easily. ‘Four. In eighteen months. That’s a hell of a record, even for the best detectives.’

Lestrade ran a hand across the stubble on his chin, remembering. He knew exactly which cases those were. Sherlock had been in Minsk during one, uninterested in another, and genuinely stumped by the other two. Anderson still talked about those two, gleefully.

Gregson sat back in his chair and spread his hands. ‘After June 2011, those numbers drop again. Not abysmal numbers, just nowhere close to what they had been. Above average for a Yarder, sure, but . . . well, you understand?’

Treating the question as merely rhetorical, Lestrade continued to say nothing. Of course he understood. Sherlock was brilliant, and he was not.

‘He’s good, isn’t he?’

Clearing his throat, Lestrade said, ‘Better than good. The best.’

‘Then you see my dilemma.’

Lestrade’s eyes narrowed. No, he didn’t, quite.

‘I can’t just dismiss this kind of a closed-case record. No matter how you slice it, more cases get solved when this Sherlock Holmes is involved, isn’t that right?’

He nodded stiffly, uncertainly. What was Gregson driving at?

‘That’s what you were telling me this morning.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You still want him, then?’

Lestrade controlled his reaction and answered smoothly. ‘I do. Absolutely.’

‘Right.’ Gregson sighed, laughed shortly, and said, ‘Now understand this, Lestrade. Like I said before, I can’t just let a civilian take part in a criminal investigation. Legal matters don’t simply disappear. But there may be some ways to work around it. What if he’s no longer just a civilian?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Put him through the process. We hire him on, good and proper. As a constable. We give him a patrol beat or make him work trafficking for a year or two . . .’

Lestrade’s solid composure was broken; he threw his head back and laughed.

‘No?’

‘You know, I made a similar suggestion, back in the day, when I was first getting to know him.’ He giggled a little more, remembering the look of utter repulsion on the young man’s face at what, to Sherlock, had been the most indecent of proposals. He hadn’t thought of that in a long time, and it made him smile. ‘Believe me. He’d rather fake his own death all over again than become a copper.’

‘Kind of him to condescend to help us, then,’ Gregson said sarcastically, though without offense.
'He likes the brain work."

'Very well. It was just a thought. It seems that the most viable course of action, then, would be contractual work, an official consultant of some sort.' He put up a hand to stop Lestrade from speaking. 'Now, I know what he calls himself. Consulting detective. The trouble is, detective work is our area of expertise. We do not consult on that point. I don’t know the man like you do, so I leave it in your hands to find a reasonable, legal way to bring him onto cases where he can be an asset and not a hindrance."

'Yes, sir.' Lestrade’s heart was pounding with excitement. He would never have had this conversation with Pitts, not if half of Scotland Yard had been murdered and only one man could find whodunit.

'I’m giving you a lot of leeway here, Lestrade. Don’t make me regret doing so.'

'I promise, you won’t.'

Gregson grinned tightly. 'I don’t expect it will be a popular move. Not just with the public, if they get wind of it. Some of the officers around here have very strong opinions regarding Holmes.'

'I’ll handle them, sir. I’ve done it before.' He stood and closed the top button of his suit coat. 'But believe me: this is a good move.'

'I hope so. Oh, and Lestrade.'

Lestrade paused with his hand on the office door.

'Maybe it’s none of my business, but how is it going with Dr Quinton?'

The amicable air between them suddenly cooled. 'Fine,' said Lestrade. 'Good. I expect he’ll deem me cured any day now.'

Gregson did not miss the cynicism. 'You know I can’t have an officer with . . . unresolved issues, distressing issues, performing in a dangerous environment where his judgement might be compromised.'

'I’m not traumatised, sir. I’m not.'

'Well then. If that’s the case, I’m sure Dr Quinton will recommend that you be taken off probationary status any day now, like you said.'

Lestrade gritted his teeth and continued out the door.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 2015

It was not the most elegant solution. But it was a solution.

Lestrade punched his code against the doorbell and was buzzed up seconds later. Once inside their flat, he found Sherlock setting his violin back in its case and heard John laying dishes in the sink; next moment, he came into the sitting room and gave Lestrade a nod by way of greeting.

'John,' Lestrade returned. He was hoping for something of a smile, but John didn’t seem to do that anymore. 'Sherlock.'

'Lovely, you recall our names with perfect clarity,' said Sherlock, dry as ever.

'It’s called a greeting.'

'I notice you have once again brought me a file. How wonderful.'

Lestrade put on his happy face and said, 'It’s not what you think. I’ve got good news.'

'If it’s about Moran being in Belarus, you can save your breath. We already know.'

'Do you?'

Of course they already knew—Lestrade had planted the information within his private database on the Yard’s ‘secure’ network the night before, a database he suspected Sherlock checked regularly. It was how he kept Sherlock informed without revealing the true source of his information. That Sherlock did not ostensibly suspect made Lestrade feel very clever indeed, though the feeling of triumph extended only so far. It was hard to feel triumphant when you had no one to brag to.

But he played along. 'I guess I’ll just skip that part, then.'

'I would hardly call it good news in any case,' Sherlock said.

Lestrade withheld a telling smirk and glanced swiftly at John to see whether Mycroft was right about him as well; John, however, was impossible to read. Instead, he crossed to the sofa and sat, setting the cane aside. He leant forward, elbows on knees, to listen.

'Nor do I,' said Lestrade. 'But that’s not what I was referring to. You told me, Sherlock, to find a way to make it right with the Yard, didn’t you? That is, to make you right with the Yard. Well, I have.' He waved the file in his hand.

For once, Sherlock didn’t have a biting retort. Instead, he looked genuinely curious and reservedly pleased. 'Oh?'

'That’s right.' Lestrade told himself to keep smiling, to keep Sherlock in a good mood. Then he’d see that his solution was . . . sensible. That, and nothing-different-whateoever from what they had done in the past. ‘All you have to do is sign a single line on a simple form. A contract with the Yard. You sign it, and we can bring you in on any case you’re interested in.’
Sherlock’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, much of his good humour already gone. ‘A contract?’

‘Of course. You’re not an officer or employee, so it’s a contractual agreement that simply makes it legal for us to have you at crime scenes. Procedurally, it will be just like it was before. Only, now you’ll have a little laminated card to add some, erm, legitimacy.’

‘Hm.’

He wasn’t buying it. He knew there was a catch. Lestrade waited for the questions.

‘If this is only a simple contract, why did I never sign one before?’

‘Ah. Yes, well. There may be a little bit of a caveat.’

‘Predictable. Very well. Let’s hear it.’

‘Well, Sherlock, in order to be given contractual work with the Yard, you have to be an approved expert in a field useful to an investigation.’

Sherlock’s spine straightened and his eyebrows lowered. ‘I’m a detective,’ he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, hardly worth saying aloud.

Lestrade winced. ‘Not an official detective of the Metropolitan Police, and that’s the only kind Gregson or anyone will go for. Detective work is out. We have to prove you’re an expert in a field in which the Yard doesn’t already have expertise.’

Sherlock now cocked an eyebrow but, mercifully, refrained from offering his opinion on that point. ‘Fine. The science of deduction, then.’

‘Yes, well, it’s not really a recognised field . . .’

‘Chemistry.’

Lestrade was now squirming a little where he stood. The smile was slipping. ‘You’re good, Sherlock. You are. But—he sighed—‘you do not have an advanced degree in chemistry, do you?’ Without that, the Yard won’t recognise you as an expert.’

‘He doesn’t have a degree of any sort,’ said John from his place on the sofa.

‘Waste of time,’ Sherlock said, looking pleased with himself.

It was true—Sherlock had attended only two-and-a-half years of university before becoming fed up with his uninspiring professors, mundane classes, under-intelligent classmates, and so forth. His excuse: uni was thoroughly under-stimulating. So he had dropped out and studied on his own, after his own fashion, never graduating, and never achieving any accreditation of any sort. Three years later, he began solving crimes.

‘Not serving you so well now, though, is it?’ Lestrade couldn’t help saying. Sherlock glared, but in annoyance, nothing worse. ‘Look, it doesn’t matter, because I think I have a way around it.’

‘What way?’ asked Sherlock.

Here it came. ‘Well. John’—he turned to John now—‘we hire you on as a medical consultant. You’re a doctor, and a ruddy good one. And what with your army experience, having served in a medical capacity with real combat fieldwork, you’re unique: I checked, and there’s no one quite like you down at the Yard. You’d be invaluable.’

Something passed across John’s face, an expression Lestrade didn’t have time to name before it was gone. Was that excitement, or apprehension? Not for the first time since coming up with this plan, Lestrade began to doubt including John at all. Not only was he uncertain whether John was in any sort of mental condition to take on solving violent crimes again, but he was also completely unsure whether he would want to. As much as he wanted Sherlock, he half hoped John would simply say no.

But whatever John was thinking, it was concealed behind a carefully constructed mask of indifference. ‘And Sherlock?’ he asked.

He ran his tongue over his teeth and geared himself for the response. ‘We bring him on’—he swallowed the uncomfortable rock lodged in his throat—‘as your assistant.’

A silence fell, each man inserting his own meaning into Sherlock’s pause.
‘He has a point,’ said John to override the awkwardness. ‘We’re not joined at the hip, after all. Would I be able to’—Lestrade could have sworn John was not struggling to keep himself from grinning—‘send him on assignment?’

Sherlock made a sound like a growl and spun on the ball of his foot, striding toward the window. Lestrade couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face now, and he exchanged a look of camaraderie with John that they hadn’t shared in a long time, a look that said, Our genius has the emotional discipline of a toddler. At that, he knew John was on board, and because of that, no matter what fuss he made, Sherlock was sure to follow.

‘Why yes, I dare say that such would be entirely within your purview as his boss.’

‘I’ll sign, then.’

‘Honestly, John,’ said Sherlock petulantly, though he did not turn around.

‘Do you need a pen?’

‘There’s one right here on the desk, I think. Yes, here it is.’

‘I’ve filled out your information already.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome to read the contract in full.’

‘I’m sure it’s in order.’ John scribbled on the dotted line. ‘Sherlock?’

Sherlock whipped back around, snatched the biro from John’s outstretched hand, and bent to sign the damn contract.

‘Intolerable,’ he muttered, slashing ink across the page, right below the name John H Watson.
FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 2015

She stood at the window, the light from the setting sun carving her into a silhouette. John watched as she fingered the curtains—brown-and-gold twill damask—and picked at the imperfections: loose threads, a forgotten pin, uneven stitching.

'I never could get them perfect,' she said. Her voice travelled across the room as though through water. An ocean.

'They look perfect to me,' John said. He unstuck his feet from the floor where his shoes were growing down into the wood, like roots. As he moved toward her, he trailed dirt and left deep scratches in his wake.

She looked over her shoulder, her face still shadowed, but a smile coloured her voice in shades of honey. 'Of course they do, to you, you goon. But then, you never see the cracks in the statue. You never hear the flaws in the music, the dropped notes, dissonant chords. Or, rather, you choose not to.'

He didn’t understand her, and she turned back to the window, her hands on the curtains. She was near enough now to touch, and he reached forward and brushed his hand down her long hair. The strands caught in the dying light and glowed like embers before falling like rain through his spread fingers and upon the floor. She drew the curtains closed to block out the natural light entirely. Only the pale light from the lamps remained. Now, when she turned to him, he could see her clearly: the soft lines around her eyes, the pink hue in her lips, the faded splash of childhood freckles across her nose. But something was wrong: her eyes. They were the wrong colour.

'John,' she said. Still, she smiled, but her eyes sparkled with tears. Slowly, she lifted a hand to his cheek, and he saw that her fingers were freshly severed, every one. She dragged her hand against his cheek in a caress, leaving behind streaks of shining red. He felt her warm blood cool on his hot skin.

'You never told me about him.'

'I . . . I couldn’t.'

'You never told me he was dangerous.'

He tried to take her wrist, but it was like trying to hold a river. 'I didn’t know,' he said in a whisper.

'You never told me that his hands were made of fire. That he destroys everything he touches.'

'I didn’t—'

'You never told me his voice summoned storms.'

'I swear, I never—'

'You knew. Deep down, my love, you knew. You chose not to see the flaws in the diamond, its surface blemishes and deep-down cracks. You were blinded by its brilliance. But you see them now, don’t you? The cracks.'

Behind him, John heard the front door open, groaning like a tree in a gale. He turned his head to look over his shoulder, but Mary caught his jaw with the palm of her bloody hand and kept his eyes fixed on her.

'It’s the tempest,' she said. 'The boughs are breaking.'

Then she kissed him lightly on the lips; he tasted the iron in her blood. But the moment he tried to pull her closer, she pulled back, stepped around him, and started toward the door where stood a dark figure, waiting for her.

'Don’t go, Mary,' he said. 'Please.'

Her feet halted. She looked back over her shoulder and smiled with teeth made of glass. All the warmth was gone, and in its place, ice. 'I am not Mary.'

Mary’s visage crumbled away like dry, falling leaves, and in her place, John saw the Woman. Behind her, stepping out of the shadows, was Moran. He twirled a silver scalpel in his hand, and his eyes were as black as night. As she passed Moran on her way to the door, she kissed him, too, chastely, like spouses, not lovers. Then she crossed the threshold and pulled the door closed behind her, leaving John and Moran alone in the room, a room which had just become a small, cold box constructed of close, steel walls.

Moran smiled. 'Johnny boy.'
clouded his mind. Desperately, he sought the gun lying just out of view beneath the sofa; it was his touchstone, and the moment he felt its cold steel, he knew he was awake—it was always so hot in his dreams. Hot like fired iron.

For a few moments, he knelt on the floor, digging clenched and trembling fists into his stomach in an effort to keep them still but with the opposite effect of rocking his whole body, a body that told him that it needed to break, to cry, but he refused its pleas. Not here, not now. Not while he had his wits about him. He had to be stronger than that.

But there was movement in the flat, coming from the direction of Sherlock’s bedroom. Oh god, had he heard? He’d been doing well with the night terrors, with hiding himself during his weaker moments, and Sherlock didn’t know how much he was still struggling. And that was good. John didn’t want him to. And in any case he was already calming. He didn’t need to be brought back again from the brink. So maybe he could fool him, again. As smoothly as he could, he rolled himself back onto the sofa, grabbed the blanket, and hastily wiped the wet from his eyes, even as Sherlock’s footsteps sounded in the hallway. Then he stilled and feigned sleep.

Next moment, the light in the kitchen flicked on with utter disregard for whoever might be trying to sleep in the adjoining room.

‘John!’

It wasn’t Sherlock’s booming day-time voice (he must have been at least half-sentient of the hour), nor was it the voice he used to pull John from a dream; but it was urgent nonetheless. John opened his eyes in time to see Sherlock bending over the sofa to shake his arm. His face was in startling proximity.

‘Are you awake?’

‘Of course I’m awake,’ John said, rubbing his eyes and sitting up. ‘Impossible to sleep with you knocking about.’

‘Get dressed, then. Lestrade just called. There’s been another one.’

‘Another . . . ?’

‘Murder, John! Lestrade’s sending a car.’

He disappeared back to his bedroom, and John trudged up to his. When he re-entered the sitting room, shirt buttoned to the collar, he found Sherlock fully dressed and shrugging into his coat, alert and agitated as though he had recently downed two or three cups of coffee. Cases had always had that sort of stimulating effect on the man. John, however, was still trying to slow his racing heart. He sank back down onto the sofa to put on his shoes.

‘What time is it?’ he asked while he laced.

‘Half three. First officers are arriving on the scene right about now. The rest are en route, like us.’

‘Lestrade wasn’t kidding about using us, then.’

‘Not remotely.’

He could feel Sherlock’s excitement radiating from the man as if he were a furnace, and standing so close that he loomed. It felt to John as though impatience had assumed a physical form. A flicker of annoyance caused John to pause, which he shouldn’t have. The tremor in his hands reignited. He tried to compensate for this by balling his hands around the laces and giving them a sudden yank. Without looking up, he said, ‘What are you doing?’

‘As your assistant, I took the liberty of fetching your coat.’ Now John glanced up from his lacing, his mouth crooked ever so slightly with amusement to find Sherlock waiting for him with exaggerated patience, John’s coat slung over an arm. When he stood, Sherlock opened the coat, an indication that he intended to help him into it. Indulgingly, John turned and slipped both arms into the sleeves at once.

‘You won’t make a habit of this, I hope,’ said John lightly.

‘Efficiency, John,’ Sherlock said, clapping his hands on John’s shoulders. He then bent over, picked up John’s cane from where it leant against the sofa, and extended it to him with a perfunctory nod.

John took it and followed Sherlock out the door, confident that the most observant man in the world hadn’t noticed anything at all.

***

‘Where is the body?’ Sherlock asked the moment his car door was closed and before Lestrade had even pulled away from the kerb.

‘South London, Borough Market,’ Lestrade answered. He flicked on the flashing red and blue lights, though not the siren. It hardly mattered, though, given the hour. The streets were untrafficked, quiet.

‘A vendor?’ John asked from the backseat.

‘No word yet on who he is.’

‘But you think he’s one of the Slash Man’s,’ said Sherlock.

‘I wouldn’t have called you two up if I didn’t. Initial report says he was found in the same condition as Sam Jefferies. Two kids found him, teenagers, called 999 about thirty-five minutes
Lestrade’s voice seemed to meld into the background, his voice rumbling in harmony with the car’s engine. Sherlock continued to ask questions, Lestrade continued to answer, but to John, it was noise. Just noise. The only words that registered were the echoing syllables: *found in the same condition, same condition.* Half naked, then. Beaten and bloody. The signature claw-like slashing along the sides and hips. Without being aware that he was doing it, John touched his own scars through his clothes, knowing where they began, where they ended, tracing them, the way they curved. He remembered how those nails had felt, how they had dragged through and ripped open skin, each time he struggled to get away. The pain that was mere prelude.

He hadn’t seen the last victim, hadn’t wanted to. Hell, he didn’t want to see this one. But Lestrade needed Sherlock, and Sherlock needed him. And in some twisted way he hadn’t quite worked out for himself yet, he needed this too, needed to prove to everyone—himself not least of all—that he could be useful again.

‘Isn’t that right, John?’ asked Sherlock, turning his head slightly to speak to the back seat.

‘Yes,’ said John, not at all sure what he had just agreed to. He became suddenly aware of his fingertips tracing the scars and pulled both hands away from his sides, shoving them between his knees to trap them for the duration of the drive.

When they arrived, Sherlock was the first out of the car. He was like a hound taken out to hunt after too long cooped up indoors. His face hid his enthusiasm well—as indifferent and unperturbed as ever—but John could see it in his long strides and quick steps as they passed through the dark market, empty but for the debris of plastic sacks, discarded newspapers, and other rubbish left over from the day. Sherlock and Lestrade strode side by side, leaving John to hobble along behind. Lestrade cast occasional looks of guilt and apology over his shoulder; but when he tried to slow and re-establish the pace, being mindful of John’s limp, Sherlock only left him behind and kept talking, forcing Lestrade to pick up again.

John didn’t mind—he really didn’t. He didn’t need coddling.

They soon approached the scene where yellow tape had already been drawn and the other officers were already milling about. Lestrade raised his voice to them: ‘Don’t touch anything!’ He lifted the tape for both Sherlock and John to pass under. ‘Forensics, you’ll have second crack at it. But for now . . .’

He didn’t need to finish. Everyone had already halted what they were doing, though not one of them in a way that could be described as deferential. They knew whom Lestrade had brought with him and that Gregson had actually sanctioned it (suggested it?), and they were all displeased. John felt the heat of their eyes on his face, and when he glanced around, he noticed that their gazes darted back and forth, from Sherlock to him and back again. Of course. They were a spectacle. One, a resurrected being; the other, a recent torture victim, still bearing the evidence in his scarred face and lame leg. Many of them had seen the convent, the state of the kitchen, a place by all rights and laws of nature he should never have left alive. He had no business standing there, like he was. Neither of them did.

John hadn’t anticipated how starkly discomfiting he would find their gaze, and he realised that this was the first time in weeks, going on months, that he had been among so many people at once, and with all their attention on him. The seclusion of the flat had been a comfort, but now, he saw, also a crutch. Suddenly hyperaware of how he must look to them, leaning on his cane with his shoulders hunched against the cold, he felt conspicuous, self-conscious, naked.

*Hurry it up, Sherlock,* he thought, feeling ill. His chest was tight, his stomach upside down.

On the surface, Sherlock appeared to be feeling none of this. If he saw how some officers folded their arms at his arrival, and how others glowered, he gave no sign and proceeded to treat them all like wallpaper. He shut his ears to the pair whispering their disapproval on the edge of the circle, and he paid no mind when Anderson threw a pair of latex gloves on the ground antagonistically like wallpaper. He shut his ears to the pair whispering their disapproval on the edge of the circle, and he paid no mind when Anderson threw a pair of latex gloves on the ground antagonistically and stood, hands akimbo, as though in challenge. The only person he didn’t discount outright was Sgt Donovan: he held out his hand to her, palm up, silently requesting a pair of fresh gloves.

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She couldn’t bring herself to raise her eyes to him, and her jaw was clenched tighter than a wrenched vice. But she handed him the gloves.

‘A little space, thank you,’ he said. However reluctant, they all obliged and stepped away from the body.

And John got his first look at the dead man. He blinked, and he was

suddenly on the ground, frigid, rigid like a new corpse, but with breath like vapour, blood like poison, and a draining heart that went

thump thump

He blinked again, cleared his head. Not on the ground. Standing. And his heart was sprinting, not waning.

The body on the ground was not his own. But it had been brutalised. Illuminated beneath floodlights Lestrade’s team had brought in, it held nothing back. John could see large, dark contusions colouring the bare torso from collarbone to pelvic bone. A red ring of chaffed skin wound round his neck. The dead man’s face was awash in blood, which dyed his fair hair dark red, and John instantly suspected bashed in teeth, a caved in nose, broken jaw and cheekbones. Many of them had seen the convent, the state of the kitchen, a place by all rights and laws of nature he should never have left alive. He had no business standing there, like he was. Neither of them did.

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twisted around his ankles. He wore two shoes, but one was missing its laces, which had been used to bind the wrists. An absurd urge to draw his own together beset him, nearly overcame him. Stifling a whimper in his throat, he determinedly kept his hands apart—one on the cane, the other balled in the pocket of his coat. Both trembled relentlessly; he hoped the quaking could be passed off as a reaction to the cold.

Sherlock crouched down beside the body, snapping on the second glove. He started with the hands, pulling the fingers apart, observing the pads and nails. He examined the shoelace binding the wrists. Pulling out a small magnifying glass, he moved up the arms, to the shoulders, neck, hairline. He lifted eyelids, pulled down the bottom lip, pushed in the skin at the cheek. He didn’t say a word, but John knew he was collecting, sorting, and processing data—he had seen him do it this way a hundred times before.

His eyes were alight: studious and zealous all at once. He moved around the body with utter and envious detachment, as if it were nothing more than a fallen log, just one in a forest of trees marked for the hewing. He might as well have been counting rings, examining lichen, sniffing moss.

Everyone’s eyes—whether scornful or curious—were locked onto his every bird-like movement. Already, John was fading, melding with the shadows.

Sherlock circled the head, worked his way down the other side, and crouched down at the feet. There, with tweezer-like fingers, he reached inside the right pocket of the bunched trousers and pulled out . . . a small, white flower.

“What is that?” Lestrade asked, leaning in. The others inclined their bodies forward as well, unwillingly curious, though they didn’t lift their feet. The flower was crushed, its tiny petals wilted and torn. Sherlock rolled the stem slowly between his forefinger and thumb, looking at it from all angles. He sniffed it. ‘Conium maculatum,’ he said. He lifted his eyes to Lestrade’s. ‘Hemlock. And fresh. Couldn’t have been plucked more than a few hours ago. Local florist or greenhouse. Bag.’

Lestrade signalled to one of his officers to pass Sherlock a plastic bag. The officer grudgingly complied.

He dropped the flower into the bag and returned to the pocket, extracting another flower, then another, then a rose petal.

‘Has a right little garden in there, hasn’t he?’ said Lestrade drily.

‘Hemlock,’ said Anderson, suddenly, pocketing his Blackberry, still aglow. ‘Poisonous, that is. Stem, petals, pistils. Was once used as a method of execution. Could be the bloke was poisoned to death.’

Both Sherlock and Lestrade turned their heads slowly in his direction, regarding him scathingly and with no small trace of irritation.

‘That would account for the bludgeoning, then, eh, Anderson?’ said Lestrade.

‘Spare yourself some dignity by avoiding future Wikipedia recitations,’ said Sherlock. Then, to Lestrade, ‘Head of forensics, did you say?’ Without giving Lestrade a chance to respond, he pulled off the latex gloves. ‘The flowers are a message,’ he said, sitting back on his heels, ‘not a weapon. Run the tox screens—you won’t find any poison in his system. Heroin, yes. But that’s not what killed him.’

‘Heroin?’

‘The signs are obvious. Your Joe Bloggs here was a heroin addict, the habit that cost him his job in the medical field, his family, and ultimately his home. He’s been living on the streets for two years . . . maybe thirty months, given the state of his teeth. Foil under the nails—he used gum wrappers, not a spoon, to prepare the drug. Callouses on the fingertips from burns over the course of months. Inner arm shows scar tissue where he injected. One injection site is red and puckered —fresh—there’s dried blood around the wound, and an indentation in the skin where he created his own tourniquet with a shoelace, his shoelace, before it was used against him to bind his hands. All evidence indicates that he was shooting up shortly before he was attacked. Eyes are still dilated—but of course, he is dead, after all, three hours at most—but also bloodshot. He was high when he died, still in the first twenty-minute rush, or he wouldn’t have been able to fight as ferociously as he did.’

‘Did he?’ asked one of the officers, shyly.

‘Of course he did, look at the body! There are signs of struggle on every inch of him.’

‘You said medical field,’ said Lestrade. ‘You mean he was a doctor?’

‘Possibly. Possibly a nurse or even a paramedic. Not enough data to be sure. But he has an educated knowledge of anatomy and veins and knows how to administer a needle.’

‘Yeah, but with enough practice, anyone, especially an addict, could learn the proper way to—’

‘Not like this, Lestrade. He was trained. It’s obvious.’

‘Obvious to a former junkie, at least,’ said Anderson. He spoke at a coward’s half volume, but everyone heard him clearly—his voice was full of acid. Sherlock blinked, clearly not expecting the charge, and his jaw tightened as his eyes stabbed Anderson from where he crouched beside the dead man. The uncomfortable silence hung just a little too long, until Anderson amended, ‘Sorry, did I get that wrong? Not formet?’

‘That’s enough, Anderson,’ said Lestrade tightly.
'Not exactly a secret—'

'I said, can it.'

'So what’s the message?' Donovan suddenly cut in.

Now Sherlock fixed his eyes sharply on Donovan, who was at last meeting his gaze with an air of defiance that dared him to impress. It looked like a staring contest, and everyone held their collective breath, waiting for one of two possible outcomes: Donovan would back down, or Sherlock would answer with an insult, and things would escalate from there.

But neither of those things happened.

'It’s a threat,' Sherlock said, rising. He turned his back deliberately to Anderson.

'Against who?'

Sherlock’s eyes slid sideways to meet John’s, then away again. ‘Me.’ He cleared his throat. '

‘You’re right, Lestrade—he was a victim of the Slash Man.’

‘It’s likely,’ said Donovan. ‘But we prefer solid evidence. DNA. That’s not something you can know just by looking.’

‘Have you met me? The marks on his hips and thighs—identical to that which was found on past victims.’

‘It is compelling,’ said Lestrade, his tone calibrated to diffuse the tension and remind everyone of the investigatory nature of their work. ‘And very likely a match. There’s no sign of bleach on this body—the last corpse reeked of it—so we’re almost certain to get a viable DNA sample to run. Then we’ll have to compare these marks to the ones found on Jefferey.’

Anderson sniffed. ‘Or just get Watson here to drop his trousers and go for the live comparison.’

Sherlock whirled about with the speed of a tornado. ‘Lestrade!’ he bellowed.

But Lestrade didn’t need the push. He had already grabbed Anderson up by the scruff of his coat and was dragging him away from the crime scene. ‘The hell’s wrong with you?’ Sherlock heard his words, heard the scrape of shoes as Lestrade hurried the little weasel away, but he wasn’t watching; his vision swam, and he saw red. His eidetic memory flared up, and instead of the body of an unidentified male on the ground, he saw John, John as he had been, that night in that walk-in freezer, seventy-seven days ago. Scarlet slashes marring every inch of bare skin. Crimson cutting into his memory. The rush and heat of blood that signalled both life and death.

‘Holmes. Holmes.’

He flinched, drawn back to reality like a fish on a snapped line. ‘What?’ he asked, irritably.

It was an officer he didn’t know very well; but unlike before, this time he had bothered to learn their names. As it turned out, it was useful to know who had your back, and who might turn. This one—Dryers, he thought the name was—had Lestrade’s personal commendation, though Sherlock hadn’t entirely made up his mind about him yet.

‘Your man, Holmes. Just took off. You want someone to . . . ?’

Sherlock looked to the empty place where John had been standing just a moment ago. He spun, coat swirling around his legs, eyes piercing the darkness beyond the circle of artificial light. He thought he saw a shadow moving at the end of the row: it limped, staggered, and disappeared behind a booth and around the corner. His breath hitched. Sherlock pushed through two officers and strode swiftly in pursuit of the fading figure.

Damn that Anderson! he thought, picking up his pace to a jog. He mentally scrolled through his list of favourite ways to get the man sacked or permanently disabled as he rounded the corner and saw nothing but a dark, silent road and a parked lorry. But on the ground, behind the rear tyre, he saw the end of John’s fallen cane, the aluminium reflecting the street lamps. Then he heard the retching.

Behind the lorry was John, bent double with his hand splayed against the brick wall of the side of the building. He had just finished vomiting and was now coughing and gasping for breath.

‘Are you—?’ Sherlock began.

But John waved him away with his free hand. ‘A minute, Sherlock,’ he said, breathless. ‘Please.’

His head bowed below his bracing arm, and he retched again.

For a short moment, Sherlock was torn between wanting to do something, anything, and giving John the space he had asked for. Then he supposed that the latter was an answer to the former. He retreated to the corner and nearly ran headlong into Donovan. Her shoes skidded on the gravel.

‘Oh,’ she said. Her eyes looked over his shoulder. ‘Is he—?’

He grabbed her arm and spun her back the way she had come. ‘Not now.’

With a sharp jerk, she wrested herself from his grip. That’s when she heard the unmistakable sound of a man retching onto the pavement. She looked up at him with flinty, accusing eyes.

‘You’re a cruel man, Sherlock Holmes,’ she said.

‘Another time, yes?’ he said icily.

‘Bringing him here. In this state.’
'He wanted to come.'

'And you let him.'

'He’s not a child.'

'He’s not well.'

He scowled and stepped around her to draw her away from John, fully expecting her to follow. And she did. In a moment, she was right on his heels, determined to speak her mind.

'It’s wrong—you know it’s wrong. Treating him like he’s the same as before, like nothing’s happened to him. He shouldn’t be here. You shouldn’t be here. Lestrade won’t tell you this because he thinks he needs you to solve this.'

'He does need me.'

'And you’re a package deal, right? So to hell with Watson then, is that it?'

He rounded on her. ‘Don’t pretend to give a damn.’

'I thought you gave one. At least where he’s concerned. Did he tell you he’s fine? That he can handle it? I thought you were a genius. Look at him. He’ll put himself through hell all over again for you, if you let him.'

'He’s not doing it for me. It’s for her.'

Donovan’s mouth fell closed.

'Now why don’t you be useful for a change and get us a cab. We’re going.'

He turned again, to return to the lorry, and this time she didn’t follow. But he heard her footsteps carrying her, not back to the crime scene, but on toward the main road. She was getting them that cab after all—he hadn’t actually expected her to.

He found John with his back bracing him against the brick wall beside the puddle of sick. His head hung low, but Sherlock could see that his eyes were squeezed shut as though in intense pain. He heard a noise like a sob, then his eyes dropped to where, between his knees, John’s wrists were pressed firmly together.

Sherlock reacted. Away from the security of 221B, all those weeks of conditioning himself against intrusive physical contact whenever John was in a state fell to the wayside. He lunged forward, grabbed John’s forearms, and wrenched his hands apart.

John screamed and jerked away from him, scraping along the wall and almost falling over.

‘It’s me, it’s me!’ Sherlock said, his hands raised now, a sign he wouldn’t touch him again.

But John was still edging away, dragging his bad leg with him. One hand bore his weight and guided him against the wall, the other he held out in front of him, as though to keep Sherlock at bay. ‘Tight and quivering, that’s how he likes us,’ John said. His voice was pitched high with distress.

‘What?’

‘What?’

John’s eyes refocused. He looked at Sherlock, but it seemed that a few seconds passed before he knew him. Then he glanced around, up and down the dark street, as though reacquainting himself with where he was. He looked confused and distraught.

‘What did I—?’ he started, but stopped himself. ‘You do it, then?’ The abrupt steadiness in his voice was at odds with the signifiers of stress his body language spoke. His chest rose and fell rapidly with his heavy breathing and his fists were clenched at his sides. He took a step on his bad leg, wobbled, and fell back again, his back striking the brick wall.

‘Did I do what?’ asked Sherlock. He took a tentative step forward, but John’s whole body flinched and his hand raised again as a barrier.

‘With . . . Lestrade.’ He nodded down the street to indicate the crime scene, but he couldn’t seem to stop; his head kept bobbing. ‘The . . . body.’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock. He took a couple steps back to relieve the invisible pressure of his encroaching on John’s walls. He retrieved the fallen cane. ‘I’ve done all I can for the moment. Seen all I need to.’ Keeping his distance, he extended the cane to John handle first. ‘There’s a cab waiting to take us home.’

John took the cane by the grip, set it upright on the ground, and slowly rested his weight on it, as if he expected it to fold under him. But he didn’t move. Maybe he couldn’t.

‘Can I—?’ Sherlock began.

‘Good. I’m good,’ said John. Then he stepped forward. And he began to move, as swiftly as he was able, toward the main road. The soldier’s mask was back.

They found the cab parked and waiting for them, Sgt Donovan leaning down to talk to the cabbie. When she saw them coming, her spine straightened and she stepped back from the kerb.

‘Get some rest, yeah?’ she said to John, pulling the back door open for him.

He didn’t answer, just slid into the car as quickly as his leg would allow. When she shut the door,
he turned aside to hide his face.

Then she faced Sherlock. He stood rigid, awaiting her next words of insult and chasiment and preparing to meet them. But she said nothing. Instead, they stared at each other for a long moment, jaws tight and shoulders squared, the both of them. At last, Sherlock broke the silence.

‘I won’t work with Anderson. He’s off this case.’

‘Not my call.’

‘I’m telling you how it is. You need me, not him.’

With that, he turned his back to her and walked around to the other side of the cab. To her credit, she said nothing, just disappeared once again down the nearest row of booths.

He pulled the door open, but just before he set foot inside, a movement caught in his periphery. Turning his head, he saw, at some distance behind, a figure standing in the mouth an alley, watching him. He squinted into the darkness. Given the height and stature, it was a man, but other than that vague detail, he could discern nothing more, not at this distance. Not age, not race, nothing. Could have been anyone.

He was torn. John needed to get home, but this man—whoever he was—might know something, might have seen something.

The figure raised an arm, pointed directly at him, and gestured for him to come closer before stepping back into shadow.

‘Two minutes, John,’ said Sherlock. He closed the door, held two fingers up to the cabbie through the passenger window, and took off with long strides toward the alley. As he walked, he reached inside his coat for his small, metal torch. It wasn’t much, but, if needed, it would serve as a baton.

He slowed as he drew nearer the mouth of the alley where the night shadows made the way black as pitch. Swiftly, he clicked on the torch and inadvertently aimed it right into the face of—

He sighed out in exasperation. ‘Ewan,’ he said.

‘Shit, man, get that thing outta my face!’

He lowered the beam to chest level; he had already seen enough to know that Ewan—a thinner, more junkie Ewan than the version he had seen back in October—hadn’t got any sleep that night.

‘Well?’ he asked. ‘Have you been waiting here all night?’

‘Figured you might show,’ said Ewan, ‘what when I heard he’d got Holden.’

Sherlock stepped forward eagerly. ‘Holden,’ he said. ‘That was the victim’s name?’

‘That was the man’s name, yeah.’

‘Who told you?’

‘Man, I knew him, no one had to tell me.’

‘No, who told you he’d been killed?’

‘Word spreads.’

‘Word spreads fast, apparently; he hasn’t been dead three hours.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Ewan sniffed and rubbed his nose. ‘We was friends.’

‘Who supplied who?’

‘Eh?’

‘No. That’s not it. You get high together, isn’t that right?’ He dragged the beam down Ewan’s arms, to his singed fingertips, and back up to his bloodshot eyes. Ewan squinted and turned his head aside. ‘Tonight. You shot up tonight. You were with him when you did. Did you see—?’

‘Nah, man, I didn’t see nothing. Course I saw nothing. No one ever does.’

‘Tell me. What happened?’

Ewan sniffed again and shifted his weight. ‘Weren’t nothing. I took mine, he took his. Then I needed a piss. Wasn’t gone a minute, not one sodding minute. When I come back.’ He shrugged. ‘Just gone.’

‘Where were you?’

‘A multi storey. Near Guy Street Park.’

About half a mile away, then. ‘Cold night.’ He noted Ewan’s thin, flimsy coat.

‘Yeah. Well.’ He shrugged again. ‘Went looking, you know? Ran into some blokes, friends. They told me. Said it was the Slash Man and coppers were on their way.’

‘What blokes?’

‘You know. Just some blokes. My people.’ He moved agitatedly, constantly shifting weight and swinging his arms at his side, like he was about to take off. ‘Wasn’t gone a minute.’

‘That’s it? That’s all you can tell me?’
Ewan glowered. ‘I didn’t come here to tell you that. Ain’t nothing I got to say is of any use in finding the Slash Man. Nah. I come here to give you a piece of my mind, that’s what.’

Sherlock’s eyebrows lowered in genuine confusion. ‘What?’

‘Two people are dead, man. Raped and killed. Old Slash, he never did that before—the killing, I mean. Messed ’em up pretty good, but always left ’em breathing. Always. Then . . . then he got hold of your mate.’

‘Stop right there—’

‘At’s when it all changed, eh? Course, could be ’cause you came back. Or maybe both things together. I dunno. All I know is, before your bloody resurrection, no one died. Now . . .’

‘I see. So you’ve decided to blame me.’

‘Yeah. Yeah, I have. ’Cause that’s the other thing.’

‘What thing?’

‘I seem to remember you making a promise. In the pub, that night. You said we didn’t have to be afraid of shadows no more. Said you’d find him. Said you’d kill him.’ Ewan lifted his chin and licked his lips—confidence undermined by doubt. ‘Last I checked, you ain’t done nothing.’

Sherlock snorted. ‘It’s not so simple—’

‘No? Been working on it since, what, October, have you? So. Here’s how I remember it. That doctor friend of yours goes missing. You come to me, I tell you what I know. Then you find him, what, a day later?’

Sherlock didn’t say a word. That’s exactly what it had been.

Ewan shrugged again and wiped a hand across his nose. ‘Case solved. Seems simple enough. You get him back, and that’s that. Got what you wanted. So fuck the rest of us, eh?’

‘Don’t be absurd. I’m doing everything I can think—’

‘Man, fuck you. Fuck you. I thought we was on the same side.’

Ewan turned sharply and retreated down the alley, kicking aside a construction cone and disappearing. The noise he made as he retreated echoed loudly in the alley and left Sherlock’s ears ringing.

The cold was beginning to numb him—fingers and ears—but there was heat in his face. With a huff of anger, he clicked off the torch and returned it to his pocket; then he stepped back to the street and began walking back. But when he lifted his head, his feet stopped dead under him.

The cab was gone.
"Pick up, damn it, John. Pick up."

The line rang, and rang, and rang. John had not yet bothered to set the voicemail on his new phone.

"Damn it!"

He started running again, legs pumping so quickly he nearly lost control of them. He flew down Stoney Street, following the cab’s most probable path. Two minutes, he’d said. Why had he left for even two seconds? How had he not noticed when the cab began to roll away? Had John simply decided he wouldn’t wait? Or had the cabbie put his foot on the accelerator of his own volition, carrying John away like Anton Willoughby had, that fateful day in mid-October?

Stupid, stupid!

The fears that clouded his mind nearly darkened his sight as he remembered, all too vividly, stepping into the cold, lightless convent, ten days too late, and he stumbled into a short stack of empty fruit crates left on the corner as he rounded swiftly onto Park Street, following the GPS in his head. He had no hope, none at all, of catching up with a moving vehicle, but he was as likely to stop his feet from running as he was to stop his heart from racing or mind from whirring.

He would call Donovan. She had seen the cabbie too, spoken to him, in fact. Maybe she knew something. And if she didn’t, she could still put out the word. He remembered the cab number, after all.

But before he could punch her number into his phone, his text alert sounded.

‘Oh!’ he cried aloud, skidding to a halt. He lifted the phone before his wide, desperate eyes and saw his brother’s name.

A stab of disappointment met with an unexpectedly warm sense of hope. He opened the message.

Southwark St, headed west. Hurry.

Incomplete sentences? Mycroft must have been texting with haste.

He doubled back on Park and hung a quick right back onto Stoney. He erupted out of the darkened street and onto well-lit Southwark like a startled bat, took another right, and scanned the street for a black cab. Instead, he saw, not half a street away to the west, the back of man with a pronounced limp, moving at a surprising speed away from him.

‘John!’

The man staggered a little to the right as if the sound of his name was a physical blow, but he didn’t turn. He kept on with a determined, if not hampered, gait. Sherlock slowed to a jog, feeling like a great weight had just been lifted off his chest. In moments, he was at John’s side again.

Keeping with John’s anxious pace, he said calmly, if not warily, ‘John. You left the cab. I thought —’ But he couldn’t voice it.

John shook his head firmly, lips pressing together. A small noise stuck in his throat.

When it was clear that John wasn’t about to say anything, Sherlock started to explain himself to the only man who had ever made him feel the need. ‘It was Ewan. Homeless network.’ He had told John of Ewan’s part in helping him learn more about Darren Hirsch, but if John remembered that now, he gave no sign. His eyes were fixed straight ahead. ‘He knew the victim, though not much more.’ It didn’t seem the time to go into the details—the drugs, the name, the accusation, was any of it at all relevant anyway?—but he had to say something. ‘Kid looked half frozen. He’s been out here all night.’ When John still made no effort to acknowledge or respond, Sherlock said, ‘I’ll get us another cab. It’ll be warmer—’

‘No.‘

John took an unexpected about face and started walking east.

Sherlock took another two steps before he noticed he was walking alone. Taken aback, he swung around and hurried to catch John up, when he heard him saying, ‘Not warmer, never warm, can’t get warm, cold and quivering . . .’

‘The flat is warm,’ said Sherlock, reasoning.

‘And thirsty. Always thirsty, but not . . . not for that.’ His lips pulled down and his brow furrowed in consternation. ‘Not that.’

‘John, I’m going to get us a cab, and we’re going to go hom—’ He laid a hand on John’s shoulder.

The man came to life.
He twisted his shoulder away from the touch, and with his opposite hand pushed Sherlock away with such force it felt like he had been punched in the chest. There was power in the body and fighting anger in the eyes that Sherlock had not seen in him since his return, and it electrified him with fear and wonder and hope. Nevertheless, he hadn’t expected to be on the receiving end of it. He stepped back, and John did the same, creating a stretch of pavement between them.

John’s breath came in visible swells and audible huffs as he breathed loudly through his nose. He moved the cane for balance. ‘No cabs.’

He should have guessed; no, he should have known. *I shouldn’t have left him, not for anything*, he thought, imagining more clearly, now, how John must have reacted, finding himself alone in the back of a cab for the first time since his abduction. However rational or irrational, the memory would have been enough to provoke the threat of it happening again. So of course he had fled.

‘No cabs,’ Sherlock agreed.

John nodded stiffly and began walking again. This time, Sherlock walked a step behind and just within John’s periphery.

He calculated quickly. They were now heading north, apparently to cross into North London by the bridge. Even by the most direct route, they were still four-and-a-half miles from Baker Street. John might have been running on adrenaline now, but it wouldn’t last him much longer, and he’d begin feeling the pain in his leg before long, if he wasn’t already. Besides, the temperature was hovering around freezing, maybe a little under, and the sun was still hours away from warming the sky. Even maintaining this pace—which he knew they couldn’t—the walk would take the rest of the night. Neither the buses nor the tube was running yet, and a cab was out of the question.

Sherlock pulled out his mobile.

_London Bridge. Three minutes._

SH

As they walked the point-three miles remaining until they reached the bridge, Sherlock noticed John’s limp getting worse and worse—his body demanded that he slow, but John wasn’t obeying. He watched John’s breath rise as fog in the streetlamps: quick huffs, short breaths. Each exhalation was coming in shorter intervals and smaller volume, characteristic not of exertion but of hyperventilation. If this kept on, his system would quickly deplete its carbon dioxide levels, and he knew what would come next, having witnessed John experience symptoms of a panic attack many times before: too many: headache, dizziness, chest pains. His mind and body were perilously juxtaposed. The one urged him to flee; the other pleaded that he rest. But it was the body that was yielding, and if Sherlock did nothing, both would fall together.

They reached the bridge and started across. Sherlock now walked at his side, prepared to steady him if the dizziness set in. He floundered for something to say, something distracting but innocuous, to sway John away from the brink.

But John Watson had become an unpredictable entity. Of his own volition, he came to an abrupt stop; his breathing went from rapid and shallow to deep and laboured. Sherlock stopped, too, stood at arms’ length, and faced him squarely.

‘John?’

‘I thought I saw him,’ said John, staring at the pavement between Sherlock’s feet.

‘Who?’

He closed his eyes and held his breath. Then he spoke. ‘Daz.’

Sherlock took an apprehensive half step closer. ‘Where?’

‘There. At the crime scene. Just after Anderson . . .’ He couldn’t voice it. He screwed up his face and looked away, over the water. ‘I blinked, and there he was. Standing just over your shoulder.’ He shook his head in dejection. ‘I ran.’

Now Sherlock understood. Another hallucination. Another damned intrusive image.

‘But you would have seen him, right? If he had been real? You would have noticed.’

Sherlock nodded slightly but reassuringly. ‘Not real, John. He wasn’t there.’

He hung his head. His fingers were bloodless around the grip of the cane; the other clenched and unclenched at his side. ‘I knew he couldn’t have been,’ he said softly. He inhaled long and loud through his nose, straightening. ‘I can’t make it to Baker Street, Sherlock. But I can’t take a cab. I just can’t.’

The apologetic tone, the shame-filled eyes, made Sherlock want to strangle something—Anderson, preferably. He parted his lips to reassure him, but at that moment he saw headlights in the distance, drawing nearer.

‘Fortunately for us both, John, we are not without friends.’

John followed his gaze, and when he saw the car, he tensed. But Sherlock was ready:

‘Lestrade,’ he said. ‘Rather good timing, too.’

John turned back, a look of fresh alarm in his eyes. ‘Don’t tell him what I saw.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it.’
The car overtook them and rolled to a stop, brake lights aglow. The driver’s side door popped open, and Lestrade jumped out, looking anxious. A question was on his lips, but Sherlock gave him a hard stare and quick motion of the head, and he swallowed it.

‘Ah, inspector,’ he said. ‘I see you are on your way home. Swinging by Baker Street?’

Baker Street was decidedly not en route to his own home, or even to the Yard, but Lestrade cotted on quickly. ‘Of course.’

Sherlock opened the back door for John. To his consternation, however, John just stood there, staring at the empty back seat. Then he nodded, not in gratitude but resignation, and he stepped into the car. Sherlock circled around to the other side, ‘Quickest route, Lestrade,’ before opening his own door.

During the short ride to Baker Street, not a word was spoken.

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He sighed into the phone and ran a hand through his hair, feeling the oils grease the skin between his fingers. ‘I don’t know if I can do that again.’

‘Hush, you’re doing fine. You did well.’

‘I thought he was going to kill me.’

‘Nonsense. He didn’t even touch you. No harm done.’

‘No harm? I’ve been suspended for three days. Three days! For one harmless quip! Plus a mark on my permanent record. And after that, two weeks doing desk work and sensitivity training. I’m not allowed in the field. I’m to be nowhere near this case. That’s not even to mention all the looks I’m getting—’

‘Stop your whinging. I told you, you did well. You found his pressure point.’

‘Pressure point?’

‘From ice to fire in a blink of an eye, I know, I’ve seen it more times than I like to think about. Right then. That’s enough, is it? That’s all you need?’

‘It’s not that simple. You need to do it again. You didn’t push it hard enough.’

‘Hard enough?’

‘Not much of a reaction, really.’

‘I told you the look he gave me. There was murder in his eyes, I could see it!’

‘All I got from you was that you ragged his boyfriend and he went crying to daddy to sort it out. There’s no story in that.’

‘But—’

‘Holmes needs to be exposed as the sort of violent and dangerous man he is.’

‘Of all the things he is, he’s not stupid. He’s not about to attack me in full view of a dozen officers.’

‘We need witnesses, darling. And I’m willing to wager that he’s not as stable as you give him credit for. You push that pressure point hard, and he’ll snap, police or no police. But do yourself a favour—don’t let Daddy Detective overhear you this time, eh? Do try to be a little discreet.’

He worried his lips between his teeth, unable to answer. He wondered whether his pounding heartbeat could be heard through the phone.

‘Don’t fret. People will realise you were right about him all along in the end. You’ll expose him again, and heroes are seldom chastised for their three-day suspensions earned in opposing villains. They’re applauded.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘Of course I am. Now don’t call again until I’ve got my story.’

***

As days went around Baker Street anymore, this was a bad one.

They returned to the flat with an hour left before dawn. Though both were accountably exhausted, neither tried to sleep. John went instantly into the kitchen to put the kettle on, and Sherlock, wondering whether this was one of those situations where he should give John his space or whether they ought to try to talk about... it... pulled out his laptop and settled himself at the kitchen table, his way of finding the middle ground between two uncertain courses of action—he wouldn’t broach conversation, but he made himself available for it. Once, he had had John to model or outright instruct him in how to behave in uncomfortable or sensitive circumstances; but now that such circumstances were, at their core, about John, he fumbled.

An unspoken rule existed in 221B: Sherlock and John dealt with John’s condition; they never talked about. Not directly. John didn’t like being asked how he was feeling, or whether he’d taken
his medication, or whether he’d dreamt last night, or why he wasn’t seeing a therapist. Doing so—as both Mrs Hudson and Lestrade learnt early on—was a sure-fire way of rendering him incomunicative at best, infuriated at worst. It was the quickest way to sour a level mood and topple a stable emotional plane. And it always invited tension into the flat. Not that there wasn’t enough of that regardless.

So they didn’t talk. Sherlock missed the way they once had. He missed John’s easy laughter. He missed his no-nonsense handling of Sherlock’s eccentricities. He missed the companionable air and unspoken but complete understanding of one another. He missed—

The thought never fully formed because he wouldn’t let it: Sherlock missed John.

After a few minutes’ shuffling about, John set a cup of tea at Sherlock’s right elbow. Black, two sugars.

‘Thank you,’ said Sherlock. He tapped the side of the cup with his fingertips to gauge its temperature. Another ninety seconds to let it cool. He returned to the laptop where he was researching hemlock. Was it even important that it was hemlock? Might it have been clovers or nightshade or bluebells or bulbous buttercups? Why the rose petal? Still too many questions. The poisonous element of the flower might have been a red herring, or it might have been the key to the puzzle. Was there a puzzle? Had the flowers been placed there? Or had the victim for some unfathomable reason put them there himself. This seemed least likely. Maybe this was actually a matter of botany; Jefferies had been placed in a tree, a horse chestnut. This victim had been carrying flowers. Or, equally plausible, Sherlock was grasping at straws.

He scrolled and clicked a few more pages, then sipped from the tea and set it on his left-hand side.

Lost in thought, he didn’t notice John again until when, several minutes later, John set a second cup of tea at his elbow, as he had the first.

He looked at it in surprise, then turned on the stool to observe the kitchen counter. Two pots, two brews, and four unfilled teacups. John was at that moment reaching into the cupboard for numbers five and six.

‘Thank you, John,’ Sherlock said again, uncertainly, ‘though I haven’t quite finished my first cup.’

John turned at the sound of his voice. A dazed look lifted from his face like a gossamer veil as his eyes found and settled on the two full cups already on the table, both steaming. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘I didn’t realise you’d already made tea.’

‘I—’ He bit his tongue, taken aback. Did he really not remember? He switched tracks. ‘Did you want one?’ He noticed that John had not poured himself anything from either brew.

‘I don’t take sugar,’ said John, though with an air of confusion, as if he weren’t sure if this was true. He stepped away from the kitchen and into the sitting room, where the first grey lights of dawn rested against the windows. He pulled the curtains closed.

For the rest of the morning, John moved restlessly, room to room. He stared at an open search window on his laptop for twenty minutes without touching the keyboard; he stood at the edge of each window, curtain pulled back slightly, and monitored the activity on the street below and in the building across the way; and he wandered back and forth between flat and landing as though waiting for someone or expecting to see something different each time he came back. It was driving Sherlock crazy, but mostly because he didn’t understand it.

After Sherlock cleared away the evidence of the first two pots of tea and re-established himself in the sitting room, John set about making a third, and like before, he poured a cup for Sherlock and none for himself. Sherlock accepted the cup with wide, worried eyes that John failed to observe before hobbling back into the kitchen and looking around in bewilderment as though he had misplaced something or forgotten why he had gone in there. Then, without touching a thing, he continued on to the hallway bathroom where, seconds later, Sherlock heard him start the shower.

Shucking off all pretence of unconcern, Sherlock put aside his study of hemlock and opened new search windows. He had already spent countless hours researching John’s condition, everything from PTSD to rape trauma syndrome, phobias to panic attacks, mood swings to hypervigilance, and how he might best help someone who refused to see a professional therapist. But maybe there was something he had missed, something that could help him now.

He was in the middle of revising new literature that linked suppression, dissociation, and bewilderment when his phone sounded in his pocket.

‘Sherlock Holmes,’ he said.

‘We’ve got a positive ID on the victim,’ said Lestrade.  

Holden, thought Sherlock.

‘Name was Holden O’Harris. Age thirty-five, originally from Shepherd’s Bush. And you were right: he worked as practice nurse at a GP surgery in West London. They sacked him almost three years ago—five months before he lost his flat—because he came to work high on heroin. A habit he never broke, evidently.’

‘He was high when he died.’

‘Yeah. Traces of heroin in blood, urine, and hair. And—I probably don’t even need to say it—no evidence of hemlock poisoning.’

Sherlock already knew it and didn’t deign to respond to that point. ‘And DNA? Tell me some good news, Lestrade.’

‘Still waiting on the lab results for that one. But don’t worry. Molly found ample samplings of . . .
everything. We'll have conclusive proof soon.'

'How soon?'

'Next few hours soon.'

'I'll come down to Bart's. I'd like a second look at . . .' But he stopped. He couldn't leave Baker Street, not right now, not without . . . And there was slim chance John would want to come. Even if he did, Sherlock knew it wouldn't be a good . . . 'On second thought, text me the results when you get them.'

Lestrade correctly interpreted the pause. 'How is he?'

'Resting.'

He heard John kill the shower.

'I asked how—'

'Fine. He's fine.'

'I can't even begin to say how sorry—'

'Don't bother.'

'I've put Anderson on suspension and gave him a strong reprimand—'

'Doesn't matter.'

Besides, he thought, it was a lot of things, not only Anderson. None of us did right by John, me least of all.

'Maybe it was a mistake, this contract business.'

Sherlock huffed a sigh of irritation. 'It's done. It's signed. We'll just have to be more—'

His breath caught: from the bathroom came a loud crash and the sound of tinkling glass.

Without saying goodbye, he ended the call and jumped up from the chair. 'John?' he called as he passed through the flat. When he reached the bathroom door, he half expected it to be locked; but the handle turned. Before he pushed in, he announced himself. 'John, it's me. I'm coming in.' He waited half a breath longer and entered.

His first step inside the bathroom brought his shoe'd foot down on a fragment of glass. The tiles were scattered with them like shards of ice; the rest had ended up in the sink or still hung in the frame of the mirror. He found John standing against the wall, half hidden behind the open door. His head was bowed and eyes shielded with one hand; his other trembled and dripped blood at his side.

'Oh god,' said Sherlock, stepping swiftly over the glass to lift John's right hand by the arm for examining. John didn't pull away, didn't so much as flinch. But he couldn't tell much. The thick blood spreading over the knuckles and down the fingers obscured the severity of the cuts.

'Kitchen sink,' he said. 'Come on.' He steered an awkwardly pliant John out of the bathroom and back to the kitchen.

John hissed when the cold water from the tap hit his skin, but he didn't pull away. He even let Sherlock roll his sleeve halfway up to his elbow and pull the largest slivers of mirror out of his skin. This acquiescence was almost as unnerving as the repeated tea making or vomiting behind a lorry; he barely knew what to do with it and was almost certain he would do wrongly.

He twisted off the tap and wrapped John's hand in a tea towel. 'Sit,' he directed, now steering him to the table. Then he went to fetch the first-aid kit, fill a bowl with warm water, and grab a bottle of paracetamol and a glass of water. Sitting opposite John, he instructed him to take the painkillers, then pulled his hand halfway across the table and opened the towel. Already, though the tea towel was soaked red, the blood flow had lessened considerably. Sherlock took John's hand in his own and counted the cuts—seven of notable length, and several more minor nicks and scratches.

'Anything broken?' he asked.

John shook his head no and balled his hand to prove it before relaxing it again in Sherlock's. But when Sherlock prodded a little more with his thumbs, John sucked in air through his nose and sat up straighter. Sherlock cocked a sceptical eyebrow, but John shook his head emphatically. 'Just tender,' he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

'Still. An x-ray would tell us for sure—'

'No. No hospitals. It's fine. I didn't hit it that hard.'

The mirror wasn't just cracked, Sherlock thought. It was shattered. But he kept it inside a closed mouth.

He pulled out his magnifying glass and rotated John's hand at the wrist slowly, clockwise, anticlockwise, occasionally wiping fresh blood away with the towel to search for other slivers of glass, which he extracted with a pair of tweezers and set on a Petri dish that happened to be nearby. While he worked, he noted the slight, irregular curve of John's little finger where the break hadn't set quite right. He also took the excuse to surreptitiously inspect the mean-looking scar on John's wrist, a remnant of the wire cuffs, which John had so diligently tried to hide from him over the past eleven weeks. He resisted a tactile examination of the dark pink, raised skin.

'I read,' John said as Sherlock performed his inspection, 'that they put more than ten units of blood in me that night.'

Sherlock's eyebrows rose in surprise—John almost never even alluded to either his time in...
captivity or the immediate aftermath. Whenever he did, it was never in direct reference to himself: never an *I* or a *me* was spoken. This was important—*was it important? It felt important*—but John continued on placidly, staring at his injured hand, and Sherlock contained any greater reaction on his own part to follow suit.

'I’d already lost quite a lot, even before I was shot.' His voice shook a little, but only a little. He swallowed. 'They had to replace more than fifty percent of my blood volume within six hours. A massive transfusion. All donor blood, of course. Strangers who didn’t even know . . . Kind of makes me wonder whose blood I’m spilling now.'

Satisfied with the cleanliness of the cuts, Sherlock unscrewed the cap on the bottle of surgical spirit and wetted a cloth. ‘A red blood cell passes through the heart every forty-five seconds,’ he said. He gently tapped the stinging cloth against the wounds. John winced with only the first dab.

‘Your heart. Within a minute, all that new blood belonged to you.’ He raised his eyes to meet John’s. ‘Any donor DNA from white blood cells would have disappeared within seven days anyway. This is all you.’

‘I know,’ said John. ‘Just doesn’t feel like it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing.’

As Sherlock began to dress the wound, winding a bandage around the limp hand, he puzzled over this, and when he could come to no clear answer, he asked, ‘Why did you punch the mirror, John?’

John’s eyes flicked up from where Sherlock was working on his hand and fell away again just as quickly. ‘I don’t know.’

‘What were you doing in the bathroom while the water ran? You weren’t showering.’

The evidence was obvious: he hadn’t changed clothes; he still wore his shoes; his hair was dry; the towels were dry; the air in the bathroom was not humid—he’d been running the water cold.

‘You never really shower. Do you. Just spot cleaning. One area at a time. Is it so you don’t have to undress? It’s not unusual, John, for one to feel vulnerable, exposed, after—’

John suddenly pulled his hand away to finish securing the dressing himself.

‘John,’ said Sherlock again, steeling himself.

‘Hm?’ John responded, attention fixed on his hand.

‘Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea . . .’

‘I should put this on ice.’

‘. . . to work through these anxieties . . .’

‘Twenty minutes every couple of hours.’ He rose from his chair and opened the freezer. ‘Ward off any swelling, bruising. It’s not broken. But.’

‘Mycroft could help. He would know of some competent, discreet psychotherapists.’

John threw the freezer door back in place; the whole fridge shook. ‘I’m *fine*, Sherlock.’

‘The evidence speaks to the contrary.’

‘If I *tell* you I’m fine, I’m fine.’

‘I’m not saying you’re not handling things well, all things considered—’

‘Just not well enough for you, is that it?’

Sherlock blinked. ‘I didn’t say—’

‘That I’m more of a burden than you bargained for? You didn’t have to. Should’ve let well enough alone then, eh? Then you wouldn’t have to deal with this’—he gestured to himself, up and down, with a furious hand—‘*mess.*’

‘That’s *not* what I said, and you’ll never hear me say it. All I’m saying is that a therapist may help you to—’

‘*Help me? I help me.* I do, Sherlock. Not once has one of those quacks done a damn bit of good to help me with anything. Not after mum died. Not after Afghanistan. Not after you d—’ He stopped and shook his head in frustration.

If John had slapped him, he wouldn’t have been more astonished. The faces of Sherlock’s six childhood psychiatrists flashed before his eyes, and he scowled. ‘There was nothing wrong with me.’

‘Oh, nothing wrong, that’s a laugh. And Donovan calls you *freak* because of your third eye and lobster hands, is that it?’

The unexpected vitriol left him stunned and without response, feeling no inclination to fight back. John was right, after all. About all of it. He had never given much credence to psychology, not after ten years of being shepherded from child shrink to child shrink in his mother’s vain attempt to figure out what was wrong with her odd little boy. Six different diagnoses and six different treatments from six different therapists—all of them hacks. At fifteen, he had refused to go back.
And oh, how Mummy cried. The way she looked at him after that... like he was the ghost of whom she had wanted to believe was her angel child. And she had always abhorred ghost stories.

‘You don’t trust me,’ John said.

‘I trust you more than anyone,’ Sherlock countered. He was unable to follow John’s train of thought—where were these accusations coming from?

‘Except for Lestrade. And Molly. And Mycroft. And—’

‘More than anyone,’ he repeated.

‘You didn’t believe me when I said that I saw Daz.’

Sherlock laughed shortly and without humour. ‘That was a dream. You didn’t believe it either.’ Why were they arguing this? They had already both agreed that the presence of the Slash Man had been impossible.

John snapped; all sense of reason and logic shattered like the mirror. ‘Not a dream! I was awake! I was standing there!’

‘An intrusive image, I mean. You’ve had them before, John.’

‘I’m telling you, I saw him! He was watching me!’

Sherlock slowly stood. ‘Then why couldn’t I see him?’

‘He was behind you, all the time behind you! If you had only turned your bloody head! ’ John’s face was red with fury, his eyes glistening with betrayal.

‘John, listen—’ He took a deep breath, hardly believing he was siding with Donovan on this one. ‘Maybe you should just . . . rest. Take a step back from this case—’

White spots appeared along John’s jawline from where he clenched it so tightly in his rage. He snatched up a teacup from the countertop that he had earlier that day pulled from the cupboard, and hurled it at Sherlock’s head. Sherlock ducked just in time, and it exploded into porcelain dust against the wall behind him.

‘It’s my case, damn you! How dare you tell me . . . ? How dare you think I can’t . . . ?’

‘Because you’re not well!’ Sherlock shouted back.

John took a ragged breath that might have been a gasp for air, might have been a sob. ‘I didn’t ask for this! Any of this! I didn’t ask to be taken out of that box! I didn’t ask you to leave me the key! What business was it of yours, what happened to me, Holmes? Why couldn’t you have just stayed dead?”

He hurled another teacup, but this time with enervated strength; his aim was poor and didn’t come anywhere near Sherlock’s head, but it smashed all the same. Then he left the kitchen through the door to the landing. Next moment, Sherlock heard his uneven steps climbing the stairs to his room, and the door closed with a resounding crash.

Sherlock lowered his face into his hands, then dragged his nails roughly across his scalp, frustrated beyond release.

‘What the hell was that?’ He realised his heart was racing. He shouldn’t have said a word. Not a damn word. John had been trying to tell him something—hadn’t he? Only Sherlock hadn’t understood what. In his need to get to the heart of the matter at hand, the mirror, he had missed something greater.

He waited two minutes, then stood, filled a bowl with ice and fetched a clean tea towel, and ascended the stairs. He knocked.

‘John?’

‘Piss off,’ he heard beyond the door.

He set the bowl on the floor, loud enough to be sure John would hear it. ‘Ten minutes before the ice melts,’ he said through the door. Then he retreated to the first floor. There, in the sitting room, he threw open the curtains to let some January light into that winter-cloaked room. Only then, as if the light were air, did he feel as though he could breathe again. At last, he set about to clear away the shards of shattered mirror and broken porcelain, to wipe down the kitchen table, and to think.

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They didn’t speak much more the rest of the day. John reappeared when he needed more ice, then again when he needed a glass of water. He spent some time sitting in his chair with the telly on, but he clearly wasn’t paying any attention to the BBC News at Six. Sherlock, however, kept an ear cocked for any mention of O’Harris’ murder, which never came up. He also kept waiting for a text from Lestrade, confirming Darren Hirsch as the killer. That also never came.

Mrs Hudson showed up at seven with dinner—lentil soup and sourdough bread—and though neither of them mentioned the broken mirror or their earlier row, she did notice John’s wrapped hand and sensed something amiss. But her query about his hand was answered with barely a shrug and three words: just a cut. Then he hid his hand in his lap and continued pushing beans around in his bowl, not eating. He hadn’t eaten a thing all day, and just that morning he had emptied his stomach of whatever he’d managed the day before. His skin colour was off, his eyes glassy. Sherlock might have been concerned about dehydration, except that, as always, John had been drinking tap water liberally throughout the day, like a man dying in the desert coming upon an oasis.

After dinner, John resumed his place in his chair but didn’t even reach for the remote control or
pick up a book to feign distraction. He just sat, and stared into nothingness. Mrs Hudson set the
copious leftovers in the fridge, removed untouched and spoilt leftovers from days before, and
tidied up in the kitchen. When she began to wash dishes at the sink, Sherlock joined her to help
dry.

As they worked side by side, with the tap still running, Mrs Hudson elbowed him gently in the
ribs to pull him out of his dark, absorbing thoughts, and when he looked down at her, she nodded
to John with concern in her eyes. *Bad day?* she mouthed, and Sherlock held up four fingers—it
was their silent code on a scale of one to five. She frowned and shook her head mournfully. He
returned his attention to the drying, but soon she was patting his arm insistently to recapture it to
herself. She indicated John again, then mimed playing the violin. He shook his head emphatically,
thinking it wasn’t a good time, that John wouldn’t appreciate such a blatant attempt at appealing
his despondency, but she urged him. *Go on, then,* she mouthed. She took the towel out of his
hands and turned back to finish the washing-up on her own.

In the end, he decided that doing nothing was more maddening, so he obeyed her direction and
walked lightly, cautiously, into the sitting room, passing in front of John to reach his case. In his
peripheral vision, he watched for any signs of objection as he lifted the instrument, golden-wood
shining in the firelight, and strummed the strings with his little finger, but John gave no response
whatevsoever. Once he decided it was well enough in tune, he tucked the violin beneath his chin
and began to play a variation on Brahms because, once upon a time, John had expressed a
particular liking for his Brahms. Again, no overt reaction. But he kept John in the corner of his eye
as he played and moved around the room, filling the air with the sweetest strains he knew how to
render.

The effect may have been missed by eyes less keen than his, but Sherlock observed it all clearly:
the way the lines disappeared from John’s forehead; the way his shoulders transformed from
squared to rounded; the way the tensed muscles in his chest and arms and legs melted into the
chair; the way his breathing deepened and steadied. It had been the right call—not a cure, but a
salve, temporary, yes, but soothing all the same. Like honey in his tea.

Mrs Hudson flicked off the kitchen light, softening the atmosphere in the flat; the fire in the hearth
cast the room in a tempered red glow. She stepped to John’s side where she sat herself on the
armrest of his chair. As she listened to the sighing vibrato emanating from Sherlock’s violin, she
rested a hand on John’s shoulder. When it seemed he had accepted her touch, she reached down,
took his bandaged hand, and rested it in her lap, where she gave his fingers a tender squeeze. She
lightly caressed the exposed skin of his thumb with her own. Though it was almost imperceptible,
Sherlock noticed that, after a moment, John tightened his fingers around hers and held on.

They continued that way in congenial silence a few minutes more, while the euphonious narrative
swelled and diminished and coloured the air with its mellifluous measures, until at last Mrs
Hudson arose. Before returning to her own flat, however, she kissed John on the top of the head,
brushed his hair with her finger and steadied it. It had been the right call—not a cure, but a
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Then, with the force of a lightning strike, the harmonies shattered.

For the third time that day, Sherlock’s ears rang with the sound of shrieking glass, and in that very
instant his violin exploded in his hands. He gave a cry of alarm and jumped backward, dropping
the bow even as fragments of wood and dust showered down on him and the sprung strings curled
at his feet.

He whirled, angling toward the window, and saw a single hole in a pane that was split like a
spider’s web. He moved forward to investigate the scene on the street, but he hadn’t taken even a
full step toward the window when he felt himself tackled to the ground even as another explosion
rocked the air and glass flew like rain in a gale. He landed hard on his back and the wind rushed
out of his lungs. He gasped but couldn’t regain his breath: John’s weight was crushing his ribcage.

‘John!’ he cried without air.

John’s only response was to wrap his arms tightly around Sherlock’s head as a shield.

He could feel John’s heart racing wildly as though a shot of adrenaline had been injected directly
into the susceptible, aching muscle. It pounded against Sherlock’s own chest and resounded
throughout his entire body until it ached in his head and down to his ankles and he couldn’t
distinguish his own throbbing heartbeats from John’s.

But something more was wrong: John’s breathing came in rapid, shallow bursts next to his ear; he
felt the muscles of John’s diaphragm clench and shudder in irregular patterns with each torturous
breath; and he wasn’t responding to his own name. With the shattering of the window, John had
been thrown into instant and gripping panic.

And there were Mrs Hudson’s hurried steps, ascending the stairs.

Bracing himself with one bent leg, Sherlock encircled John in his arms, heaved, and rolled,
pushing John off of him and easing his back to the floor just as Mrs Hudson appeared in the doorway, already in her nightdress.

‘Sherlock! I heard a terrible noise! Sounded like—’

‘Gunshots. Two of them, straight through the window,’ said Sherlock, kneeling over John, who had begun to hyperventilate in earnest. He scratched at Sherlock’s arms as though seeking something to hold onto.

‘Oh lord!’

‘We’re not hurt.’

‘But John—?’

‘Panic attack. I’ve got him. Call Lestrade.’

‘Will he be all right? I can ring for an ambulance.’

‘Lestrade, now!’

As she fled back to her flat to use the landline, he called after her, ‘Keep away from the windows!’

John writhed on the floor, unable to breathe. His face was purpling, and his eyes were wide with fear. ‘Breathe, John,’ said Sherlock, infusing his voice with a steadiness he did not feel. He took John’s head in both hands and tried to get his eyes to refocus on him. ‘Calm. Breathe. We’re okay. We’re okay.’

But whatever reality was before John’s vision, Sherlock wasn’t part of it. His eyes were fixed with terror on a spot past Sherlock’s right ear. He continued to scratch at Sherlock’s arms and pull his sleeves into his fists as tears of fear spilt from the corners of his eyes and into his hairline. He was entirely unable to draw air—it was as if his lungs had collapsed. The muscles in his neck were strained like taut ropes, and a pronounced vein in his forehead broke out in sweat.

‘All right, all right, I’ve got you,’ said Sherlock as he pulled John’s upper body off the floor, nearly into a sitting position. He situated himself behind him, kneeling low, and pulled John in close so that his own chest and stomach pressed against John’s back. Then he wrapped his arms securely around John’s torso: one hand splayed against John’s chest, the other over his diaphragm. John’s head fell back, weak against Sherlock’s right shoulder, so he spoke directly into his left ear: ‘Feel my breaths. Breathe with me, John.’

He inhaled slowly, letting John feel his lungs expand and fill with air as he pushed out his stomach into John’s back, a breath held low and full. He held it for two counts, and steadily exhaled.

John twisted and jerked involuntarily in his struggle for air; his left hand came around to grip Sherlock’s arm above the elbow, and he hung on with bruising strength.

‘Breathe in with me. One, two, three, four, five. Hold.’

John tried. Each breath drawing up his chest and throat sounded like the teeth of a hacksaw against rough wood. But when Sherlock heard a short sob escape John’s throat, the tightness in his own chest lessened—John had at least enough air to cry.


He coached him, guided him, and as the seconds wound round and round the clock, John’s own breathing began to match his. It was a labour, but as the oxygen returned to his bloodstream, to his brain, he began to calm. Even so, John’s grip on Sherlock’s arm didn’t slacken in the slightest. Sherlock held him just as firmly in return, an assurance that he was there. Amidst the ruin of the once-beloved violin, they sat together, breathed together, even as Mrs Hudson returned and the reflection of distant blue and red lights first flashed against the broken glass of the window.
The bullets they dug out of the ceiling were .476 calibre Enfields; two spent cartridges were found in the street. Ballistics experts down at the Yard agreed they must have come from an Enfield revolver. An antique, then.

‘So not Moran,’ said Mycroft.

‘Not Moran,’ said Sherlock.

Fingertips pressed together, he tilted his head back and looked up at the ceiling’s two new holes from where he stretched out in his chair. He’d already spent considerable time examining them, in addition to their trajectories through the window, and with the two paths together, he knew precisely where the shooter had been standing on the street when he looked up, saw Sherlock through the parted curtain, took aim, and fired.

Two shots: each spoke volumes. The first said the shooter wasn’t an especially practised shot to begin with. He had to reason that he had had very little by way of professional training, nor very extensive practice at firing a weapon. That, or he had been especially nervous. Despite being evidently homicidal, the shooter was likely unaccustomed to violent acts. To begin with, the gun itself suggested that the firearm was a family heirloom—it probably hadn’t fired at anything in decades.

Nevertheless, the would-be killer had been the determined sort, and that’s where the second shot had come from. Seeing that he had failed to take out his target with the first pull of the trigger, he’d made a second attempt. After all, he had come to Baker Street with the express purpose of finishing a very specific job. He might even believe he had succeeded. After all, as he had fired the second round, the target had collapsed.

And that’s what Sherlock was now thinking about now—how, if John had not tackled him to the floorboards, he would have followed through with his impulse: to check the street for where the shot had come from. A suicidal instinct, sometimes, his compulsion to investigate. But then, there was John, whose own instincts had anticipated the second shot and thrown him inexorably into action. If not for John, Sherlock’s blood and brains would even now be joined with the two bullets in marring Mrs Hudson’s ceiling.

Every time he thought of this, his blood quickened in his veins, and he marvelled at John’s capacity. Yet, at the same time, he quailed, for John, seeing the violin blasted apart, had in that instant believed Sherlock had been shot, and it nearly undid him.

‘A hired hit, do you think?’ suggested Lestrade.

‘A deplorable hit man, if that was in fact the case,’ said Mycroft, and Sherlock sensed his derision had less to do with the idea of an assassin and more to do with Lestrade’s failure to recognise the folly in thinking that a hit man would use an Enfield revolver. A poor deduction. Mycroft didn’t say this but continued with his sardonic humour. ‘I do hope he wasn’t paid up front.’

Lestrade pulled a face of disapproval at the levity with which Mycroft Holmes was treating an assassination attempt on his own blood. ‘What I’m saying is, you’re right, Moran didn’t take the shot. But he might have instructed one of his people.’

‘It wasn’t Moran,’ Sherlock repeated, leaning forward and looking at Lestrade like a teacher tired of repeating himself. ‘It’s not his style at all.’

‘His style?’

‘Look. If Moran wanted me dead, I’d be dead. He would have shot me himself in the basement of the convent and been with it. But he’s a sadist. And it’s not just physical torture that excites him. He’s a mental terrorist. It’s psychological. Nothing thrills him more. A quick bullet to the brain would be too quick, too easy, even too clean for him. No, he’ll build up to it, induce fear and paranoia, play his little game of psychological teasing, until something in here—he tapped the side of his head—“snaps. Then he’ll strike.”

‘Cheers,’ said Lestrade tiredly, falling back onto the sofa and conceding the point. ‘Not Moran, then. Fine. Then it might have been just about anybody. Half of London would see you dead.’

‘And the papers are working hard on the other half,’ Mycroft concurred glibly.

He was referencing that morning’s headliner in The Times: ‘Vigilante makes failed attempt on life of recently acquitted malefactor Sherlock Holmes.’ But The Times wasn’t the only one painting his name in red and lauding the actions—however unsuccessful—of the unknown assailant. The Daily Telegraph called the shooter a ‘would-be hero’; The Daily Star characterised him as a ‘neighbourhood watchdog’; and Kitty Riley of The Sun went so far as to compare him to Claus von Stauffenberg, Violet Gibson, and the New York City Guardian Angels. All highly inaccurate comparisons, and Sherlock was especially unappreciative of being the dictators and violent criminals in Ms Riley’s colourful analogies.

‘It is London’s loss,’ she wrote, ‘that we may never know the true identity of this dauntless seeker of retribution.’

Her words crowned the would-be killer with laurels and disguised her underlying petition to drop the search so that the unknown criminal might not face the hand of the law that would indict him with illegal possession of a firearm and attempted murder. Her call, however, was in vain. The police were taking the shooting seriously. Nevertheless, it still caused Sherlock to sneer at what she was trying to incite. As if the people still had the power to release Barabbas.
The people? Maybe not. But the media . . .

‘Sherlock, are you listening to me?’

‘Are you still here?’

Mycroft’s frown lines grew more pronounced. ‘I simply renewed my insistence, in light of last night’s event, that you remove yourself to a place of safety, for the duration.’

Sherlock’s hands fell down upon the armrests like bricks, and he cast his brother an accomplished look of utmost scorn. ‘Leave London?’

‘Of course leave London! Leave England! With a sadist having sworn vengeance against you and half the city calling for your blood, it’s the most sensible course of action.’

‘I won’t run.’

‘Why not? You have before.’

Lestrade winced, but Sherlock glared. ‘I can’t. You know what will happen if I do. Besides, my work is here.’

‘What work, Sherlock? No, Greg, don’t you leap to defend him. I know about your little arrangement. The one that thrusts John back into the house of horror just so my little brother gets to have another go at playing detective. What were either of you thinking?’

‘It was my mistake, and I take full respons—’ Lestrade began, but Sherlock seemed to have forgotten he was at all a part of the conversation and rode over him.

‘I was thinking, Mycroft, that John wanted a hand in taking down the bastards that did this to him. It was his choice.’

‘John’s choices are questionable at best. He’s not about to admit that this is all too much for him. If a child fears water because he nearly drowned in it, you do not throw him back into the sea and expect him to keep his chin above the surface, no matter how much he insists he can swim! You drive inland and take him to a psychiatrist.’

‘What, kicking and screaming?’

‘If need be.’

‘Wonderful. Now you’re going to play mum to him, too.’

‘If need be. One of us has to, and lord knows it won’t be you. You’re not good for him, Sherlock.’

Sherlock pushed himself to his feet in one fluid motion. ‘You need to leave,’ he said. He turned his back on them both and faced the hearth. There, he occupied himself with the scroll from his shattered violin, the largest in-tact piece he had found. He had set it on the mantelpiece as a keepsake of sorts—the rest had found its way into the bin. He lifted it now and rolled it around in his hand. ‘Both of you,’ he said.

‘Sherlock—’ Lestrade protested.

‘When John wakes up, I want you both gone.’ He pocketed the scroll and made a brusque departure to his bedroom where he would be able to hear John better through the ceiling of his room.

Mycroft and Lestrade were left alone in the sitting room. An uncomfortable silence descended. Then:

‘It’s hard on him, too, you know,’ said Lestrade.

Mycroft sighed, staring at the tip of a polished shoe at the end of one long leg, crossed over the other. ‘You’ll forgive me if I’m not feeling entirely sympathetic.’

‘He’s the one who almost died last night. Twice. I don’t think he’s had time to, you know, process that. Not in light of the, erm, aftermath.’

‘You mean John.’

‘John doesn’t feel safe in hospitals. He feels safe in this flat. Even after the bricks that have flown through the windows, the bullets, he feels safe here. Because Sherlock is here. When he gets into states like that, when he can’t think in a straight line, when he can’t remember why he’s angry at him, he needs Sherlock near at hand.’

‘You’ve been watching closely, haven’t you, inspector?’ It was a wry observation, not praise.
‘You’re the one who asked me to,’ Lestrade said, intent on respecting Sherlock’s wishes that they leave. ‘Don’t forget: I’m with them more than you are, Mycroft. I’ve seen more than you have. I don’t care how much of a genius you are. An hour’s observation doesn’t count.’

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Over the course of the next seven nights, whenever he could manage to fall asleep, Sherlock dreamt of finding John in the freezer, kneeling over him, and pressing a scalpel into his flesh to add another ragged IOU to his already bloody back. Every night, he awoke in a cold sweat and with a racing heart, which he couldn’t pacify until he crept into the sitting room with its now-boarded windows to ascertain whether John was all right.

And every night, John slept fitfully, his own unspoken dreams adding their own torment to his midnight hours. If they seemed bad enough, Sherlock woke him with lights and noises, never touches; if they were mild but persistent, he tried to alter them by inserting his own voice and calming narrative until John’s limbs stopped writhing and his face smoothed out and his breathing settled; otherwise, he just stayed close, waiting for John to awaken on his own, allowing him to get every precious minute of sleep his exhausted mind and body demanded.

But it was that first night—the night following the shooting, after all the police and Mycroft had gone, and quiet was restored to 221B—that kept weighing on Sherlock’s mind.

His voice was thick, gruff, unused for several hours, but it carried with it a note of authority and the expectation of obedience, and Sherlock complied almost without thinking. Instead, he reflected on what he was witnessing. Perhaps this was a part of John’s mind that still believed that Sherlock was the one who asked him to. In the absence of the IOU, that part of John’s mind felt that it still had to be avenged. It was strange, and not a little unnerving. John had doctored him before, through minor injuries and a few illnesses barely worth remembering, but that had been then, and, of course, John had been fully conscious. Now, Sherlock couldn’t tell where John believed he was, or when.

He himself had not slept in nearly two days, and he could feel the fatigue weighing on his mental faculties. There was so much to think about, and he was having trouble keeping things compartmentalised—the hunt for Moran, the first murder, the second murder, the shooting, John, bloody Mycroft—and properly ordered. Four hours, he thought, would be enough to refresh things. So after John had fallen asleep once again on the sofa (it still perplexed Sherlock why he preferred it to his own bed) and without the aid of sleeping tablets, Sherlock undressed and fell straightway into bed. One minute later, he was fast asleep and dreaming of the freezer . . .

He awoke feeling nauseous, overheated, and shaky. Knowing he was unlikely to fall back to sleep, he sat up, turned on the bedside lamp, and grounded into his hands, trying to dispel the gruesome images that still swam before his face. He needed to clear his head at least a little before rising to check on John.

But it was while he sat there, with his back against the headboard, knees drawn up, and fingers fistig his curls, that there came the low, slow creak of the door. He lifted his head. Through the yawning doorway, John entered, limping, because instead of his cane he held the first-aid kit in his hands. He shuffled forward on shoeless feet, head cocked to one side, eyes downcast and glassy. Sherlock had seen this from John once before, and he added anxiety to his nausea.

‘John,’ he said, voice barely above a whisper, ‘are you awake?’

John didn’t answer. He came to a stop at the foot of the bed and rested his weight on his good leg. Motionless now, like a video set to pause, he appeared to be staring at the duvet, but Sherlock was fairly certain that he wasn’t seeing it at all. Seconds passed while John just stood there and Sherlock contemplated the best course of action. This wasn’t like before. John didn’t seem distressed, didn’t seem to believe he was in peril, and, fortunately, he didn’t have the gun on him this time to imperil Sherlock. (Sherlock had been sensible enough to hide it before the police arrived, but John wouldn’t go to sleep without knowing it had been returned to its place beneath the sofa.)

So did Sherlock let this play out? Or help him back to bed? He hadn’t told John about the last sleepwalking incident for fear that it would depress him further, and he didn’t know how far John could sink before he was lost entirely to that black ocean.

Before he could reason through things, John seemed to reach a decision himself. He moved closer, sat himself on the edge of Sherlock’s mattress, placed the kit at his side, and opened it. His hand began to rummage around in it, searching for something, but his eyes weren’t even focused there; they were cast sidelong to the floor.

Sherlock straightened out his legs and inclined toward the kit, the better to see what John was doing. That’s when John put a hand on his chest and pushed him back to the headboard. ‘You were shot,’ he said. ‘Take it easy.’

His voice was thick, gruff, unused for several hours, but it carried with it a note of authority and the expectation of obedience, and Sherlock complied almost without thinking. Instead, he reflected on what he was witnessing. Perhaps this was a part of John’s mind that still believed that Sherlock had indeed been shot.

But at the moment, he didn’t seem too concerned about it. Instead, he lifted a digital thermometer from the kit and stuck it directly under Sherlock’s tongue without bothering to press the button to turn it on.

Sherlock sat in dumbfounded fascination as John proceeded to check his vital signs and basic health with routine efficiency, despite being fast asleep. He took Sherlock’s arm and lightly pressed two fingers into his wrist while watching the seconds tick by on a wristwatch he wasn’t wearing, monitoring his pulse. When he was satisfied, he removed the thermometer and read the blank screen. There must have been an acceptable (though imaginary) number there, too, because he seemed content with what he saw and gave a little nod. He checked Sherlock for pupil dilation with a regular biro, not a pen light, and used the same biro for eye tracking. But he put the instruments aside to examine Sherlock’s throat, two well-practised medical hands probing expertly, gently, beneath his jaw, checking for swelling.

Sherlock sat rigidly throughout but allowed John to perform his vocation. It was the most at ease he had seen him since the latest crime scene, and he was afraid to upset this state of calm. True, it was strange, and not a little unnerving. John had doctored him before, through minor injuries and a few illnesses barely worth remembering, but that had been then, and, of course, John had been fully conscious. Now, Sherlock couldn’t tell where John believed he was, or when.
Maybe he could find out.

‘Doctor,’ he said, his voice a study in serenity.

‘You’re doing fine, soldier. Just rest.’ He lowered his hands from Sherlock’s throat.

Soldier? Afghanistan, then. Again. ‘You said I was shot. Where?’

John pointed to his own left shoulder, gingerly placing his fingers on the spot right over his own old scar. ‘You’re lucky it missed your heart,’ he said. ‘Let’s have a look.’

Sherlock, though not normally slow on the uptake, took a moment before he realised that John wanted to see the non-existent wound his shoulder. Then he laughed a little uncomfortably. ‘You won’t be asking me to turn my head and cough any time soon, will you?’

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Your shoulder, captain.’

Captain? Who, exactly, did John believe he was treating? Taking a deep breath, Sherlock relented and pulled his t-shirt over his head. While he disrobed, John pulled out his stethoscope and settled the tubing around his neck. Then he removed large, square plasters and disinfectant cream from the kit.

John scooted up on the mattress, the better to reach Sherlock’s shoulder and treat the invisible wound. While he rubbed antibiotic into the bare, unbroken skin, he said, ‘A clean wound. Straight through. The flesh will heal.’

‘Good,’ said Sherlock, though apprehensively. John’s fingers warmed the cool cream as he rubbed a circle into Sherlock’s shoulder. ‘Nothing to worry about, then.’

‘No. It’ll still hurt like hell. That never goes away. It just . . . shifts. In one way or another, you’ll always feel like you’ve been shot through the heart.’

The sudden desire to end this seized Sherlock. He wanted to tell John to stop, to shake him awake and end this unparalysed nightmare. But he couldn’t. A window was opened into John’s mind, one normally bolted closed with fogged glass in the pane. Sherlock didn’t want to pry, but to peer, to understand a little more clearly what John wouldn’t or couldn’t express while awake.

While he formulated his questions, John taped the square plaster over the imagined wound. His fingers were dexterous, efficient, but also mindful of the supposed pain such a wound could cause, and so they were also kind.

‘Where does it shift to, doctor?’ Sherlock asked softly. ‘What hurts?’

For the first time since entering the bedroom, John’s body completely stilled; his hands froze against Sherlock’s shoulder; his eyes unfocused and his lids drooped. Sherlock watched him with mounting disquiet until, at last, John sat back, unwound the stethoscope from around his neck, and settled the ear tips in his ears. He placed the cold diaphragm over Sherlock’s right breast—against the sternal border and second intercostal space—the perfect place for listening to one’s heartbeat. Sherlock held his breath.

‘There it goes,’ said John, his voice low and dark. ‘Still, it goes. Thump. Thump.’ Then his eyes rose and met Sherlock’s straight on for the first time that night. Their focus was sharp, cutting, hateful; they weren’t John’s eyes at all. ‘What for, Johnny boy?’ he asked. ‘How’s it doing that? I thought we had torn it out of you.’

Sherlock felt his blood run cold. Instinctively, he recoiled, shifted away, meaning to leave the bed on the other side and find his feet. But before he could move very far at all, John’s right hand, still bandaged from the damage of the shattered mirror, shot out, seized him around the throat, and slammed his head back against the headboard. ‘Stupid little fuck,’ he snarled. His fingers squeezed, nails sinking into the skin as he compressed Sherlock’s windpipe with vicious intent. Sherlock’s legs kicked out—a response to pain, to lack of air—and overturned the kit, which spilt its contents onto bed and floor. He grabbed John’s arm to try and break his hold. But at the defensive touch, John cocked his left fist and smashed it into the side of Sherlock’s head.

His throat released, Sherlock fell sideways to the mattress, gasping for breath, his head ringing with the exploding sting of the blow. He rolled to his knees, preparing to rise and defend himself, if it came to it, but when he lifted his head, he saw the door hanging open again, and John was gone.

‘Shit,’ he gasped. He scrambled out of the bed and clawed his way back into his t-shirt even as he ran through the door.

He skidded to a stop the instant he entered the dark sitting room—John was on the floor, on his knees and elbows, rocking backward and forward with a jolting rhythm. Sherlock hit the light by the door, but the lights didn’t stop, and with the room illuminated, he saw that John was pressing his wrists together, and his fingers were tensed like claws. His head was bowed low and hidden between his arms, but he could hear a choking, stifled cry in his throat.

He should have known better than to approach John from behind. It had been a lesson learnt early, not long after John returned to Baker Street. But Sherlock didn’t think. Acting out of desperation, not reason, not even experience, he reached out for him, saying, ‘God, John, wake up,’ and laid a hand on the curve of his back. John screamed, twisted, and flung himself around so that he lay flat on the hardwood floor.

Sherlock sprang backward as if he had touched a hot coil and watched helplessly as John’s arms
drew in close, his joined wrists covering his face, which he turned aside as though to bury in the floorboards. ‘Jesus no, Jesus no,’ he panted, voice muffled, limbs quaking.

‘Damn it, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, John,’ said Sherlock. His voice quavered in fear for his friend. He swallowed it down and tried again. ‘John, listen to me. It’s Sherlock. Can you hear me, John?’

Several agonising seconds passed, during which John did nothing but tremble. Sherlock said his name again. Through the panting, Sherlock heard John reply, almost too quietly to be heard: ‘Sherlock?’

‘Yes. Yes, I’m—I’m here. And . . . and Mrs Hudson, too. We’re both here. In our flat.’

Slowly, as if he were moving through water, John rolled to his side and curled into himself. ‘The flat,’ he echoed.

‘Yes, John. You’re home. You’re safe.’

To his great relief, John’s wrists drew apart on their own. He lay still, muscles softening and limbs limp. He was still asleep, and Sherlock feared that if he stayed as he was, the nightmare would reconfigure in his mind. So he needed to re-craft the dream in full, and move him off the floor—cold and hard like the freezer—and to the soft, familiar cushions of the sofa.

‘It’s safe here,’ he repeated. He took a step closer and watched John’s face for signs of stress. His brow was furrowed, his lips pulled down in a frown. Sherlock continued his narration. ‘Safe. Warm. We started a fire in the hearth half an hour ago, and by now, the flames have eaten halfway through the log. So I add another. You . . . you are sitting in your chair, reading the paper. The *Sunday Times*, sports edition. Some twaddle about cricket.’

As he spoke, John’s breathing deepened and the lines in his forehead smoothed out. Sherlock lowered himself to the floor, to one knee, and hesitated with a hand hovering over John’s bony shoulder. ‘Mrs Hudson’s making us tea in the kitchen,’ he continued. He gently, cautiously, placed the hand on John’s arm at the elbow. There was a flinch, but next moment, John relaxed under the touch. ‘You ask for biscuits, and she says not worry—she’s brought those currant scones you like from the corner bakery. I promise not to eat the extra she always brings this time.’

‘You better not,’ John mumbled, quite seriously, though still fast asleep.

Sherlock couldn’t help it: he laughed, a low rumble in his chest. ‘I won’t,’ he said. Then he lifted John’s arm, placed it around his own shoulders, and eased John up into a sitting position. Subconsciously, John gripped his arm at the bicep to support himself, and when Sherlock put an arm around his waist and lifted him to his feet, John followed without resistance.

‘I’m playing my violin,’ said Sherlock, guiding him to the sofa. ‘Mrs Hudson is humming along. A little off pitch and behind the tempo, as usual. The fire is popping—it’s the rapid oxidation, really, the resin trapped in the wood expanding as it heats, creating little pockets of gas ready to explode. It’s what we get for burning pine—’

‘You talk too much,’ John mumbled.

Sherlock grinned as he lowered John onto the cushions. ‘You’re growing sleepy in your chair. So you decide to lie down, here on the sofa, and fall asleep.’

‘What about the scones?’ John asked, childlike, as he settled onto his side, sinking into the cushions. Sherlock cupped the side of his head and guided him back down to the pillow. Then he knelt and pulled a blanket over his shoulders.

‘There will be a whole plate of them in the kitchen when you wake up.’

After that, John didn’t ask any more questions. He sank into a deeper, more restful sleep. But Sherlock stayed where he knelt for a long time. He rested his hand on John’s blanketed shoulder as though to hold him there, to keep him from drifting away from him, and he sat back on his heels, and bowed his head in relief, in enervation, in regret. As he listened to the sound of John’s steady breathing, he resolved to go out in the morning and buy half a dozen scones before John woke up, to invite Mrs Hudson to breakfast, and to lie his fool head off when John asked about the bruise already blooming beneath his bloodshot eye.

***

Sherlock and John weren’t the only ones suffering bad dreams.

‘How’s work going?’

Lestrade cracked his neck and forced himself to settle back into the sofa. Today, he had decided before walking through the door, he would be amenable. Within reason. He would do whatever he had to in order to expedite Dr Quinton’s signature of approval on a clean bill of mental health.

‘Good. Things are good,’ he said, telling himself to smile, to add a little uplift to his voice. The result was a pitch too high and a crooked mouth.

‘Stressful?’

‘Well, that’s the nature of the job, isn’t it.’

Dr Quinton readjusted the spectacles on his nose. ‘I’ve been following the news. The murder of a second homeless man. Ghastly stuff.’

‘Mm.’

‘How’s the investigation going?’
Lestrade’s head quirked to the side. ‘You know I can’t talk about that.’

‘No, of course not, I know that. So let me put it another way: How are you coping?’

‘I’m a homicide detective. This isn’t my first case, doctor. I’ve been doing this sort of thing my whole career. I’m coping just fine.’

‘Yes, but with a double murder of the nature of—’

‘Serial murder,’ Lestrade corrected. ‘The victims were not killed together, as during a double or triple murder, a spree. There was a cooling-off period between the two temporally separated events. We call that serial murder.’

‘And how many serial murderers have you dealt with during your career, detective inspector?’

‘Enough.’

‘How many have you caught?’

Lestrade straightened a little. ‘All but one.’

‘Good record.’

‘Not good enough.’

‘Ah. There it is again.’

With a swift glance at the clock, Lestrade asked, ‘There’s what again?’

‘The self-derision. A couple of weeks ago, you called yourself a bungling copper. Do you remember?’ Lestrade offered only a shallow nod of acknowledgement, not liking at all where this was going. Dr Quinton continued, ‘Do you feel the same today?’

‘Let’s get one thing clear: I never called myself that. Not really.’

‘But is it how you feel?’

Rather than answer that directly, he said, ‘I’m a damn good copper.’

‘Your record would support that.’

‘It’s true.’

‘All right. And I’m sure you excel in each of the very many aspects of your work. Not only working crime scenes and examining dead bodies, but dealing with the live people, too. Criminals. Victims and their families. Superiors, subordinates, and colleagues. Tell me about your relationship with Mr Holmes.’

Lestrade’s pleasant demeanour was slipping: he scowled and looked irritably out the window.

‘What do you say, Greg? We can continue to have these silent sessions, me asking the same questions over and over again, you finding new ways to evade answering. Or we can get at the heart of things, maybe even work through the anxieties that are affecting your work, your sleep, your relationships, so you can start to feel in control of your life again. After all, isn’t that why you’re here?’

‘Why I’m here?’ Yes, the amenable mood had been snuffed out like candle. ‘I’m here because you won’t sign off on the damn form.’

‘Why does that upset you?’

‘Why? Because I shouldn’t be here in the first place! I’m not the one who—’ He caught himself, bit down on his tongue, pinched the bridge of his nose, and squeezed his eyes closed.

Dr Quinton didn’t let it go. He inclined his body forward, an arm across his knee. ‘Greg? Who what?’

It erupted out of him like volcano. ‘I’m not the one who was raped and mutilated for ten days in some godforsaken underground abattoir! I’m not the one who spent more than three years as a dead man. I’m not the one being shot at in my own home because an entire city hates me. And I’m not the one who watched the woman I love murdered before my eyes. I have no business being here, feeling so unbalanced, feeling devastated, feeling like my world is spinning out of my control or might explode at any second. No right.’

Dr Quinton eased himself back into his chair. ‘I see.’

‘Do you? Because it doesn’t make a shit bit of sense to me.’

‘You’re comparing your trauma to others’ and have decided that its severity, well, doesn’t compare.’

‘It doesn’t. It can’t even be called trauma.’

‘Okay. We won’t call it that. For now, We’ll just ignore the fact that you were shot . . .’

‘That was hardly a—’

‘. . . and that you saw your boss get taken out by sniper fire mere moments after you were forced to arrest him . . .’

‘It’s the job—’
'. . . while you were still holding onto his arm, no less . . .'
'I've dealt with that—'
'. . . and that you’d been betrayed by those you trusted, those you relied on to do your job right . . .'
'We were never close—'
'. . . and that someone you cared about, who you believed to be three-years dead, was suddenly alive . . .'
'A shock, not trauma—'
'. . . and that you received first-hand evidence of the brutal treatment, the unimaginable torture, of a friend . . .'
Lestrade had stopped talking; his throat was closing in on itself.
'. . . all within the space of about a week. Okay. We won’t call it trauma. So do we call it?' Lestrade tried to clear his throat and squeaked instead. He swallowed it down, wrinkled his buzzing nose, licked his lips, wiped fingers across his dampening forehead. When he thought he could manage speaking again, he cleared his throat, this time successfully, but still could only manage a whisper. 'Week from hell,' he said.
'Sounds ruddy awful.'
'Mm.'
'I want to remind you, Greg, that any one of those kinds of ordeals brings officers into my office all the time. When these things happen, it doesn’t matter how strong we are—mentally, emotionally. We are human. Events like the ones you’ve experienced take their toll. They rattle us down to our bones. And we wish to God there was something we could have done to prevent it. But we can’t change what has happened. So we punish ourselves, often without even meaning to. Some people stop eating. Others stop sleeping. Others begin to hate themselves or hurt themselves or cut themselves off from loved ones. And none of this is good. You know that. Up here—'he tapped his head—'you know that. But we can’t always stop ourselves, not on our own. So we need outside help. I’m here to help you, Greg.' Lestrade rubbed a hand under his nose and sniffed loudly. 'I know.'
'Good. But we have to work together. You have to start being honest with me, and you can’t do that until you’re honest with yourself. About everything. Your insecurities, your fears, your anger, even. Are you willing to do that?' This wasn’t going the way he had imagined. It took every ounce of willpower he still possessed, but in the end, he nodded his head.
'All right then. I want you to answer my next few questions honestly. Yes or no will do for now, all right?' Again, he nodded, feeling defeated.
'Are you still having the dream?'
Sighing out a ragged breath, he answered with a thick throat. 'Yes.'
'Every night?'
'Most nights.'
'Why do you think you keep having the same dream?'
'Yes or no questions, doc.'
Dr Quinton nodded his concession. 'Do you blame yourself for what happened to Mary Morstan?'
Lestrade glared at Dr Quinton, but though his eyes burned, there was no fire there. Dr Quinton waited patiently for an answer.
'Yes.'
'Do you believe you are right in blaming yourself?'
Lestrade bowed his head and took long, stabilising breaths.
'Honesty, Greg, remember.'
His head came up. 'Yes. Yes, I am. Because . . .'
'Go on.'
'Because I should have known. Because I should have anticipated the danger to Mary. That was my job! He ran a hand across his scratchy chin, feeling the guilt well up inside him like bile, and he was unable to stop it. 'I spent three days looking for John, three days, hacking computer files and talking to all the wrong people and working on a case that just didn’t matter. And then Sherlock Holmes comes along, listens to me bumble on about dead ends and fruitless leads, and a mere twenty minutes later—' He slapped a hand down on the leather armrest so hard that Dr Quinton jumped a little in his seat. 'He knows. Just like that. Mary’s a target. And we’re fifteen
minutes too late getting to her. My phone call is five minutes too late. Five fucking minutes.’

His heart was drumming in his chest, and he couldn’t stand the sound of it, so he kept talking to drown it out. ‘I didn’t see her die, doc. That wasn’t me—that was John. But I’m the one who could have saved her. And I didn’t. I sat in her flat, and I talked with her, and I promised her, right before I walked out that door and left her all alone, that everything would be all right. She believed me; I could see it in her eyes. But I proved myself a liar in the end. So now I have to watch her throat get slit every night, to remind me of how I failed her and John. Every damn right.’

‘Do you think John blames you?’

‘No one knows what John Watson thinks these days.’ He sighed at the instant recognition of something else that had been bothering him, deep down. ‘John and I don’t talk. Hell, I don’t think even John and Sherlock talk. John’s got his own demons to deal with.’

‘Have you tried talking?’

‘I wouldn’t know what to say.’

‘Do you want to talk to him?’

‘Most days, I find it hard just to look at him. He always looks so damned sad all the time, and all I can think about is how I wronged him. But what else am I supposed to do? Pretend like nothing’s wrong? Like nothing happened? Like we’re still living in the days before Sherlock fell?’

‘What do you think John deserves?’

‘Better than what I’m giving him. But I don’t know what to do.’

‘Do you want his forgiveness?’

‘I don’t deserve——’

‘But do you want it?’

Lestrade answered honestly. ‘I don’t want what I don’t deserve.’

‘All right. That’s all right. For now, I think our way forward is clear. We need to deal with these feelings of guilt and self-blame. Until you are able to forgive yourself, the dreams won’t stop.’

‘But——’

‘Guilt is a funny sort of animal, Greg. We think we can cage it, hide it away. But it’s a hungry beast, and soon it starts eating at us from the inside out because we keep feeding it with our negative emotions, our worst memories, and self-doubt. But it can’t be contained forever. Eventually, if we don’t starve it, it will break free to harm us and our relationships with others.’

Molly, thought Lestrade. Already, it was affecting her, them, as he tried to keep her at arm’s length but was unable to let her go. He wanted her too much.

‘Tell me what you want.’

‘I . . .’ Lestrade floundered for a moment before answering. ‘I don’t want to feel like this anymore.’

‘Then are you willing to work on this with me?’ Dr Quinton asked.

He nodded, reluctance and willingness tangled in one.

‘Good. Let’s establish some guiding principles, then, shall we? First: communication. In physical therapy, you exercise the body. In psychotherapy, we talk. Sometimes, that’s exactly how we discover what is weighing us down. So that leads to the second principle: honesty, as we discussed before. And third: trust. You need to trust that I can help you, and I need to be able to trust that you’re being honest with me. Even when it gets hard and I ask you to tell me about something you really don’t want to talk about, we keep moving forward. Yes?’

‘Fine.’

‘Good. Then let’s begin with something easy, something I think you’ve been lying to yourself about for some time.’ Lestrade tensed. ‘Let’s talk about your feelings of resentment toward Sherlock Holmes.’

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Lestrade walked out of Dr Quinton’s office feeling exhausted, as though he could lie down, right there in the hallway, and be asleep before his eyelids had a chance to close.

But there was work to be done. There was always work to be done. And though he was pressing his team hard, stretching them to their limits with long hours and vague threats and unforgiving, unsympathetic responses to their failures, there was still more work to be done. Dryers and Milton headed the search and recovery team for the stolen evidence from the convent but were encountering only dead end after dead end, which led to Lestrade shouting at them as he demanded to know whether they had thought about investigating with their eyes open for a change. Reynolds and Cooper were charged with heading the Jefferies murder, and to work alongside Formisano and Yang, who headed the O’Harris murder and the hunt for Darren Hirsch. All they had accomplished so far, however, was tracking the origin of the hemlock, an herb that had been growing out of season and that was also uncommon to local florist shops. The flower did grow, however, in a greenhouse at Hanover College, not far from where O’Harris had last been seen. A lock had been busted, though no fingerprints had been found.
Then there was Donovan, whom he’d assigned to finding the sod who had fired the Enfield revolver through the window of 221B Baker Street. She attacked her assignment with vigour—perhaps to compensate for avoiding more than one jilted conversation with 221B’s occupants—but her search was so far proving as fruitless as Dryers and Milton’s.

The trail to finding Sebastian Moran had gone dry. The one leading to Irene Adler, non-existent. And Darren Hirsch was moving around London like a ghost: materialising, attacking, and vanishing without a trace. Well, not quite without a trace. At least they knew now that it was Darren Hirsch—the DNA results had come back positive at last.

And the one person on whom he had been relying above anyone else to help him solve it, all of it, whom he’d finally been sanctioned to consult with, had his attention divided in favour of something Lestrade couldn’t possibly beg him to dismiss, no matter how dire things got.

But then, how dire would they get? Two murders was bad, but there wasn’t any solid indication that there would be more. And all Lestrade needed was for Hirsch to make one mistake, or for one witness to give him just the right sliver of information that would lead to just the right circumstances for taking the bastard down. If they were lucky, he wouldn’t need Sherlock at all.

He started off down the hallway toward the lifts where he punched the down button. While he waited, he considered taking an hour to drop in on Sherlock and John (to prove to Dr Quinton, if not to himself, that he felt no resentment), not for a consultation or to talk shop at all but just . . . to talk. As friends. But even as he thought it, he dismissed it as ludicrous. Sherlock wasn’t the sort to just talk, like mates going out for a pint. If not crime, what the hell would they talk about?

The lift doors opened with a ding. Lestrade stepped in, hit the floor for his office, and at the very moment the doors closed behind him, his text alert sounded in the pocket of his suit coat. He sighed and fished for it, thinking of all the people he’d rather not talk to at the moment: Gregson, with another request for an update; Anderson, again begging to be reinstated on his investigation team; Mycroft, with another damned covert assignment; Sherlock, telling him there’d been another projectile attack on his windows . . . His heart rose a little, though, at the possibility of Molly, insisting on taking him to dinner and refusing to take any work-related excuses for an answer. He thought how he just might let her win, shock off the myriad responsibilities that weighed him down, and take a few hours to be with her, just the two of them, not bothering about anything else at all . . .

He checked the lit-up screen: Watson.

And his breath stuck in his throat.

Because he knew it wasn’t John. Because John never called him. And because John was programmed into his address book as John W now. This was an old number, from an old phone, a phone that was now, as far as he knew, in the hands of fugitive sadist. He had received messages from this number before, and they had each of them been . . . horrific.

He couldn’t breathe. He could barely think. Something inside screamed at him not to open the message, to delete it, to pretend he had never received it to begin with. But already, his thumb was hovering over the screen to retrieve it. He knew he could do nothing else. Bracing, he opened the text.

‘Oh god,’ he said aloud, as the lift doors opened with a cheery ding.
FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2015

She found Anderson in the Yard’s refectory where he was halfway through a microwaved Salisbury steak and instant mashed potatoes.

‘Snowing again, if you can believe it,’ she said, dropping into the vacant chair across from him.

He gave a start, which she ignored. Instead, she plucked the fork from his hand, scooped up some mashed potato, and ate it. ‘Ugh,’ she said, pulling a face and passing the fork back to him.

‘Disgusting. I don’t know how you can stand this cafeteria food.’

His face screwed up like she’d spit in it. ‘It’s cheap,’ he said. ‘And if I’m on the verge of losing my job, I’d best start saving every penny. Kind of you to care, Sally.’

‘Don’t be so dramatic.’ She kicked his leg teasingly under the table. ‘You’re not sacked yet.’ She smiled tightly, if not affectingly, cocking her head to the side and examining him with dark, incisive eyes. ‘Looking a little tense for someone with the luxury of running labs indoors all the livelong day while the rest of us brave the cold and wet.’

Refreshing his scowl, he retorted, ‘You’d be sore, too, if you had to be hunched over a microscope for hours on end. And that’s *before* the paperwork.’

‘You should get up and move around more. Walk. Stretch. Do star jumps.’

‘Thanks for the advice,’ he said with a snort. ‘I want back in the field.’

‘Yeah, well,’ she shrugged and took a sip from his water, ‘I’m not here to talk about that. That is a matter entirely out of my hands.’

‘Don’t be stupid, you have Lestrade’s ear. He likes you.’ She laughed, but he pressed on. ‘Tell him it was an honest mistake! Tell him I didn’t mean anything by it. It was really late. Or bloody early. Look, I was tired, a little out of sorts—’

‘How’s the family, Anderson?’ she cut in. She commandeered the fork again and began pushing peas into the potatoes.

‘What? My family?’

‘Yeah. Sweet Mum, good old Dad, everyone doing all right?’

‘You want to talk about my family?’

‘Just being friendly. You went for a visit last weekend. How’d that go?’

She saw the confusion, the suspicion, in his eyes, the failure to size her up with any degree of success. ‘Fine, they’re all fine. Mum’s due for another optometry appointment, what with her eyesight not being what it used to . . . Hang on. How did you know I went to Reading?’

‘I could hear you chewing Jelly Babies from the other side of the office, that’s how. Your mum always sends you back to London with a sack full of them.’

‘Well, aren’t you a right little Sherlock Holmes, Anderson?’ Anderson seethed. Donovan’s smile slipped off entirely. No more games. Setting aside the fork, she placed her elbows on the table and tended forward.

‘Your dad,’ she said, ‘Falklands veteran, isn’t he?’

‘Yeah. So?’

‘And your granddad? World War Two vet, yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Ah. And great-granddad? World War One?’

‘Look, I come from a long line of military careers. So what? So I’m a ruddy coward for not enlisting, is that it?’

She wasn’t deterred. ‘And great-great granddad? What are we talking, the Afghan War?’

‘Jesus, I don’t know. Why are you asking me this?’

‘Got any memorabilia? Any heirlooms from the old pops?’

He frowned. She watched him lick his lips, watched his eyebrows lower in consternation. He began to twiddle his fork unnecessarily. ‘Some things, I guess. I mean, I don’t have anything, but—’

‘But Papa Anderson has, hasn’t he? Things like old medals? Photographs?’
‘Sure . . .’

‘An Enfield revolver?’

‘Now hang on.’ He looked around the refectory to see if anyone happened to be listening in. ‘Just what exactly are you asking me?’

‘I’m asking where you were last Friday.’

‘You know that. I was in Reading.’

‘Maybe during the day. But you wouldn’t stay the night. I mean, really, love, not with your flat only a thirty-minute train ride away. When was the last time you actually slept in your parents’ house? I know you better than that, Anderson. So what I’m asking is this: Where were you Friday night? Say, around nine o’clock? Back in London, were you?’

He squirmed. ‘I know where you’re going with this. I know exactly where.’

‘Just covering all my bases. Can’t rule out anyone, especially not someone with a score to settle. That would be irresponsible. So just a refresher course. Here’s how detective work works, in case you’d forgotten, being off the team and all. It’s a game of joining the dots: suspect, opportunity, motive.’

‘Stop. Stop it. I had nothing to do with what happened on Baker Street.’

‘Then I’ll ask again: Where were you?’

‘At home. In my flat, watching telly.’

‘What did you watch?’

‘BBC Four. It was, um, a documentary. About military aircraft.’

‘Learn anything interesting?’

‘I didn’t realise there’d be a quiz.’

‘You in all night?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can anyone corroborate that?’

‘No, I was alone, because, as you seem to have forgotten, I’m a friendless tosser.’

If he had been hoping for some pity, Sally Donovan wasn’t doling it out. ‘So no one came to the door. No one rung you up. Not a soul to vouch for you. And you just had a night in.’

‘I’d been suspended for three days, I didn’t exactly feel like going out and celebrating.’

‘There are other reasons to leave the flat. Look.’ She interlaced her fingers under her chin and stared him down. ‘This is how I can see it going down. You’re furious. Maybe a little pissed. Of course you are. He embarrassed you in front of the whole team. Hard to blame him. I mean, really, Anderson, hemlock poisoning? But when you lashed out, fought back, gave him the what-for, you got punished. What next? You go crying to mummy, and while you’re home having a good whinge, you notice granddaddy’s antique revolver behind glass on the mantelpiece . . .’

‘Sally—’

‘Next thing you know, you’re back in London, but the injustice still has you rankled, and one niggling little thought just won’t go away. A drink or two later, and it’s beginning to sound like a very sensible thought indeed. Am I warm, or am I hot?’

‘I can’t believe you! I am not a suspect! You honestly think I’d do something like that? Me? What kind of person do you take me for?’

If Donovan had been a hound, she would have seen his ears flatten against the side of his head and her hackles rise. Her palms fell to the table top. ‘What kind of person do I take you for? Let me think. How about the kind of person who taunts rape victims just to stick it to a personal foe?’

His jaw fell open. ‘Sally—’

‘That’s not why I did it.’

‘Oh, okay. So you’re the kind of person who taunts rape victims for the hell of it. You know, you’re lucky all Lestrade did was suspend you for three days. If it had been up to me, I would have sacked your sorry arse on the spot.’

‘Watson shouldn’t have been there in the first place!’

‘That’s your defence?’ she cried. They really were drawing attention now, but her volume had spiked beyond her willingness to control it. ‘He shouldn’t have been there, so he had it coming? You’re sick. Sick. I should drag you down to interrogation right now.’

He paled. ‘Sally,’ he said beseechingly, speaking barely loud enough to be heard; she watched him try to melt into the table, despairing of the plethora of eyes pointed in their direction. ‘Sally, this whole thing . . . It’s absurd. You know me. You know me. I would never— I could never— I’m not capable!’

She snorted. That could very well be true. Anderson was too much of a coward to do even something as pusillanimous as a shoot and run. The truth was, she was bluffing. Beyond her own suspicions—coloured by her disgust over what had happened at the crime scene—she had no true evidence linking him to the shooting on Baker Street. Just speculation. Forensics had been able to
lift only a partial print off of one bullet, not enough to match any records. There had been no eyewitnesses—none that had come forward, anyway—and of course the revolver itself hadn’t been recovered, despite the ongoing search in the most likely of places for panicking assailants to dispose of weapons: skips and sewers and postboxes. The Thames. So when it came down to the bare bones of it all, Donovan didn’t really believe Anderson had the stones for attempted murder, no matter how thoroughly his fragile ego was whipped. His revenge was more petulant, childish, cowardly. Like being a nasty, hateful git under his breath.

But her own doubts weren’t stopping her from sending officers to Reading to question his mother, which is exactly what they were doing at this very moment. She had timed their knock on the front door with her entrance into the cafeteria. She’d work on getting the search warrant for his flat, next.

All that aside, there was something off about him. It was in the way he blinked, like there was an eyelash caught under the lid, in the way he couldn’t focus on any one object for more than two seconds together. It was how his shoulders rounded forward and his chest caved inward. It was in the way he swallowed and licked his lips and kept shifting the tray, as though to re-establish the barrier between them, afraid she might leap over the table and throttle him and the tray would be his only defence. And it wasn’t just today. His behaviour had been askew for days, maybe weeks. She just couldn’t quite place her finger on why.

“What are you not telling me?” she hissed at him.

He spluttered. “What? I don’t; I mean, I, I, what are you—?”

“Something’s not right. I can smell it. And it stinks.”

He glowered, and his closed mouth twisted about like he was forming words but not uttering them. At last, his body stiffened and a shadow passed over his face. He said, “Then maybe a hot shower would do you some good, Donovan.”

“Excuse me?”

“The stench of Sherlock Holmes. It’s all over you.”

She smirked. ‘Oh no. I know that ploy. You’re not turning this back on me.’ She raised her chin in defiance. ‘My conscience is clear.’

“As clear as it was when you arrested him three-and-a-half years ago? You knew then he was a psychopath, and guilty as a modern-day Judas. You were convinced of it.”

“I was following the evidence. That was my job. Just because I didn’t like where it led didn’t stop me from—”

“Oh, you liked it all right. What was it you said to me, when we’d heard he’d jumped? You looked at me and you said, It’s over. Thank God. I knew what you meant, exactly what you meant. He was over, done, dead, and the world was free of one more criminal.”

“We all believed it. That he had lied, I mean. We couldn’t see the whole picture.”

“No, no, Sally! No! You can’t see it now! You’ve painted him a new picture over the real one, to justify what he did and to fool you, all of you. You’re blinder now than you’ve ever been. That man’s got Lestrade eating out of his hand and you on a leash, and the people out there—” he stabbed a finger at the windows—“they can feel how dangerous he is, more dangerous than ever, and they’re scared shitless and wondering what’s the matter with the Metropolitan Police who still invite him to crime scenes and let him handle and manipulate and probably plant or destroy real evidence!”

“I’m not having this conversation again. You know how I feel about Holmes being at crime scenes. You know how I feel about him personally. But how many times do I have to say this? He’s not a criminal!”

“Not a convicted one,” said Anderson peevishly, if not with a dash of self-righteous coolness. ‘Not anymore. The man should have gone to trial, if not straight to a jail cell. We all know it. But he wormed his way out of it with some cock-and-bull story about two Richard Brooks. Yeah, well, show me two bodies, give me some hard proof I can run labs on. But he can’t, can he? No one can. Sherlock Holmes is nothing more than a clever storyteller. But the truth will out, Sally. Watch him, you’ll see. You’ll see just how dangerous a man he really is.’

Before she could retort, her mobile sounded. It was a text from Lestrade:

My office, now.

GL

At once, she placed both hands on the table and pushed herself to her feet, leaning closer over the table, and watched him shrink back. ‘I’m watching you, Anderson. You take any missteps, I’ll know. Got it?”

***

It was Friday. Sherlock Holmes was waiting anxiously for something to happen. Then, at half five in the afternoon, something did.

His phone rang.

The caller ID showed Lestrade’s name against a lit screen. He eyed John across the room where he was watching the BBC News at Five. Though John didn’t stir at the sound of the phone, Sherlock saw him reach for the remote to turn down the volume by increments, inclining his head slightly toward Sherlock, the better to hear.
He put the phone to his ear and sighed dramatically. ‘What is it this time, Mycroft?’

‘Sherlock. It’s me,’ came Lestrade’s voice. Sherlock could practically see the look of bewilderment in what he was sure were currently pinched eyebrows.

‘Let me guess—just a kindly, fraternal chat, is it? Make it quick.’

‘. . . Oh. Is John with you?’

‘Of course. I might inquire into your diet again, but we both know how well that’s going.’

John’s head turned back, giving his fuller attention to the telly.

‘Right. Okay, don’t say anything. Just listen. There’s something I need to show you. It’s probably best—no, I know it’s best that John doesn’t see. It’s . . . it’s not good. Can you come down to the Yard? I’m giving a full briefing in twenty minutes.’

‘Your timing is impeccable. As is your indolence. Is your army of minions on holiday? Can’t be bothered to do a bit of legwork yourself?’

‘This had better be for show, dear brother,’ said Lestrade testily. ‘Will John be all right if you leave for a short while? What’s he at today?’

‘Two. That’s how I like to keep it, and I’ll trust you not to meddle with that.’

‘A unit is on its way to keep an eye on things. Officers will be watching the front door from a discreet location. And I’ll try to get you back as quickly as I can. How long can you—?’

‘One hour. Then I’m done. I can’t be expected to miss The One Show at seven. They’re featuring Keely Hawes.’

‘Then move your arse, Holmes, and get down here. I wouldn’t want to keep you from your celebrity gossip.’

‘You’re a pain in the arse, Mycroft. You owe me.’

He ended the call and stood up from the couch with a huff. He opened his mouth, but John preempted him. ‘Mycroft, was it?’

‘I’m going down to the Diogenes Club,’ said Sherlock. He knew John had no fondness for the place, so what he said next would present no temptation. ‘He wants me to review some transcriptions of a telephone conversation from Belarus that he thinks might be coded. Of course, if he would bother to string two beads together he could figure this out on his own, but that’s Mycroft for you. Do you want to come?’

‘No,’ said John to the television.

‘Shan’t be long,’ he said as he pulled on his coat and fitted his gloves and scarf. ‘And it’s Mrs Hudson’s bridge night, so she’ll be out. I’ll bring something home, then, shall I? Thai?’

‘Yes, all right.’

He felt his coat pocket for phone, keys, and wallet, took one last look at John to assure himself that he was indeed of sound mind today, and set his brain’s alarm clock, beginning the countdown. One hour. He would keep to it.

***

The last time John had set foot inside the Diogenes Club had been on the night before Sherlock died, at which point Mycroft had near enough admitted that he’d been the one to tempt Moriarty with his brother’s scent before setting him on the trail. In the days that followed, Mycroft had failed to claim the body, attend the funeral, or even watch the casket lower into a hole in the earth. John. It was John who had done all those things. Days later, Mycroft would accuse him of failing to protect Sherlock, a thing for which John already accused himself.

John Watson had no love for the man. He saw Mycroft’s sins more clearly than anyone, he believed, more clearly than even Sherlock. Here was a man with untold resources and manpower at his fingertips, and he had sat by while Moriarty was acquitted of crimes the whole world knew him to be guilty of. Then he had watched him walk free. He had known, before anyone, that Sherlock had been in danger, yet he had done nothing. So though John knew what Mycroft had done in helping Lestrade find him in his own torture chamber, that night, and though he knew that Mycroft had been trying to make amends ever since, in his own, minimal, man-behind-the-curtain kind of way, John would never be able to forgive what Mycroft had done to his own brother.

John made concerted efforts to avoid any direct contact with Mycroft Holmes. If he knew Mycroft was on his way to the flat, he kept to his room; and if he turned up unannounced, he found a reason to excuse himself from the sitting room. Not that he happened by very often at all, and John faulted him for that, too. So it was only after much chewing of the lips and clenching of the fists that he finally picked up his phone, found Mycroft’s number among the short list of names in his address book, and called.

‘Evening, Doctor Watson,’ said Mycroft on the other end, failing to disguise his surprise at being contacted. ‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’

John skipped over the niceties. ‘Is Sherlock with you?’

There was a slight pause while Mycroft seemed to consider this question. He answered slowly. ‘No. Have you misplaced him?’

‘Are you at the Diogenes Club?’ he asked next.
‘I’m not even in London. John, is something the matter?’

‘Nothing,’ John said. And he ended the call.

His suspicion, then, had been correct. Sherlock, though with all his snideness intact, had agreed all too readily to assist the brother he never readily assisted. Even had he been interested—and when had cracking codes ever been interesting?—he surely would have made Mycroft beg a little longer. Clever of him to play it so cool, inviting him along somewhere he knew John wouldn’t care to go. But he had miscalculated. For as well as Sherlock knew John, he had forgotten to account for one little detail: John knew Sherlock.

But if not Mycroft, then who had called? And where had Sherlock hurried off to? What had he not wanted John to know?

John plucked his cane to push himself to his feet, but he let it fall against the chair again once he was upright and hobbled unaided to his laptop, which lay open on the table by the boarded windows. He woke the monitor and sat. He located the site for Sherlock’s smartphone, typed in Sherlock’s email address, and entered the password. John knew this trick. He would use GPS to find him.

In less than half a minute, a map of London appeared, along with a moving, blinking dot. John watched it roll south on Park Lane, then to Grosvenor, and by the time it turned onto Victoria Street, he knew exactly where Sherlock was headed, and he felt the swirling disquiet burst into flame. It was a case! It was his case! It had to be! Any other case and Sherlock would have said, he would asked him to come along. But now, he was being shunted to the side, kept in the dark, like a child, a helpless little child.

With a loud screech of the chair, he pushed back from the desk and shot to his feet, but he’d taken only two steps when a sudden pain burst from the site of the gunshot wound and, like electricity, reverberated up and down the bone, from ankle to knee to hip. He gasped, gripped the table to keep his balance, and squeezed his eyes shut and jaw tight, waiting for the pain to ebb. When he could open his eyes again, his sight was cloudy, but he used his anger to fuel him. Cane in hand, he staggered around the flat, collecting shoes and gloves and coat and hat, and by the time he was dressed for the winter air, Sherlock—he saw by the dot on the screen—had arrived at New Scotland Yard.

There was one problem. He believed (and had for a while) that someone—Lestrade’s people? Mycroft’s people?—was watching the flat. If they hadn’t been before the shooting, they certainly were now. He had no proof of this beyond the suspicion that something had been set up even after John had expressed (heatedly) his dislike of the thought of being watched. Bollocks the claim of security. What if they were turncoats, like the others? Double agents? What if they were given keys to the flat? What if they were tracking his movements? And all in the name of his protection? Sherlock hadn’t liked the thought either, but Mycroft couldn’t be trusted to respect his brother’s wishes.

So he couldn’t use the front door. Not if they were watching, not if they would try to stop him leaving. Fortunately, for him, Mrs Hudson was out, and she had a back door to the alley. He would use that.

He stepped outside and pulled the door closed securely behind him. The chill wind stung his hot face, carrying with it flurries of snow that didn’t seem to be landing. Before stepping away from the back door, he checked up and down the alley, then high and low, assessing the threat level. When he was satisfied, he made for the Jubilee Line.

The tube was crowded with the usual commuters returning home and eager for the weekend. Normally, the crowds made him anxious, but John convinced himself that he was too angry to care. With the seats all occupied, he stood. He grabbed hold of a metal pole and rested his weight against it, just to take some of the pressure off his bad leg while he balanced with the cane. At the next stop, Bond Street, more people got on the train than got off, and again at Green Park. His anger slipped from his hold as the press of bodies began to overwhelm him, and he kept shifting, skirting around the pole to find his own unconfined space, but there was nowhere to go. His coat was upright and hobbled unaided to his laptop, which lay open on the table by the boarded windows. He woke the monitor and sat. He located the site for Sherlock’s smartphone, typed in Sherlock’s email address, and entered the password. John knew this trick. He would use GPS to find him.

When he was satisfied, he made for the Jubilee Line.

People shifted and jostled, and a body pressed itself firmly against his backside.

John let out a strangled, half-swallowed sort of yelp and thrust himself forward and into the crowd, making directly for the doors. He jolted through the mass of bodies and was shoved hither and thither himself, but his eyes were fixed on the closed doors with half a plan to wrench them open whether or not the train was still moving. To the people he shoved past, he made no apology, which he wouldn’t have been able to voice even if he’d had the wits enough to think the words, and when he at last reached the exit, he placed a hand on the cold glass and gasped, trying to breathe.

‘Sir, are you okay?’

He heard the question, but he didn’t register it.

‘I think this one’s gonna be sick.’

‘Oh god, let him out first.’

‘Stay back, honey. Don’t touch him.’

At last, the doors opened at Westminster, and he hurried out, almost losing his footing but unable stop his feet from moving until he’d passed through the crowd awaiting to board, then down the
platform and into another crowd pushing into their next train.

When the press of bodies thinned out, John found himself leaning a shoulder against a wall while the people continued to flow by him like a raging river. He closed his eyes, and with every breath, he thought one, two, three, four, five, and hold. Breathe in. Breathe out.

He still had to take the District Line to St James’s Park.

When he at last emerged onto the street again, he was so stiff he could barely walk, but the cold air rushed into his lungs, and the oxygen loosened his tense muscles and revived him enough to press onward. It was a two-minute walk more to the Yard, and his shaky legs steadied as he went. He took another bracing breath before he pulled open the Yard doors and entered.

Though he had not been inside this building for many years, not much about it had changed. He still had to pass through a metal detector, present identification, take a visitor’s badge, and sign his name in a log book. Glancing up the list of guests, he did not see Sherlock’s name, but that wasn’t entirely surprising. It was doubtful he had come in through the visitor’s entrance to begin with.

John walked up to reception. The young man behind the counter didn’t recognise him at a glance, which John thought just as well.

‘I’m here to see Detective Inspector Lestrade,’ he said, infusing his voice with as much of the old military confidence he could muster.

‘Are you expected?’

‘Damn right I am.’

‘Oh. Okay.’ The young man typed something into his keyboard. ‘It appears that DI Lestrade is currently conducting a briefing.’

‘Yes, I know. That’s exactly where I’m meant to be.’

The young man took John in, scarred temple to lame leg, and said, ‘I believe it’s for officers only.’

‘But seeing the hard look on John’s face, he trailed off.

John pulled out his wallet, opened it, and withdrew a plastic card. ‘And for all the members of his team, I’m a consultant.’ He threw the card down in front of the receptionist and waited, almost daring the young man to show him to a waiting room or invite him back tomorrow.

‘It’s, erm, room 422,’ he said instead. ‘Lifts are just around the—’

‘I know where they are,’ said John, reclaiming his card.

Alone in a lift, he tore the visitor’s badge off the front of his coat and stuffed it into a pocket.

***

Due to a conflicting meeting and a few hiccups in technology, the briefing was slow to get underway. While the officers were still assembling in the room—everyone from junior detectives to forensics specialists to situation analysts—Sherlock took a seat in the front row, impatiently drumming fingers on his crossed knee. Lestrade stood at the front of the room, hands akimbo, speaking crossly with the IT guy who was trying to figure out why the projector wasn’t working, while Sgt Donovan stood to the side, arms folded and looking just about as irked as Sherlock felt.

Sherlock caught Lestrade’s eye, tapped his watch, and gave him his most dour of expressions, while Sgt Donovan stood to the side, arms folded and looking just about as irked as Sherlock felt.

‘Aha!’ Lestrade cried as the projector snapped to life, and a square of blue light illuminated the screen behind him. He gave the IT guy a sharp jerk of the head indicating that he leave the room.

Apparently, his very presence carried with it a kind of force field, for though there was limited seating and two rows of bodies were standing in the back of the small room, no one occupied the seats directly behind or on either side of him. He heard whispered jokes about ‘the assistant going rogue’ and that he was sure to be ‘disciplined’ when he returned home. He pretended not to notice, or to care. But he was Sherlock Holmes—he noticed everything.

‘Aha!’ Lestrade cried as the projector snapped to life, and a square of blue light illuminated the screen behind him. He gave the IT guy a sharp jerk of the head indicating that he leave the room.

All right everyone, quiet down! Quiet. Let’s get this underway. McLeod, the door. Thank you.

Alone in a lift, he tore the visitor’s badge off the front of his coat and stuffed it into a pocket.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, silently urging Lestrade to cut the preamble. Whether Lestrade could sense the telepathic cattle prod to get to the point, Sherlock could only speculate, but with the next words out of his mouth, he did just that and got straight to it.

‘This morning,’ he said, ‘I received, to my mobile, a—a here he seemed to struggle for the word; Sherlock supplied it in his own mind: threat—a—message,’ he settled on, ‘from John Watson’s old phone, which we believe still to be in Moran’s possession. It is still untraceable, and the phone company can’t seem to recover its billing records or cut its service. We’re still working on that one. This is the . . . sixth communication from Moran that I have received to my personal mobile.’

Seventh, thought Sherlock, though he supposed that Lestrade was purposefully omitting the video from his count. He had deleted it, after all, after forwarding it to Arthur Doyle’s phone, which had ultimately been destroyed. No evidence of the video now existed, except for the perfect copy in Sherlock’s eidetic memory.

‘The nature of each of these communications has been on the level of threat and intimidation. Now, the images I’m about to show you, some of you have seen before, though many of you have not, as they have been deemed highly sensitive and classified. Let me repeat: this information is confidential and is not to be shared with anyone not on this task force. The only reason you are all permitted to view them is in the interest of . . . internal transparency. And you need to know the
sort of creature we’re dealing with. Lights please.’ Someone killed the lights. ‘Thank you. Exhibit 23-A.’

Sherlock saw Lestrade steel himself. Then he clicked a button on the hand-held remote, and the first photo Sherlock had seen, that day in the morgue at Bart’s, was projected onto the screen. The image had already seared itself into his memory, but seeing it again—enlarged, the only thing illuminated in a darkened room—twisted something deep inside him. For a moment, it was like it was happening all over again. As he stared at the image of John’s beaten face, the bright blood in his mouth, the smears of dark red and black and blue on his cheeks and jaw and neck, he was besought once again with that feeling of helplessness and desperation, and he had to remind himself that John was safe, back at home. Nevertheless, without being aware of it, he began scratching the back of his hand with his fingernails.

‘This photo was taken with a mobile phone on Tuesday, October 21, of last year,’ Lestrade continued, ‘on the seventh day of John Watson’s captivity. It was received to my mobile the next day, Wednesday, October 22, at approximately 1830 hours, some seven hours after the body of Mary Morstan was recovered from Baker Street.’

He clicked the remote again.

‘It was immediately followed by two more photographs. Exhibit 23-B—the second photo flashed up on the screen, a close shot of John’s bloody wrists, joined by wire; he clicked again—’and Exhibit 23-C.’ As he continued to talk, Lestrade left on the screen the image of John lying prostrate on a bloody tiled floor, his back a mess of lacerations in the form of writing. His measured tone was something Sherlock didn’t understand. If it had been him, he would have been shouting his wrath at all of them, demanding that they get off their arses and find the son of a bitch who had inflicted this cruelty upon an innocent man.

‘Along with Ms Morstan’s body, these photos were our first pieces of hard evidence that indicated not only the severity of Watson’s predicament, but also that he was still alive and that the brutal treatment was ongoing. This series of photographs was accompanied by a single text message promising the further torture—specifically, the dismemberment—of the victim if we—that is, if I—did not turn over Sherlock Holmes, who was, at the time, believed to be dead by all but a few.’

At that, Sherlock heard a few people behind him murmuring something to a neighbour, but Lestrade’s voice overrode them.

‘Now, that text message referred to John Watson as Johnny boy, what our psychoanalysts refer to as a debasing moniker intended to diminish his status as an independent agent and turn him into a sort of pet. This nickname was used in conjunction with the possessive pronoun our, that is our Johnny boy, further implying a sentiment of ownership over Dr Watson that the offenders, specifically Moran, had developed. This theory is furthered by the inscriptions Moran made in the victim’s skin, as you see here. Though intended as a message for Holmes, Moran was also, in effect, marking what he considered to be his own property, thereby claiming Dr Watson as his. Our psychoanalysts, specialising in criminal psychology and profiling, believe that by this stage—and correct me if I’m wrong here, Hinckley—Moran and his men had reduced Dr Watson, in their own minds, to little more than an object, a toy and a tool, but also that they had formed a kind of possessiveness over him to such an extreme that we might call it, what was it?’

‘An intense psychological attachment,’ said Hinckley. ‘Extreme possessiveness disorder.’

‘That’s right. A psychological, possessive attachment, which we believe was only intensified with the later sexual violation.’ He clicked the remote again, and the screen went to blue. Sherlock released the tension in his muscles, which he hadn’t realised until then had been seized up, and at that point noticed how the skin on the back of his hand was raw and red from his scratching. He cursed under his breath and flattened his offending hand over the sore to hide it.

‘The next message I received from Watson’s old phone came a couple of weeks later . . .’

As Lestrade continued to relate the psychology behind the single-worded text Bang and Pitts’ demise, Sherlock’s phone sounded with a text message. He felt eyes turn in his direction. Instantly, he silenced the alert noise and checked the screen. There was a momentary flutter of uncertainty morphed into alarm upon reading the text:

Next time you intend to use me as an alibi, a little forewarning would not go amiss.

He gasped through his nose. Immediately, he hit reply and let his fingers fly across the keyboard.

What did you tell him?

A moment later came the reply:

I was not aware that discretion was necessary. I told him that I am not currently in London. He hung up on me.

Sherlock quelled the impulse to shoot to his feet and run out of the room, to hail a cab or at the very least to call John with an explanation. . . . and to make sure he hadn’t done anything rash. But what was the most likely consequence? In all probability, John was still sitting at home, seething, no doubt, and waiting to see whether Sherlock would keep to his word about one hour. He checked the time. Forty-two minutes had passed. He would need to leave very soon.

‘Moran’s only purpose in sending that text,’ Lestrade continued, ‘was to show me that he was in control. He feared no reprisal. He wanted to boast—’
‘Get to it, Lestrade,’ Sherlock spoke out.

At his intrusion, the murmur swelled again, but Sherlock was beyond caring. Lestrade looked for a moment as though he were biting his tongue, but he nodded curtly.

‘Threat and intimidation,’ he repeated, ‘is his game. And it is exactly what he’s doing now. A reminder about the confidential nature of these images. No one is permitted to discuss them with anyone outside of this room.’ Lestrade caught Sherlock’s eye again, and they shared a look of chagrin, before clicking the remote again and bringing up the newest screen.

It was a video, and the moment it began playing, Sherlock’s fingers sank back into his skin, this time at the wrist, and latched on.

It was his third time viewing it since arriving at the Yard twenty-five minutes ago, but it was no easier now, not when these people who didn’t really care about John’s personal suffering were being made privy to it. Yelling at Lestrade, arguing against the senseless dissemination of sensitive materials, had done nothing to dissuade him, for he was under direct orders from Chief Superintendent Gregson, who insisted on employing transparency with the entire team working the case. There had been too much cloak-and-dagger detective work to this point, Gregson had said, unfazed by Sherlock’s rant. It was time to bring things into the light. Every member of this task force, Gregson had said in his plain-speaking, authoritative, no-room-for-discussion manner, has been individually reviewed and judged trustworthy. They are professionals with a job to do; I will not treat them like children.

So there was John, laid out naked on the blood-splattered orange tiles like a spectacle for every viewing Tom, Dick, and Harry with an officer’s title before his name. He wore only the metal cilice on his right leg, and his hands, still bound to the drain, were crushed beneath his body where Daz had left him.

‘Day eight, is it?’

The gritty voice of Sebastian Moran himself. And the camera shook. The image became a mess of streaking colour and flickering lights. When it settled again, Moran was in front of the camera, straddling John’s backside with his knees on the tiles and bearing a silver scalpel like a sceptre. He motioned to the camera, inviting it closer.

‘Watch how I work, boys,’ he said with a smirk.

And the camera watched—as did the full room of Yarders. They watched as Moran found a stretch of unbroken skin on John’s back, in the depression along the outer edge of the erector spinae where the tissue was soft and deep. Moran turned to the camera and gave a wink. Then he pressed the tip of the scalpel deep into the flesh. As the blade sank, bright-red blood rushed to the surface, easy as breaking an egg yolk, and as Moran dragged the scalpel down toward the waist in one, long, straight stroke, the blood spattered down John’s side in a solid sheet. The instrument retreated, dark and dripping, and Moran wiped the skin free of blood to find a new home for blade.

‘His face,’ Moran said.

The camera pulled up, repositioning in front of John’s face, which filled the screen. One cheek pressed against the basement floor; the other was swollen and darkly bruised. Blood stained his patchy eight-day beard. Broken skin peppered the side of his face as though he’d been in an explosion. He might as well have been: he looked to be in shock. His eyes—pale and bloodshot from exhaustion and shining with tears—stared straight ahead, unfocused and unaware of the camera. His nose was clearly broken and curved to the left side of his face. His lips, cracked, scabbed, were parted so he could breathe. But he seemed hardly aware that a camera was being held in front of his face. Every few seconds, he winced and his head trembled against the tiles; it was the most reaction he gave to being carved. It was the eighth IOU.

After forty-one excruciating seconds of watching John’s face as he endured this torture, Moran’s own came into the frame as his body curved over John’s. His head tilted to the side, and he spoke, softly, into John’s ear. His voice was too low for the camera’s microphone to pick up, but John’s eyebrows twitched, then his eyes closed, and a tear slipped from each eye, one striking the floor, one the puddle on the flat of his broken nose. Moran laughed, dark, hideous laughter, and kissed John at the temple, lips and tongue, a single lick of blood.

The camera pulled down once again, and the last shot was the completed IOU bleeding freely down John’s back. The video ended.

Heavy silence hung in the room as the screen went dark and the room lost all illumination, but Sherlock could hear the smothered glottal stops as Lestrade repeatedly trying to clear his throat without making any noise. At last, he managed to say, gruffly, ‘Lights,’ and someone flipped the switch. Lestrade cleared his throat again.

‘We figure that this event took place near midnight on Wednesday, October 22,’ he said, but his voice had lost its boom. ‘This video was accompanied by a text message. It read, simply’—he was looking down at the remote as though the words were written there for him to read, avoiding eye contact with anyone in the room, ‘One of a kind: The one that got away.’

He sighed and put the remote down on a table. His hands went into his pockets. ‘Since recovering Dr Watson from St Mary’s, we see this as the first open threat that has been made against him, and we are taking it seriously. A unit has been sent to Baker Street to monitor 221 and to keep an eye out for any suspicious characters. After this meeting, I’ll be going over there myself, with Holmes, to apprise John—that is, Dr Watson—of this latest development.

‘Intelligence, however, does not put Moran in London. He was last spotted in Belarus, a week ago, and MI6 believes he is still on the Continent. And to be frank, we are not confident that Moran sent us this video and text himself. He has many operatives, confirmed to us by Everett Stubbins, who described himself as a member of a legion of people working for Moran, interested
‘The point,’ he said, and for the first time, his voice shook a little in anger, ‘is that this’—he stabbed a finger at the blank screen—‘cannot be allowed to continue. Enough people have already suffered or died because of this man, and he sends us this to make us squirm and to laugh at our ineptitude. But we are not a weak force against him. He lost twelve of his own last October and November. We did that. And we’re not done. But he’s still laughing at us. We need to show him in no uncertain terms that we are not playing this game, his game. So we find him, we stop this, we—’

His voice cut out, because all at once, the room rang with the sound of a dozen mobiles. People jumped, checked their pockets, but as it happened, the sounding phones belonged only to those seated or standing on the right-hand side of the room.

Including Sherlock.

Eyebrows knitted together, Sherlock opened the text from Unknown Caller.

London Bridge is falling down.

Behind him, someone read the text aloud—it matched Sherlock’s perfectly.

‘That’s what mine says, too!’ one of the women said in alarm. ‘What is this—?’

But like Lestrade’s, her words were cut off because her phone suddenly chimed again, and those all around her, but this time, the phones belonging to the people seated in the middle section of the room joined in.

‘The hell?’ said Lestrade, stepping forward, eyes jumping from mobile to mobile.

‘London Bridge is falling down,’ a man seated in the centre read aloud.

‘Falling down,’ read someone else on the right-hand side; again, it matched the newest text in Sherlock’s hand. A murmur of disquiet swelled in the room.

‘Okay, everyone, remain calm,’ said Lestrade.

But it happened again: every mobile in the room sounded its text alert. And this time, it was the section of phones on the left-hand side of the room that read London Bridge is falling down. And in the centre and on the right: falling down, falling down.

Sherlock was on his feet, staring at his phone in wonder and dread as yet another text message appeared on his phone, reading the same as the first. It was starting over. He whirled and watched as the texts kept coming in waves, repeating the rhyme, though never finishing it. He watched the terror growing on the men’s and women’s faces with each new text, as they looked to each other, to Lestrade, to him, wondering what was happening, what it meant, how to stop it.

‘It’s a round,’ he said. ‘A musical round. Perfectly timed.’

He could feel it like a metronome in his head. Tick. Tick. Tick.

‘But why?’ asked Lestrade.

‘We need to trace this,’ said Donovan.

‘You won’t be able to,’ Sherlock said, waiting for the second refrain of falling down to appear on his phone. A second later, it did. ‘It’s from them. It’s a message, another message . . .’ He waited for the song to begin again, but his phone was silent. He looked up. The phones at the centre of the room had fallen silent, too. And at last, the phones on the left received their last falling down.

Silence descended again, and the officers all stared at Sherlock with bated breath, waiting for an explanation. But he had none. It was a rhyme, a children’s rhyme, a children’s game, and it had been left incomplete—

And then, from the back of the room, a single mobile sounded. And Sherlock felt his heart clench: he recognised the distinctive text alert sound, different from all the others.

Startled, the officers standing in the back of the room turned their heads, looking for the source of the sound. When they discovered it, they stepped aside. And there was John. Small and unobtrusive, he had been standing hidden in the back the whole time, invisible to even those standing with him, and—

The whole time. Oh god, thought Sherlock. He’d seen it all, heard it all, every ghastly image, every menacing word. He’d been unprepared, completely unprepared, for what Lestrade had presented to a room full of strangers, and it showed in his visage and posture. His face was wan, the skin of his forehead shiny with sweat, his eyes wet and lined with red. He looked lost, stunned. As John stared at Sherlock from the opposite side of the room, phone in a trembling hand, he licked his lips as though wanting to speak, but he couldn’t. Instead, he blinked and looked down to read the text he’d just received. A long pause followed. Then he gripped the cane and planted it in the cleared path in front of him. He moved forward.

All eyes tracked him as he limped down the aisle that ran the length of the room until he reached Sherlock. Without a word, he shoved his mobile into the centre of Sherlock’s chest, turned, and headed for the exit. Sherlock watched the mobile before it could crash to the ground, but his attention was on John’s retreating back. When it disappeared beyond the door, Sherlock’s eyes dropped quickly to the open text. Then he threw the mobile to Lestrade and followed after John, the glowing letters still burning in his retinas:

My fair lady.
Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to kellpod for her amazing fan art for this chapter. Please follow her at kellpod@tumblr.com
FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2015

Lestrade left the room in its semi-chaotic state, trusting that Donovan would re-establish order again. She knew how to take the reins, and he’d been passing them to her a lot lately. So leave it to her to finish articulating the Yard’s objectives and assigning tasks. She was good at that sort of thing: she neither participated in nor tolerated overreactions of any sort from anyone, especially not from officers of the Met. She was a workhorse, and he knew exactly when to use her as one.

He held John’s phone in one hand, his own in the other, and jogged down the hallway, ignoring puzzled looks from the officers veering out of his way. He had received no text messages himself, and neither had Donovan, and they seemed to have been the only ones. But he didn’t have time to think about the rhyme and reason behind that right now. He was headed for the lifts. Sherlock and John couldn’t have gone far. He had to find them, apologise, explain—

But before he reached the lifts, he heard them, voices echoing from behind a closed door to the loo at the end of an off-shoot, seldom-trafficked hallway. He recognised them by their voices: Sherlock’s, deep, even rhythms, a study in equanimity developed over the last several weeks; and John’s higher-pitched, afflicted cadences, a turmoil of sound. Their words, however, were indistinguishable from where he stood. The nearer he drew to the door, however, the clearer they became. He dropped both phones into his pockets.

‘...away. Just stay back. Right there. Don’t come any closer.’

‘I’m not moving. Look at me, John. I’m staying right here.’

Lestrade halted, hand hovering at the door and debating whether he should insert himself in this scene.

‘Not a step. And don’t— Don’t look at me like that. Not you.’

‘Do you need me to leave? I’ll leave. If that’s what you n—’

‘You already did that.’

In the long silence that followed, Lestrade closed his eyes and bowed his head, feeling the weight of those words tug down on his heart. What was happening on the other side of the door, he could only guess. He imagined they were standing on opposing sides of the loo, each man’s back against the wall, staring one another down. Or maybe they couldn’t bear to look at one another at all. All he knew for sure was that both had fallen mute. John’s reproof went no further, and Sherlock proffered no defence. Lestrade was just mustering enough courage to enter the scene himself when John spoke again. His voice had fallen quieter, but still brandished a sharp edge.

‘What else have they seen?’

‘Nothing.’

Another uncertain pause.

‘Because that was ... it was just after ...’

He didn’t have to finish. Sherlock already knew; Lestrade knew it, too. Though neither had spoken it aloud, they had each independently fitted this latest video into the reconstructed timeline of events, based on John’s testimony and other evidence. The eighth cutting, on the eighth day, had taken place directly after Moran had given him over to the Slash Man, that first time.

‘That video was destroyed,’ said Sherlock, softly but firmly. ‘It doesn’t exist. I promise you. No one has seen it.’

‘You did.’

‘If I hadn’t...’

‘Lestrade did. And, and ... Oh God.’

‘And no one else. Not a soul. It’s gone.’

John wasn’t placated by this. ‘But they saw this! All of them. How ... on the floor ... how it was, with him. They saw—’ His voice cut and fell again in volume, strangely and alarmingly composed. ‘They shouldn’t have seen what they saw.’

‘I know.’

‘The looks on their faces. They were all so disgusted.’

‘Not by you.’

John made a noise that Lestrade didn’t understand. It wasn’t a word, or even an exclamation of anger. It was guttural, fierce but smothered, as if by a hand or cloth. Something raw was trying to break free, but he wasn’t allowing it. Then, again, in a peculiarly measured tone: ‘You knew, though. What they would see. You knew.’

‘I know.’

Lestrade hadn’t expected that Sherlock would ally himself with him; rather, he had anticipated
blame. He was the one who had conceded in the end; meanwhile, Sherlock had kicked over the rubbish bin in Gregson’s office.

‘But you didn’t tell me.’

‘I didn’t know. Not until I got here.’

‘Then why did you leave me behind?’

‘I didn’t know what I’d see, and Lestrade said it wasn’t good. I thought it was best if I—’

‘Best?’

‘It’s been a . . . a punishing week. I thought—’

‘Punishing. Hm. Maybe so, but I’m still breathing, aren’t I? I still woke up this morning. I wake up every morning. Don’t I?’

Lestrade’s heart was pounding. He felt guilty, eavesdropping like this, but he couldn’t pull himself away.

‘I didn’t want to add another bad day to the lot.’

‘So there are bad days!’ John suddenly bellowed. His voice rang clearly, and Lestrade threw a glance over his shoulder to see if anyone else had heard. A woman paused as she strode by; he gave her a sharp jerk of the head to keep moving. ‘I have good days, I have bad days, you know that. That’s not new. But you promised me. Good, bad, and worse. You promised.’

‘I know, but—’

‘I thought we were partners in this.’

‘We are. We are, John! But I never agreed to knowingly put you in a situation that might trigger another waking nightmare. I figured, that’s not what friends do.’

For a moment, all sound was suspended. Then: ‘I said partner, Sherlock.’

‘There you are!’

Lestrade nearly jumped out of his skin as Donovan, who had been running down the hall, skidded to a halt upon seeing him around the corner. She started toward him.

‘Call just came in: There’s been another one, one of his. We’re moving. London Bridge, south end. What’s wrong, what are you doing?’

He was frantically waving an arm at her, to hush her, and grabbed her elbow to pull her away from the loo. But they didn’t get far before the door swung open. John came out first, followed closely by Sherlock.

‘Oh,’ Donovan said under her breath, as close to rueful as he’d ever seen her.

‘London Bridge, did you say?’ said John tersely as he passed them up, moving pretty damn quickly for a man with a cane.

‘John—’ Lestrade began.

‘We’ll meet you there.’

Then came Sherlock. His face was stone, his eyes dark, and as he passed in front of Lestrade he leaned close and said in a low, hard-edged voice, ‘Get an earful, inspector?’

***

Though he was shorter than she, and though her nearly every memory set him alongside and so in physical contrast to a towering Sherlock Holmes, Donovan had never thought of John Watson as a small man. She wasn’t sure why this was so, exactly, why the descriptor had never occurred to her. Short, yes, but small? Never. Even in the beginning, before she had got the measure of him, she had always regarded him as the sort of man who could hold his own, who was outwardly placid but couldn’t be bullied, and who, when push came to shove, wouldn’t hesitate to shove hard. She barely remembered that when she had first met him, he had relied on a cane; that memory was eclipsed by the one of his socking the chief superintendent square in the nose before escaping police custody and bolting for the alleys. At the time, she had been scandalised. Of course she had! Watson might have been a decent chap once upon a time, but then he had taken up with Sherlock Holmes. He was no good, they were both of them no good beatniks who had thought themselves grandiose men, above their fellows, above the law, even. ‘Small’ never came into it.

It wasn’t until she saw him that day in hospital, on the other side of hell, in a body crushed and starved and a spirit wearied and wrecked, that the word first entered her mind. And it hadn’t left.

She watched him now, getting out of the backseat of Lestrade’s car. To no one’s surprise, Lestrade had insisted that the pair of them ride with him rather than take a cab. This, of course, after his feeble protests that they not come at all, to which John, a spark of his former self flaring to light, had a ready argument: ‘You need him; he needs me.’ Oh, and one other: ‘You can’t stop me.’

Donovan saw both as high debatable.

And still, all these weeks after the hospital, to her eyes he looked small. Smaller than he had before the convent, that was, as if he still hadn’t regained himself. He may have recovered the better portion of the weight he had lost while in Moran’s prison, but he remained slight of figure,
like a stiff breeze could knock him over and his hollowed bird-bones would shatter. It seemed to her that the skin of his face was wrapped on bone, not flesh, and where there was a scar or blemish, she was almost certain it must have been impressed into the bone underneath, too. Tonight he wore a coat disguising his skinny frame, but at their flat, the night of the shooting, when she had seen him in only a shirt buttoned to the collar, she had marked how thin his neck had seemed, how bony his shoulders, how gaunt his face; she could only imagine the damage and thinness hidden underneath all his layers.

It amazed her how a mere ten days could ravage a man. That said, it was no wonder Sherlock watched his every move like a hawk. But watching closely was one thing. It was unfortunate, really, that John had entrusted himself to Sherlock’s clumsy care.

As they drew closer—John, surprisingly, in the lead—Donovan caught the tail-end of a conversation that had begun in the car.

‘I’ve used that trick before,’ Sherlock was saying.

‘Yes, but how?’

‘Research, Lestrade. It’s simple enough. I thought you had it figured out. I inputted the mobile numbers of all the reporters from the press conference list—they’re of public record—and sent a mass text. See? Easy.’

‘Police phone numbers are not of public record.’

‘And crime scene evidence doesn’t just disappear from police lockers. You already know that the Yard is not as secure as you would like to believe.’

Lestrade sighed. ‘So how did you know when to send those texts? You weren’t at the press conference.’

Donovan saw Sherlock’s lip quirk. ‘Wasn’t I?’ It faded again just as quickly. ‘Whoever sent those texts today must have had them on a sort of timer, sending them at perfectly spaced intervals. But to send three different messages all at once? I’m wagering that there were three phones involved, all from untraceable numbers. That’s not the most disturbing part, though.’

‘The seating.’

‘Precisely, Lestrade. Precisely.’

Donovan stepped into their path, which meant cutting John off midstride. The foot of his bad leg skidded a bit on the pebbly pavement, and he had to hop on the good leg to re-establish balance. John glared at her, but she refused to feel guilty—this needed to be done.

‘Here’s what we know,’ she said.

‘You just got here,’ said Lestrade.

‘A touch faster than you did, so listen up. She half expected Sherlock to protest and charge ahead to see the body, but instead halted and waited for her to continue. ‘The victim is a white male, looking to be in his late twenties, early thirties. No indication yet of who he is.’ Now, to prepare him. ‘No clothes found on or anywhere near the body, except for shoelace binding his hands.’ She was speaking directly to John now. ‘He’s pretty busted up, like the last one. Bruising, contusions, likely a few breaks. And those scratches.’

‘Where is he?’ asked Sherlock.

‘Hanging just below the bridge.’

‘Hanging?’ Lestrade echoed.

‘By the neck. They used cabling.’ She looked over her shoulder, nodding in the direction she meant, behind Glazier’s Hall. ‘We’ve not taken him down yet. We’re still sectioning off the crime scene, scouting for witnesses, just beginning the sweep for evidence. I imagine you’ll want to see him in the state we found him.’

Before she had even finished talking, John was already moving around her, determinedly heading for the scene.

‘That would be preferable,’ Sherlock said, though lacking his usual enthusiasm. His eyes tracked John’s resolute steps before falling in behind him. Then Donovan’s eyes met Lestrade’s. When John was just out of hearing, he said to her in an undertone, ‘I know it’s not good. But considering the threat, and with officers swarming the place, this may be the safest place for him right now. Just don’t let him out of your sight, all right?’

Above them, evening traffic continued on its merry way.

She watched as John came to a stop at the water’s edge, and though she saw only the back of his head, it was clear that his attention was riveted on the hanging corpse. He leant heavily on his cane, which sank into the wet, grainy earth. He replanted it, but only to repeat the same effect. So he lifted out of the ground and rest ed all of his weight on his one good leg, using the other for balance. Already, Donovan wondered how long he would last tonight.
Sherlock charged straight into the water.

‘What is it, boy? Trouble?’ quipped one of the officers further down the bank from Donovan.

Other officers laughed, and she felt her jaw muscles tighten.

But Sherlock ignored it completely. ‘His face!’ he shouted. ‘Show me his face!’

At the signal from Lestrade to go ahead, two officers standing in the shallows took hold of the victim’s ankles and, with care, turned him about. Sherlock circled around impatiently, seemingly impervious to the frigid water that engulfed his legs to the knee. He dug into his pockets for a small torch, as the provided light was insufficient, and when he fixed the beam on the man’s face, his body stilled; his mouth opened as though to speak, but no sound came out. Sensing that something was wrong (more so than before), Donovan stepped off the concrete and came nearer.

‘Sherlock?’ Lestrade was saying. ‘What is it?’

‘Who is it?’ John asked, more softly.

Sherlock let the torch fall. His shoulders sagged. Then he turned around. Donovan was almost surprised to see his face so grim. In her experience, Sherlock usually wore one of three expressions at crime scenes: annoyance, haughtiness, and delight. To see him in any state close to morose was unsettling. He trudged out of the water, coming toward John and Lestrade.

‘It’s Ewan,’ he said. He kept his back to the body. The officers had released it, and it began to rotate slowly at the end of the cable once again.

‘Ewan?’ said Lestrade. ‘From the pub? One of your—?’

‘Yes.’

‘Drinking mate of yours, Holmes?’ a nearby officer asked.

‘Didn’t know the man drank,’ said another.

And a third, ‘Didn’t know he had mates.’

‘Get to work, you berks!’ Donovan barked. Then, to Sherlock, ‘Ewan who?’

He cocked his head at her, bemused. ‘I don’t know.’

‘You just said you knew him.’

‘He never told me his surname. I never asked. We were merely acquainted. I knew things about him. But I didn’t . . . know him.’

John looked down at his feet and shifted his weight.

Sherlock coughed into his hand. Then he straightened, sniffed, and began. ‘He was homeless, like the others. Born in Bexley, according to his particular brand of cockney, though he’s restricted himself more or less to Central London for the past dozen years, which has muddled it a bit. Thirty-one years old, drug habit, likely an abusive past—my guess is the mother—no training or skills beyond pickpocketing and a memory for faces. Streetwise. Useful, that way.’

He looked back at the hanging corpse, and his face twisted in repulsion. ‘Get him down,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing to learn by leaving him up there. We know who did this.’

Ewan Nichols, as it turned out, was in the system, having twice been cited for public urination; he had been high both times.

By the time Sherlock and John left the crime scene, Sherlock could feel nothing from the knee down. His trouser legs were still damp and his socks still sopping with river water, but until he slid into the back of a cab, he gave no notice to these things. The numbness had been welcome, and the pain could wait—there was too much to think about.

One end of the cable had been secured to the railing that ran along the pedestrian path on the bridge above. The other end, of course, had been attached to Ewan. To get him down, they had used bolt cutters. As before, Sherlock got first crack at examining the body, though he had never felt less keen. In the end, he had learnt two things: one, Ewan’s body had been thrown over the side of the bridge, plummeting some fifteen metres and ending in a cleanly broken neck; and two, Ewan had been alive, right up until the cable snapped taut.

He was the third victim of the Slash Man in three weeks who had all suffered the same fate: hands bound with shoelace, beaten, raped, murdered.

Sherlock couldn’t shake the images from his head.

‘Don’t do that,’ said John softly, staring out of the window as the cab took them back to Baker Street. Lestrade had offered to take them, but John—disturbingly stoic tonight—had refused.

For a moment, he was confused as to what John meant. That’s when he realised he was scratching again, and he pulled his hands apart and cupped his palms around wet knees. But John wasn’t even looking at him and hadn’t noticed his hands.

‘You didn’t know he was a target,’ John said to the window, and Sherlock realized that John was watching him in the reflection of the glass. ‘So how could you know what would happen to him? You can’t save everyone. You haven’t, in fact. You’re not some kind of hero. Remember?’

Sherlock unglued his teeth and focused on keeping them from chattering. ‘I spoke to him. Maybe
that was enough to mark him.’

John didn’t reply, but his silence was neither concession nor repudiation.

He had had no overt reaction to what he had seen at the crime scene, and for the better part of an hour, while Sherlock worked and Lestrade asked questions and Donovan barked orders, John had remained a voiceless onlooker. Posture, rigid. Expression, stolid. Now, he rubbed his leg at the knee, indicating a notable amount of pain (he had missed his six o’clock pain meds), and Sherlock saw, too, how the other arm was slipped inside his coat, and he held himself around the middle. A portion of his shield was crumbling; the physical strain was manifesting. Nevertheless, his face remained a deliberate exercise in passivity.

A few minutes later, Sherlock spoke again. ‘John, about the video—’

‘We don’t need to talk about that.’

‘You should know that Lestrade and I never intended to keep you in the dark. We had planned to tell you directly after the briefing.’

‘So I heard.’

‘If I had known more before I left—’

‘Sherlock, stop. This isn’t new. I know what he wants with me. I’ve known all along, all right? One more iteration of it doesn’t matter.’

‘I should think it would matter a little, the first real word from him since—’

‘Well, it doesn’t.’ John was squeezing his leg now with a bloodless grip.

Sherlock let things fall quiet between them again, bracing himself for what he would ask next. Then: ‘What he whispered into your ear . . . Will you tell me what he said?’

John cringed. ‘No,’ he said firmly. Then, ‘It’s not important.’ Then, immediately on its heels, ‘I don’t remember.’

The cab rolled to a stop in front of 221.

‘You’re half frozen,’ said John, pulling the latch and opening the door with his good foot. ‘Take a shower and get your body temperature back up. Not too hot or you’ll be in a heap of pain.’

Sherlock sighed and pulled out his wallet. He paid the cabbie through the window as John opened the front door and disappeared inside. Sherlock followed slowly, allowing John to disappear up both flights of stairs without having to exchange another word. He supposed he should be relieved that John was handling things so well. Well being a relative term. He was upset, clearly, but after having seen and heard all he had today, Sherlock had rather imagined another intrusive image or panic attack to mark the night. He supposed he should be grateful that John was merely angry. But he couldn’t seem to muster a feeling of relief.

His body was beginning to ache with the cold, even the parts that weren’t wet. He wanted to get on the laptop and revise his notes, or call Mycroft and shout at him, or even just make himself a sodding cup of tea; but he knew that all of these things were just distractions so he wouldn’t have to think about Ewan, his horrific final hour, or the last things the streetwise kid had said to him. He decided to follow the good doctor’s direction and take a warm shower and scrub and scrub until he had destroyed every last nerve down to the synapse, until he could feel nothing at all.

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John collapsed. He didn’t even make it to the bed. His legs gave out just two steps into the room, and he fell forward, arms outstretched, and caught the edge of the mattress. It broke his fall, and he landed almost without a sound, but for the clattering of the cane. Bone-weary he sank, and exhausted, he had no power to rise. He stayed on the floor, settling himself with his back against the wall by the head of the bed, legs drawn in, head bowed low.

Whatever face he had presented to Sherlock, to Lestrade, and to a good portion of the Metropolitan Police, he was a churning sea beneath the untextured surface.

Though he had known of their existence, he had never seen the mobile photos for himself, nor had he wanted to. He hadn’t even asked for the details. Now the images swam like sharks before his face. To see himself like that, to know that the pathetic mess of a creature on that screen was him, and to know that it accounted for mere seconds of hundreds of hours of anguish—it was unbearable. He had entered that room only seconds before the tech guy left and the door closed, and in the hum of noise and movement he had hidden himself in the back behind taller men and women. The panic of the tube ride had lessened considerably and the anger had returned, and to know that it accounted for mere seconds of hundreds of hours of anguish—it was unbearable. He had entered that room only seconds before the tech guy left and the door closed, and in the hum of noise and movement he had hidden himself in the back behind taller men and women. The panic of the tube ride had lessened considerably and the anger had returned, and he had failed to notice how the other arm was slipped inside his coat, and he held himself around the middle. A portion of his shield was crumbling; the physical strain was manifesting. Nevertheless, his face remained a deliberate exercise in passivity.

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Then the video, and oh God, he thought he would faint.

He had been out of his head, fighting to see the colourless walls of a room at Scotland Yard and not the dripping red-on-stainless steel of a basement kitchen, but the images of bloody walls and flickering fluorescent lights swam in and out of his vision, solidifying, shimmering, fading, and solidifying again, and he didn’t know whether he was standing on his own two feet or lying flat on the cold tile floor. All he knew was that his legs trembled and threatened to fold, and as the cacophony of mechanical bells erupted around him like sirens, he heard in that distorted music the
haunting, whistled tune of Danny Boy and Moran’s dark and inescapable laughter. It swirled around him, all those sounds, like a cyclone, and on that fell wind, debris that sliced, cut, stabbed, and burned.

Until his own familiar tone sounded in his pocket, shattering the spell. Gone were the damnable noises, the bleeding walls, and only the throbbing pain in his chest and pulsing in his thighs and stinging in his back remained. The room and its one hundred eyes stared at him in horror and revulsion and indictment. He had to get out.

But those same eyes followed him to the crime scene. They’re not here, they’re not here, he thought as they cut the cables and lowered the stiff body onto a tarpaulin. He needed to build the walls higher, thicker, so no one could see him, so they would forget the man and see only the fortress. Then, when that same terrible laughter penetrated those barriers, he thought, Not real, not real. And while they set Ewan’s body on the bank of the river, he had to remind himself, Not me, not me, not me. The forensics technicians’ bulbs burst in blinding flashes of light as they snapped photo after photo of the devastated corpse, and meanwhile Sherlock began his own examination.

But something was wrong with Sherlock—his movements and deductions were as perfunctory as ever, but John noted a tightness in his mouth and lines of stress furrowing his brow, and his eyes were restless in a way that had nothing to do with his keenly incisive brain. He blinked far more rapidly than was his wont. This night had shaken him, though John wondered if he alone could see it.

And it wasn’t fair. He needed Sherlock to be cold and detached, the man who had once treated dead bodies with the same deference as a head of lettuce, not the man who had regretted the supposed death of a woman who would one day take pleasure in hand-feeding him to ravenous wolves. He needed that old Sherlock to serve as coal to heat his own anger. But he found it impossible to hate a man in his grief.

He shivered against the wall, holding his head in his hands. He couldn’t let Sherlock know how deeply Moran’s words penetrated, or what words they recalled to his mind, words whispered menacingly into his ear as the stink of peppermint filled his nostrils. He tried so hard to forget them that the thought of reciting them aloud was unbearable. They took him back to hard orange tiles and unspeakable pain and a longing to die. And always, in the close distance, Moran’s voice, calling his name. Johnny boy. Just a dog. Johnny boy.

‘There you are, Johnny boy.’

His head snapped up from his knees. On the other side of his bedroom, in the corner by the door, stood Sebastian Moran. His eyes were as dark as midnight, his mouth slanted in a malevolent grin. Between his thumb and forefinger, he rolled a silver scalpel.

John let out a breathless cry. There passed a moment of paralysis, but then a surge of adrenaline—born of terror—flooded his stomach, and next moment he scrambled up to his knees, threw himself at the headboard of his bed where, in a drawer, hidden during the day lest Mrs Hudson should find it, rested his loaded pistol, already hot as iron. He didn’t think; all he could do was act. He seized the pistol, and in one swift movement, flipped off the safety, aimed at the man in the corner, and fired.

The bullet punched through Moran’s chest, straight through the sternum, and he rocked back at the impact. But he did not fall. The grin slid away, replaced by an expression of utmost hatred that sent John reeling backwards until he fell against the wall. There, he slid, quaking, back to the floor, the gun held unsteadily before him, his finger a pressure on the trigger, ready to squeeze again.

Somewhere far away, he heard a mangled cry of dismay: John!

‘You’ll want to play nice,’ Moran said.

There was a pounding, footsteps on the staircase, racing nearer.

‘I’m not through with you yet.’

His own rapid breaths filled his ears like a windstorm.

Moran touched the bloodless bullet hole in the exact centre of his chest. ‘Little fucker. I’ll give you over to Daz for that. Here he comes.’

The handle on the door turned. John’s head twitched first, then a split second later his arm came around, and he fired again.

The wood exploded. From the other side of the door, he heard a heavy collapse.

Moran stepped forward. John fired a third round, aiming for his head, which flew back, but only briefly, before settling itself once again with a deadly eye fixed on John.

‘John, don’t shoot!’

He gasped at the voice calling his name, as familiar as his own but one he hadn’t heard in more than three years but in his dreams. His chest constricted, and his eye darted quickly to the door, which was opened a crack, just enough for him to see, at the foot of the door, Sherlock, on hands and knees, looking in.

‘It’s me! It’s me!’ he said, a hand raised in supplication.

‘Sherlock, run!’ John cried. His eyes had returned to Moran, pulled there with magnetic force.

‘I’m coming in.’
Stay out! He’s here, oh God, he’ll kill you! Run!

But Sherlock was rising to his bare feet and pushing open the door. His hands were splayed and held out in front of him as he stepped gingerly into the room. He was half dressed, droplets beaded his shoulders and slid down his chest, and his hair was shining with water. ‘It’s just me,’ he said in a low, tense voice. ‘Please. Put down the gun.’

John trembled. His vision swam. The gun wobbled, but he readjusted his grip and took aim at Moran, who stood perfectly still in the corner with his silver instrument in a closed fist. And he was no longer looking at John, but at Sherlock. He raised the scalpel like a knife about to plunge.

For the fourth time, John fired. The bullet buried itself once again in Moran’s chest, but this time he didn’t even flinch.

Sherlock jumped away from the line of fire. ‘John! Stop! It’s me! No one’s there. It’s just me!’

‘He’ll kill you, he’ll kill you,’ John sobbed. He refocused the gun, aiming for Moran’s heart.

‘Look at me, John.’

He couldn’t.

In two long strides, Sherlock crossed to him, lowered himself to a knee, and took John’s head between his hands. ‘Don’t look at him. Look at me.’

‘No. No!’

‘He’s not there. Trust me. No one’s there. Only me.’

‘But I see him. I see him.’

‘Look at me.’

Moran threw back his head and laughed, and John’s hands twitched around the grip.

Sherlock’s fingers tightened around his head. He took quick, shredded breaths, shook his head to clear it, and said, ‘All right, John. It’s all right. Keep looking at him. Tell me what you see.’

‘What?’

‘Describe him to me. His face, describe his face.’

‘It’s, it’s . . .’ He was breathing so hard his ribs ached. ‘Dark. Black eyes. Sharp and, and hungry . . .’

‘Does he have a scar?’

Moran was fingering the holes in his chest. His eyes were fixed on Sherlock, and he looked murderous. But there was no scar.

‘No.’

‘The real Sebastian Moran has a scar running from cheek to cheek across the bridge of his nose. I know because I gave it to him. I slashed him across the face with his own carbon-steel knife. Do you see it?’

‘No.’

‘That’s because he didn’t have it when you knew him,’ Sherlock said, his voice urgent, pleading. ‘The Moran you see is a memory, a dream. Your mind is recreating only what you yourself have seen, John. The Moran in this room? He’s not real!’

The vision before his eyes shivered, but only just. John’s arms suddenly felt very heavy. The gun lowered by increments.

‘Are you real?’ he asked breathlessly.

‘John, look at me.’

It seemed to take all his strength, but slowly, John’s eyes pulled away from the corner of the bedroom and found Sherlock kneeling beside him, eyes bright and hands strong and steady around his head. His left ear was full of red and dripping onto the floor. He looked real, but John continued to doubt. So Sherlock dropped one of his hands from John’s head, turned his torso and bent his head to the side to point to the scar on his neck, an ugly seam of gnarled skin. With his other hand, he maintained the connection to John. ‘I didn’t have this before,’ he said. ‘Remember, John? Tell me where I got it.’

The thought came slowly, conjured from another world. ‘Libya,’ John said. ‘The weapons smugglers.’

‘And here?’ He pushed back his wet fringe, showing John a sealed gash along his hairline.

‘That’s where . . . He hit you. With the gun. The night you found me. Molly stitched you up.’

‘Yes! Now tell me—am I real?’

‘. . . Yes?’

‘Tell me where you are, John.’

‘I’m . . . home.’
‘Where’s home?’

‘Baker Street.’

‘Good! Good. Baker Street. In our flat, and Mrs Hudson’s on her way home, and we’re going to ask her to tea and maybe watch some telly. Because it’s just a normal night. A quiet night.’ He nodded fervently at John, tried to smile, failed. ‘Now, is he still there?’

John swallowed and looked back to the corner of the room. Moran smirked and lifted a finger to his closed lips; the black eyes were filled with warning, daring him to tell the truth. John’s eyes returned to Sherlock’s. He nodded subtly, fearfully, hoping Moran wouldn’t see. His fingers, hot with sweat, slipped along the gun.

‘That’s all right, don’t worry, you know he’s not real. You know it. So we’re going to make him go away.’ He replaced his second hand on the other side of John’s head again, encouraging John’s focus to centre on him, and not the shadow in the corner. ‘I want you to close your eyes.’

‘I can’t!’

‘Trust me, John. Please.’

He felt like he was being asked to dive into deep, choppy waters, and he didn’t know whether he’d be dragged down or be able to stay afloat. He’s not there, he told himself. Sherlock says he’s not. He took a deep breath, let the gun fall to the floor, and with both hands gripped Sherlock’s forearms near the wrists. He closed his eyes. With his sight cut off, his other senses were enhanced, and all he could feel, hear, and even smell was Sherlock.

‘I want you to remember our first case together. Do you remember it?’

John nodded in Sherlock’s hands.

‘Tell me.’

‘The pink lady. The cabbie. He was going to kill you.’

‘But you stopped him, John. You barely knew me, but you came after me anyway. You killed him to save me.’ His hands tightened around John’s head, warm and sure. ‘You have to know that I would do the same. You have to know that if he were in this room, I swear I’d tear him to pieces. But it’s us, just us. You and me. We’re home, on Baker Street, and we’re safe.’

John nodded, but his eyes remained squeezed shut. Some small part of him understood, logically, that Moran couldn’t be in the room. Sherlock, however, wasn’t appealing to logic; he was trying to satisfy a deeper need entirely. John continued to tremble, but for different reasons now.

‘I need you to breathe. Slowly in. Slowly out.’

He hadn’t realised how rapid and shallow his breaths were, how tight the muscles in his abdomen or how painful the burning in his chest. But when Sherlock began to count, and as he followed him as if he were a symphonic conductor, the feeling of constriction loosened. Only then did he know for himself that he really was on Baker Street. He opened his eyes. The corner was empty.

‘Are you all right?’ Sherlock asked, slowly removing his hands from John’s head, and John released his arms.

He felt as though he were awaking from a terrible nightmare. He looked at Sherlock with wide, shining eyes.

‘Jesus, Sherlock, I almost shot you.’

‘I’m lucky your aim was off, for once.’

But Sherlock’s levity did not dispel the horror of what had almost happened. ‘I might have killed you. Dear God, I might have . . .’ He looked again at the bloody ear.

‘But you didn’t.’

‘Sherlock—’ He made to touch the ear, to clear away the blood and discover the damage.

‘You’re thirsty,’ said Sherlock. ‘Come, John. Let’s go downstairs.’

Indeed, he was horrendously thirsty. He hadn’t even realised until now. So he let Sherlock pull him to his feet and lean against him for balance. They left the gun behind, on the floor, with the cane, and as they passed out of the room together, John saw three bullet holes in the wall in the corner of the room, and one that had blasted through the door. He felt sick.

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He had come to a decision. It was something he should have done in the beginning, he knew it, but he had simply lacked the courage.

But now, after what had happened tonight, he had no choice. He was dangerous. He understood that now. And not just a danger to himself. He had proven himself a danger to Sherlock. And he could hardly stand that.

So something had to be done.

The bullet had only grazed the antihelix and outer auricular tubercle of Sherlock’s ear, flaying open the skin and likely damaging the cartilage below. It had also left a burnt streak across his cheek that was barely noticeable but which drew John’s attention as though it were flaming red. Minimal damage, Sherlock had said, flippantly, as John silently cleaned the wound and packed it with disinfectant and gauze. But John felt miserable about it. One inch to left, he thought, and
Sherlock would be dead. The collapse he had heard would have been a body falling senseless to the ground, not a live man throwing himself to the floor to be out of range of a second possibly lethal shot.

It was now well past midnight. Fearing further nightmares, John made no move to go to sleep, despite the weariness that weighed down his every limb; so Sherlock did not either. And though Sherlock made noodles rather than send for takeaway, John couldn’t eat. He spoke little, and only of filling the holes with plaster repair polyfilla, applying a new paint job, and replacing the door before Mrs Hudson could discover what he’d done. But other than that, neither said much at all. Finally, John put on the telly and pretended to watch, and Sherlock with him. But it was clear to John that Sherlock’s thoughts were engaged elsewhere within that brain. He knew he was thinking about what had happened, maybe even working up a list of solutions. It was only a matter of time before he proposed one of them. So John had to beat him to it.

He snapped off the television.

Sherlock lowered his templed fingers to rest in his lap, observing John from his own chair. John, who had been ready to say what he knew he needed to say, found himself suddenly unable, so he began picking at a stray thread on the armrest and worrying his tongue against his teeth, steeling himself to speak. Sherlock simply waited.

At last: ‘I’m taking myself off the case,’ he said. He lifted his head, hoping his eyes conveyed his resolution, but he felt them burning, instead, with shame. ‘For a time. While I get . . . help. And until . . .’ He swallowed, wrinkled his nose. ‘Until I have things . . . under control.’

There was no immediately reaction. Then, with a slow nod of unenthusiastic acquiescence, Sherlock responded, ‘What do you need from me?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Try again.’

They stared at one another a long time without speaking. There would be no surrender from Sherlock, not in this. John realised that he was glad of it.

So he tried again, as best he could. ‘Talk to me.’ ‘Don’t keep me in the dark. ‘Tell me what you learn, the important things. But not everything.’ I’ll leave it to your judgement, what I need to know, and what I shouldn’t. I’ll try to trust you. ‘And, when I’m ready, bring me back on.’ And be here when I need you, and make sure I take my pills, and help me breathe, and pull me out of nightmares, and don’t give up on me, no matter how bad things get. Don’t send me away, and whatever you do, please, oh God please, don’t leave.

‘Deal.’

End of Part 1

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to miss-dramateen for creating the audio file to ‘O Danny Boy’ for this chapter.
Jack and Jill

FEBRUARY 2015

Ralston Winters had been living on the street since he was fifteen years old, a senseless but scared boy without a thought for where he would lay his head or where his next meal would come from. He didn’t consider that he’d never again sleep on a clean mattress or eat a shepherd’s pie. He left home to escape his mother’s abusive boyfriend, a mean drunk or a short-fused sober man, depending on the day. Though he loved his mother, he was tired of being the buffer between her and what’s-his-name’s meat-mallet fists. She wouldn’t come with him, so he left on his own.

He’d gone back to the flat only once, three years later, when he was tired of scrounging meals from skips and snitching sweets and cigarettes from corner shops. But shame drove him home as much as anything, guilt at having broken his mother’s heart. Even if she didn’t want to see him, surely he’d get through the door and spend long enough inside to burn twenty quid off her, or even punch a tenner from the jar of emergency cash she kept in the cupboard by the front door. But when he rang the bell, a stranger answered. His mum was gone, and nobody could tell him where to. For a couple of days, he looked for her around the neighbourhood. He talked to all the wrong people, evidently, and never learnt anything useful. Eventually, he just gave up. He never went looking again.

Ralston wasn’t sure when it happened, exactly. The move from being just a wilfully dispossessed kid on the streets to becoming a homeless man, that is. Had it happened overnight? Or had he been walking that long, inevitable road from the start? Either way, he awoke one morning in Battersea Park from beneath a blanket of Camden Gazettes and East London Advertisers and realised that, as he planned his day around begging pence and pound off commuters at the entrances to the Piccadilly Line to buy himself a pack of smokes, he was a man crawling at the bugger-arse bottom of the food chain. He was a slug in the form of a human male. He sludged his way in and out of shelters, up and down soup lines, and always, always, he craved a cigarette.

Among his fellows—other society-evicted humans of London’s underbelly—he had friends. Acquaintances. Well, someone to bum cigarettes off of, from time to time. In any case, there was a sense of camaraderie among the homeless, born of shared disappointments and unspoken pasts and the commonality that they were all gutter dwellers now. But beyond that, they had little to bind themselves together as a community. Still, he knew their faces, their names. He could always tell the hardened dry meat from the fresh. He could spot the smackheads, the benders, the slags, and even the shitehawk ex-military, usually at a glance.

Though there were no leaders among them, a few had risen to a level of gutter-nob prominence. There was Alfie, who played the guitar better than Eric Clapton (they said) and who brought in enough street-corner dosh to rent out a flat (or so the rumours went), if he’d had the mind to. There was Pippa, thirty years old and had been so for the last twenty years, known for her tattoos and tourist photo bombs—a right laugh, that one. There was Peter, one of the shitehawks, who had a knack for busting cash machines and hacking computers, though no one had seen him around lately. And, of course, the bloke sometimes called gaffer, though he was still a young man, maybe Ralston’s age, the one who knew the Detective. Ewan. Everyone knew Ewan, and he knew nearly everyone. ‘It’s why I’m useful to him,’ he’d been known to say, a gleam of pride in his eyes, a chest swollen with pride like a cock’s. ‘The Detective needs a bloke like me to work his magic.’

Ralston? He was no one. No one of consequence or someone to tell stories about. Having dropped out of school and having never held a job, he was without skills, without talents, and without ambition beyond the next fag. He was bloody worthless, which anyone could tell at a glance and a sniff.

But then he met her. Nette. Nettie. His Nettie. She was golden, like dark honey. Skin, hair, eyes. Beautiful. Like Ralston, Nette had left home as a kid. For a couple of years, she stayed with an aunt and some friends, but eventually she cut herself off from them all. But they didn’t talk about those days, Ralston and Nette. They never talked about the way things were before the street life. There was no point. The point, really, was that they had found each other. It was rather like finding a twenty pound note in the gutter, or an unopened lager in a skip. A real find.

Unlike him, Nette was fearless, which she attributed to her having been bitten by a dog during her first summer sleeping in London parks. She had unwittingly come upon the mutt’s stash of bones while picking for supper herself in an alleyway behind a pub, and the animal had gone berserk. It barked and bit and scratched before locking its jaws around her thigh, and it took three pub boys hitting the dog with broomsticks and whipping it in the face with rags before it backed off. She was taken to A&E and sorted out well enough, but she didn’t tell anyone her name for fear that they would find her father and tell him where she was. As soon as she was able, she was back on the streets, moving slowly and with a limp, but moving all the same. She told anyone who would listen that she’d survived a dog attack and seemed pretty damn proud of that. Aint nothing can kick this of girl, she often said, feeling life itself had been kicking her plenty up till then. By the time Ralston came to know her, the limp was just part of who she was. Tore up me muscles and then some, she told him. Aint never goin be right agin. He smiled and rubbed her leg through her coffee-stained jeans, though he suspected, from time to time, that she could have walked well enough, if she’d had a mind to, and that a lot of the real damage was in her head.

They were seen everywhere together. That was, they were hardly seen apart. And because not many knew their real names, they were often called Jack and Jill, which suited them both just fine.

He remembered the day the Detective died. Ralston hadn’t been anywhere near Central London at the time, but word spread quickly enough. The man had gone crazy and jumped, they said, right off a hospital rooftop. Shot someone first, then just jumped. To Ralston, as to many, it came as a surprise. The Detective didn’t seem the sort. But what did he know? He’d never met the man. Just knew the stories. Damn good stories, too, they said to one another. Too bad they weren’t none of them true.
Ralston also remembered when those other stories began to circulate, the scary ones. Initially, they were fuzzy sorts of tales. A homeless woman attacked in a vacant multi-storey, a vagrant man nabbed and beaten in Battersea Park. Nothing too unusual, at first. But more stories kept coming, and in time, the emerging details began to reveal sharp similarities. Not just attacks and beatings; these were rapes. By midwinter, every homeless person in every corner of London whispered of an attacker they all called the Slash Man, a monstrous-sized shadow of a sexual predator with claw-like fingernails. Like a bear, some said, and others, like a vampire. According to the reports, the creature was faceless, voiceless, and a cement mixture of frozen air and nightfall. He appears out of nowhere, the stories went, when you is alone, ravages you good and proper, like you’d expect of a hell-beast, and leave you a bloody, quivering, naked mess, to sort yourself out.

The Met looked into it, or so it was said, but no arrest was ever made, and by the time the weather turned and a warm breeze began to stir London again, the stories had petered out. Like a bad, confusing dream, Ralston more or less forgot about the whole affair. There were more pressing matters, like filling the belly and avoiding the coppers.

Spring passed, summer passed, and with autumn came rain and cold, like any other autumn in London, though perhaps with more of a bite in the air. Life was normal, and he and Nette were as happy as two homeless sods could be.

Then came rumour of the Detective’s return from the dead, though initially Ralston dismissed them as mere ghost stories. The street dwellers loved to concoct mystery around such extraordinary figures, even the dead ones. Especially the dead ones. But then the papers began running the stories, printing the photographs, and even Nette swore she saw him one evening in Central London, getting out of a cab. Maybe it was true after all.

Not long after came the whispers of the Slash Man’s simultaneous resurrection.

Then the murders.

Of a sudden, the Gaffer was dead.

An air of unrest had settled in the empty stomachs of the homeless men and women of London, and an unprecedented camaraderie grew among them. They huddled together, made pacts of solidarity and vows never to sleep alone. They told new stories now—about how the police were covering up the crimes, not solving them; about how Ewan had known too much and needed to be silenced; and about how the Slash Man and the Detective were one in the same and had been all along.

But he ignored them, all of them. He had his Nette, and she was all he needed, so bugger the Detective, the Slash Man, the ghost stories. They were none of them about him, after all.

Then, in early February of the next year, Ralston Winters was murdered.

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The phone at the front desk rang twice before she set aside her emery board and picked up.

‘Dr Thompson’s office.’ She blew the dust from her nail tips.

There was dead air on the other end of the line, and she was about to say hello again when she heard the slow intake of breath, so she waited. Then, ‘Hello. Yes, I would like to schedule an appointment.’

She knew that tone. She’d heard it often enough in her capacity as a receptionist in this office. It was the recipe of reluctance: a generous serving of shame, light on the submission, mixed with a pinch of self-loathing. She felt a little self-loathing of her own, having become hardened to that tone.

‘Are you one of Dr Thompson’s current patients?’

‘No, I—’

‘I’m afraid Dr Thompson is not taking on any new patients for at least six more months, but I can refer you—’

‘If you could just—’she heard him taking a steadying breath, and she knew that one, too; he was seconds away from either shouting or crying—‘just ask her if she’d see me. Please.’

She sighed soundlessly, feeling the stirring of . . . what was that again? Oh yes, pity. It had been a while. In the end, it was the hard-spoken please that caused her to relent. She sighed. ‘Let me put you on hold.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Your name, sir?’

‘Watson. John Watson.’

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but she brushed it off as quintessentially British. It was a common enough name. He might as well have given his name as John Smith. ‘Hold please, Mr Watson.’ She hit the hold button on the phone, stood, and walked to the closed door of the office. The last patient of the day had left ten minutes ago, and Dr Thompson was likely finishing up her notes. She knocked lightly and let herself in.

‘Yes, what is it?’
‘I know you’re not taking on new patients right now—’

‘No new patients, Naomi, like I said.’ Dr Thompson didn’t lift her head but busily continued to annotate her latest session in her electronic files with rapid clicking of the keys. ‘I’m full up at the moment, you know that.’

‘I know, but I’ve just got a call from a former patient of yours. John Watson?’

Dr Thompson’s fingers stilled on keyboard.

‘He seems keen. I know it’s not policy, but I felt like I ought to check with you—’

‘Is he on hold?’

‘Line one.’

Dr Thompson spun her chair to the phone and in the same motion lifted the receiver and hit the button to take the phone off hold. Naomi stared in surprise.

‘John? Yes, this is Ella. Hello.’ There was a loud pause in the room as the man on the other end of the phone spoke. ‘Yes, it has been a long time, but that’s fine, that’s just—’ Another pause. ‘John, there’s no need to apologise. None at all. Of course I can see you. ‘Her eyes snapped to Naomi, staring her down pointedly as she said, ‘Can you come in tomorrow, say, eleven o’clock?’

‘Dr Thompson, you have an appointment with Phyllis Cooper at elev—’

Dr Thompson covered the mouthpiece with a hand and hissed, ‘Cancel it.’ Then, back into the phone, ‘Lovely, John. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Goodbye.’

‘Who—?’

‘That’ll do, Naomi. Thank you. Schedule the appointment and contact Phyllis. Then you may leave early today.’

Naomi closed the door, her curiosity piqued. She returned to the desk computer and was on the cusp of making a quick revision of files in search of John Watson’s name and history. Those records wouldn’t have much information on him besides the date of his last appointment, but at least she would know how long it had been since he was in. In the end, though, she just typed his name into an online search engine. She was confused to see that her first hits brought up in greater prominence the name Sherlock Holmes, the shady detective who had faked his own death and gotten away with murder on a technicality, or so she understood. She’d not been following the story terribly closely, but it was hard not to know some of the details. But what did he have to do with . . . ?

She clicked on the first link, read two lines about the St Mary’s Abductions, and said aloud to herself, ‘Well, shit.’

***

Ella stood at the door to meet him when he arrived, punctual as he always had been. He was using a cane again, but that didn’t dispel the military bearing. He had always donned that, as if walking into her office meant he was entering a battlefield, and he had to put on the proper armour. Only once had she ever seen him without the soldier’s mask, and that was the first time he had returned to her after a long absence, shortly after Sherlock Holmes had died. On that day, he had come not as a soldier, but as a man. Just a man.

‘John,’ she said warmly, extending a hand. He shook it and smiled tightly. It wasn’t a real smile—the lips pursed in a straight line and drew up a little, but no light reached his eyes. She knew better than to say she was glad to see him again. ‘Make yourself comfortable,’ she said instead.

When he had cleared the doorway, she set the lock and watched as he quickly took in the room again, everything from the windows with their parted curtains to the notebook lying open on her desk. Though it had been some three years since she had last seen him, she had made few changes and knew he would find it a familiar space. Most patients found that comforting. With John, though, it was always hard to tell where he derived comfort.

He took the initiative to close the curtains. She made no comment but turned on another lamp.

‘My leg really did take a bullet this time around,’ he said as he seated himself in the provided chair. ‘If you were wondering. Thought it was time I earned this cane.’

Opening with a joke? It was a grim joke, but it wasn’t a bad sign. She sat in her own chair, angled towards his, and crossed one leg over the other. For now, she left her notebook aside.

‘Glad you didn’t spring for the wheelchair,’ she replied with a smile.

‘I would’ve done, but the stairs, you see . . .’

‘Wise.’

They lapsed into silence. John rubbed his leg with one hand and stared at the other in his lap, which was balled into a fist. She considered how best to begin. There were some patients you just had to sit back and listen to, and the challenge was corralling the conversation into a fertile pasture. Then there were others that seemed like dead engines, but give them a jumpstart and their mouths ran like well-greased motors. John was neither. He had never been one for saying much at all, and every sentence had to be coaxed. What he held back never exploded in bursts of anger or frustration; he never broke down and cried; he never gave more than he was asked to give. Except
for returning to her. He’d done that twice now.

But then, she’d never worked with him long enough to find out whether there was a toggle to flip that she just hadn’t found yet, one that would get him to share what she wasn’t directly petitioning. The first time he was a patient of hers, it was because the Army had mandated that he see a therapist in order to deal with his post-traumatic stress and keep receiving his pension. Given that she specialised in trauma therapy and had a particular focus on ex-soldiers, her name had been on a short list of recommendations. But he didn’t have to choose her, and she had often wondered how he had landed in her office. He had stopped coming after a short four weeks, however, about the time he had moved into a flatshare with the now notorious Sherlock Holmes. The second time, he had come on his own, eighteen months later, when the same Sherlock Holmes (were there any others?) had committed suicide. Ella, who followed the news more closely than she let on, was sorry John had been tangled up in that mess. He came back only because he didn’t know what else to do with his grief, and he hadn’t kept on more than a few sessions. He hadn’t really desired healing, either time.

She wasn’t yet sure if this time was different. In fact, she wasn’t quite sure why he had come back at all.

‘Let’s talk about why you’re here,’ she said after the silence had drawn on long enough.

He nodded, a gesture of agreement, not an acceptance of the implied invitation to begin talking. She would have to be more direct.

‘What happened, John?’

He raised his eyes to her. Guarded, reluctant, but resolved.

She wouldn’t bring up the St Mary’s Abductions herself. She knew everything the papers said about it, as she had been following the story since before it was even called the St Mary’s abductions, ever since mid-October when she had first heard that her former patient John Watson had gone missing. The more details that came out, the more sickened she felt. Not that there were a lot of details, but the words kidnapping and torture and even sadism had been used more than once, though what was meant by ‘torture’ was never defined. In fact, there had been speculation in editorials and on message boards that reports of abuse had been exaggerated, that there hadn’t been any real torture. She believed it, though. Seeing John now, just the sunken, haunted look of him, she couldn’t help but believe it. It would be John’s choice, however, whether to open that door and lead her through it. Until and unless he did, she would not reach beyond her purview. Already, she was beginning to wonder whether she would need to recommend him to a different therapist with more specialised foci and experience in this realm. PTSD in soldiers returning from the battlefield was one thing. Ten days in a dungeon with a sadist? Well, that was another.

‘I’ve been . . . ’ he started. He touched his forehead, half shielding his face while he collected his thoughts. He started again. ‘I’ve not been well.’ He swallowed. His eyes skittered to a small refrigerator against the wall where he knew she had once kept small bottles of water. ‘I have these . . . nightmares. Hallucinations. I see things that aren’t there, hear things no one else hears. I can’t make them stop.’

‘Nightmares and hallucinations,’ she repeated to make sure these were the words he meant. At his nod, she asked, ‘You experience these things both asleep and awake?’

‘Yes.’

‘How often?’

‘Lately, every night. Most days.’

‘What do you dream about?’

‘Lots of things,’ he said in a whisper. She would have to nudge a little more. She had spent the evening revising her notes from their past sessions to refresh her memory. ‘Like before? Do you still dream about the war?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘But not always?’

‘Not often. Not anymore. There are . . . worse things.’

She judged that it was too early to peel back that layer of skin, so she gently steered it away. ‘Why have the dreams brought you here?’

‘They’re bad. They’re only getting worse. And I’m afraid of what I might do.’

‘What might you do?’

His hand flexed and clenched in his lap. ‘Hurt someone.’

‘Have you?’

He let out a long breath. ‘I woke up one morning, and my hand was stinging like I’d punched a wall. Thought maybe I had, you know? Swung my fist while I was asleep or something. I don’t always sleep . . . restfully. But then I saw Sherlock. Side of his face was all swelled up, bruised, like he’d been punched. He hadn’t gone to bed like that.’

‘Did he say what happened?’

‘Said he’d been to the bakery for scones early that morning and that some tosser on the street had taken exception to his face. It’s what he wanted me to believe. And it wasn’t implausible, given
the . . . state of things. How people take to him. But that bruise was hours old. And what he didn’t
know was how badly my hand was hurting. It was my left hand, too. When I throw a punch, it’s
usually with my right. But it was my left. And it was the right side of his face. He doesn’t think I
can, but I know how to put two and two together.’ He scrubbed his chin, frustrated. ‘He helps me,
sometimes, when he can see I’m having another one. A bad dream, that is. But he knows better
than to touch me. If he did, if he tried to hold me down or something, that might explain why I
lashed out at him. I don’t know why he wouldn’t tell me, though.’ His eyes were hidden behind
the hand again. ‘It must have been pretty awful.’

‘Did you tell him all this?’

‘We don’t talk about . . . things like that.’

‘And is this incident what brought you in today?’

He shook his head tightly, a miniscule movement, and when his hand fell away, his face was
mournful. ‘I almost killed him,’ he said without breath. ‘I thought he was someone else, and I
almost . . .’ He couldn’t say it again.

‘Who did you think he was?’

He shook his head again unwillingly.

‘John.’

She watched as he visibly steeled himself to speak. ‘Da— One of the men who . . . killed Mary.’

‘Who was Mary?’ She knew. Of course she knew. But that wasn’t the point of the question.

‘My . . . my girlfriend.’

‘So you attacked Sherlock because you thought he was this man, the one who killed your
girlfriend, and you were . . . angry?’

This time when he shook his head no, he closed his eyes. ‘Scared.’ They opened.

‘What of?’ She needed to him say it.

‘What he would want with me. Do to me. And if not to me . . .’

‘Go on.’

‘To him. Sherlock. I’m afraid of losing him. Again. And if I do, I’m afraid of what would happen
next.’

‘What do you mean?’

His left hand began to tremble, and he covered it with his right, casting his eyes to the ceiling.
When his head came back down, he said, ‘If I had killed him, I wouldn’t have given it a second
thought. I would have ended it. Right then. I know it.’

And the thought of dying . . .

‘It’s not that. I’m not afraid to die. Not for myself. But if it had happened, like that’—his face
screwed up—‘Mrs Hudson would have been the one to find us. She would have come home,
climbed those stairs, and seen . . .’ He couldn’t seem to finish the thought. ‘I can’t bear the thought
of doing that to her. Or to Lestrade.’

She knew that name, too, from the papers. ‘Who is Lestrade?’

‘Someone who put everything on the line to save me. And then there’s Molly. She works in the
morgue at St Bart’s, and might have been the one to . . .’ He shook his head. ‘How could I do that
to them? After all they did to keep me alive, to keep Sherlock alive?’

‘Sounds like a lot of people out there care about you.’

His eyes widened a little, as though stunned. Then blinking rapidly he looked away.

‘Ella, I can’t live like this,’ he said. ‘I’m scared all the time. If things keep going this way, I’ll have
to leave. And I can’t. Not right now. So I need the dreams to stop, and I’ll do whatever it takes.
That’s why I’m here.’

‘You know we’re going to have to open that box—the reasons behind your fears. I’m going to ask
you to talk about the hard things.’

‘I know.’

‘You can’t overcome these fears or master your responses unless you confront them.’

‘I know.’

‘And it may take a while. Longer than you would like.’

‘But I have to do this. If I’m ever going to feel even halfway in control of myself again, I have to
do this. Don’t I?’

But they didn’t open the box that day. They needed to start in a place of control. So instead, they
discussed his current physical health, diet, sleeping patterns, and exercise. She asked what
medication he was on, when he last met with his doctors, and how long until his prescriptions ran
out. They discussed a new anxiety medication she wanted to put him on, and the possibility of
antipsychotics, if she determined that he needed them. Then together, they worked out what Ella called a therapeutic strategy for moving forward, a list of dos and don’ts. He was to return to physical therapy, twice a week. He was to meet with her three times a week, at least in the beginning, and if he couldn’t come in they would have their session over the phone. He promised to always come in. He was to avoid triggering stimuli as much as possible until he could work through them in the security of her own office. He was to repeat certain mantras to himself when he felt the first stirrings of panic, and before he went to sleep, and in the minutes after waking, and agree to whatever mental exercises she required of him in future. To all this, he agreed, but to the last point, he faltered:

‘And finally,’ she said, ‘I want you to begin writing again.’

An unmistakable light of dread flashed in his eyes.

‘I’m not talking about a blog this time,’ she said. ‘This will be for you, and only you. In fact, you don’t even have to keep it. Write on paper and burn the pages. Or type on your computer and delete the files. But you need to understand what happened to you, John. You need to get the bad memories out of the confines of your mind and into a space that you can encounter, calmly and rationally, with some distance. Putting it on the page will help you do just that.’

‘I don’t know . . .’

‘Start small. Pick a memory you know you can handle. Find a tranquil space in the middle of the day, when you’re wide awake, and write for only five minutes. When you’re ready, work up to ten, to twenty. Write and rewrite the same memory, if that’s what you need to do to face it. But you don’t need to share it with anyone, not even me. I just need to know that you’ve done it. Then you’ll be ready to talk about it.’

‘You think this will help?’

‘I know it will. Because John?’

She waited until his eyes locked onto hers.

‘For you, writing is therapeutic. Writing is your way of ordering your world, of making sense of the absurd and appalling. It helped you before. And I promise you: It will help you again.’

***

Ralston awoke to the sound of whistling. It took him a moment to place the tune, what with his throbbing head, the dark, the disorientation. But it was as familiar to him as any child’s nursery rhyme. ‘Tis I’ll be here in sunshine or in shadow, he thought, mentally matching the lyrics to the notes as they sank into his ears.

Where was he?

It was dark, and he felt he was most certainly indoors. Though, last he remembered, he had been in free air and open sky. He and Nette had managed to scrape together eight quid between them, so they had gone for a pint at Shepherd’s Knoll, an old pub just a stone’s throw from Regent’s Park. Yes, that’s right. Two lagers each and some pence to spare. Then what? They had left Shepherd’s Knoll at half eleven, half-pissed and falling into one another but laughing all the same, and then . . .? He remembered it vaguely, almost as if it hadn’t happened at all and his imagination had concocted the scene. A blow to the back of his head. He hadn’t seen it before it landed, and even if he’d had his wits about him, he wouldn’t have seen a thing. Arm in arm, they had been strolling in and out of circles of lamplight, shadow then light, shadow then light, then just . . . shadow. And that was that.

But now, a whistling.

And someone crying, softly. A sniffling, a muffled whimper. It took another minute for his brain to work properly—his head pounded and dizziness made him want to sink closer to the ground—but when the whirling, hazy thoughts settled, he recognised three things: he was sitting on a concrete floor, his back against a cold wall with a bag over his head; his arms and legs were bound and his mouth was stuffed with a wad of fabric (maybe a sock—he realised he wasn’t wearing either shoes or socks); and the voice of the crying woman belong to his Nettie.

He screamed into the gag and twisted his body, trying to move. The whistling stopped. And another blow fell.

For untold hours (stretching into days?) Ralston and Nette were treated like animals, abused, humiliated, and violated. They were stripped of every particle of clothing and left to shiver in the dark; they were attacked with fists and claws; they watched each other endure sexual degradation of the vilest sort. And never once did their lone tormentor speak. He didn’t have to. They knew who he was—the Slash Man—and they knew they were dead.

Though they had given up God long ago on the premise that he had abandoned them first, they cried out to him now, pleading for death. For Ralston, the magnanimous arm of mercy was extended. After three days of torture, his skull was swiftly and without warning split in two with a cleaver. As for Nette, God failed to hear her pleas. The Slash Man took her apart piece by piece.
Still, in one thing they were united: their loathing of the woman now being escorted into the adjoining room.

Kitty Riley took a chair and sat erect, hands clasped on the table before her as if she were the one about to conduct the interview. When they left her alone, she cast a glance at the mirror, smiled self-assuredly, and resumed staring straight ahead. Once, she brushed her fringe out of her eyes and adjusted the collar of her Persian blue silk blouse; other than that, she remained dignified and still, waiting.

But the door to the observation room opened first, and Lestrade put his head in. ‘My earpiece is in,’ he said, ‘but use the mic only if you have something important to say. And one at a time, yeah? If I get the both of you shouting at me at once I swear to god I’ll throw the damn thing in the bin.’ He backed up, half shut the door, but remembered something. He poked his head back in, ‘And Sherlock. Seriously. Don’t leave this room. Remember, you’re here “on assignment”, so don’t do anything to jeopardise that allowance.’ He gave a pointed look to Donovan to watch him, then another to Sherlock to behave, and at last exited.

‘I’m not a child,’ Sherlock muttered under his breath.

Donovan snorted but said nothing. She was still seething over the issue of the contracts and Lestrade’s fancy interpretations.

Seconds later, Detective Inspector Lestrade strode into the interrogation room bearing a copy of that day’s The Sun. There was no greeting, no preamble, no faux-playful I hope you’re comfortable because you’re going to be here a while. His demeanour had turned dark, quite unlike how Sherlock was accustomed to seeing him, and he got straight to it, threw the paper on the table in front of her, and said, ‘Your source, Ms Riley. Now.’

She spread her hands to show them empty. ‘Anonymous,’ she replied.

‘Enough of your bullshit. Those photographs were classified, and the property of New Scotland Yard, not to mention highly sensitive. So tell me. What are they doing being printed in vivid colour over three spreads of your goddamn paper?’

‘Not his usual tack,’ Donovan murmured.

Sherlock didn’t respond, but he couldn’t help but agree. This sort of behaviour, this sort of language, did not typically characterise the detective inspector, on or off the job. But he couldn’t say he disapproved of the wrath boiling out of Lestrade now. His own reaction had not been far different when Mycroft had contacted him early that morning, a simple four-word text: Seen today’s Sun yet?

In print and online, an article written by that growing pest Kitty Riley featured six full-size photographs of the inside of the kitchen of St Mary’s Convent, evidence taken by the Metropolitan Police on the night John Watson had been found alive. Gregson’s phone had been ringing off the hook all morning, and he was livid. He had been heard reaming out the editor-in-chief of The Sun (who had himself been dealing with a public outraged over the graphic nature of the photographs) from behind the closed door of his office, using language that made even the most hardened of officers cringe. Shortly thereafter, the photos had been pulled from the website and the newspapers recalled, but the damage had been done: They were out there, now, and some smart arses of the cyber universe, thinking themselves funny, were already at it, superimposing images of Johnny Depp’s Sweeney Todd, Gordon Ramsey holding a butcher’s knife, and captions reading Bon Apetit! and Hell’s Kitchen into the scene of blood and carnage and posting them to blogs and media sharing sites. They made Sherlock sick.

Fearing John would come across these unprepared, Sherlock told him what had happened.

‘Don’t go looking,’ he had said in the end.

‘Bad, are they?’ John’s tone was faux-casual, but he was doing that thing with his hand again: clenching it into a tight ball.

‘Yes.’

John paused to breathe. Then: ‘How did they get them?’

‘A leak, apparently. Lestrade is bringing Kitty Riley in now. I’m going down to the Yard. Share a cab?’ John had a physical therapy appointment within the hour and agreed. Neither spoke the relief each felt at that.

Now Kitty lifted her chin, adopting a tone of self-righteous superiority. ‘The public deserves to know the truth about what happened down there. About the dangers associated with Sherlock Holmes. I wouldn’t have to do this if the police weren’t being so hush hush—’

‘This is an ongoing investigation. Exposing evidence may seriously compromise the integrity of our progress, not to mention throw ordinary citizens into an unwarranted panic. That’s why they were classified!’

‘I didn’t know they were classified,’ Kitty Riley said coolly.

‘Didn’t bother to find out though, did you?’ Lestrade rejoined. ‘Is that how they teach investigative journalism these days? I do hope you’ve been sacked.’

‘They wouldn’t dream of it. I’m The Sun’s best reporter. Because of me, The Sun is now the top-selling paper in Europe, three-months running. When I run a piece, print copies sell like corner fish and chips. Online, I get more shares and comments than any other journalist in Britain.’

Again, Donovan snorted, and Sherlock sneered.
'Don’t be so quick to champion yourself,’ said Lestrade. ‘The Sun has always been in high circulation. And brighter stars than you get snuffed out every day. Your editor might think you’re the shiniest toy right now, but believe me, Ms Riley, the public will stand for only so much sensationalism before they demand the truth of things. Remember Hillsborough? Yeah. You are the new Kelvin MacKenzie. You’ve been feeding the people nothing but lies for years now. Forget about your career; they’ll call for you blood. Your legacy will be nothing more than a trail of fiction and slander and—’

Donovan snatched the mic up from the table. ‘The case, Lestrade. The photographs. Her source.’

‘You can’t scare me into confessing anything. I’ve done nothing wrong. And if I were you, I’d be more concerned about the Yard’s reputation, not mine. Solved any crimes lately? The four-month-old St Mary’s Abductions trail gone cold, has it? Here’s a tip, a trail you’ve neglected to set your hounds on: Sherlock Holmes, notorious criminal mastermind and murderer. Ever thought to look into that one, Mr Lestrade?’

‘Don’t let her goad you,’ Donovan said through gritted teeth; in any other universe, her glower would have shattered the glass between them.

‘It’s detective inspector, if you please,’ said Lestrade, pulling back the chair and taking a seat.

‘Now. Let’s talk about those photographs.’

With an audible sigh of relief, Donovan set down the mic.

‘Who is your source?’

‘Three things, DI. One: I have dozens of sources, so I couldn’t possibly know which one you mean. You’ll have to be more specific. Two: The law protects me from revealing my sources. I’m kind of like a priest that way. I couldn’t do my job if people thought I would expose them. And three—she grinned, cat-like—many of my sources are anonymous. I couldn’t expose them, even if I wanted to.’

‘You may come to find the limits of that law soon enough. If it comes out that you knew something, anything, that can be construed as your own knowledge and didn’t come forward? Well then. You might be indicted as a conspirator. The court doesn’t look too favourably on conspirators, I’m afraid. Especially not ones tied to murder.’

Her lips closed over her teeth, but she kept right on smiling.

‘Best you can do now is show some willingness to cooperate with the police. You don’t have the greatest track record with that, but surely we can turn it around. Right a few wrongs.’

‘Oh, I am righting wrongs. Your wrongs. I’m giving the people what they deserve, and that’s the truth. A pathology expert examined those photographs, and you know what he told me? You read my report, didn’t you? The amount of blood spilt in that kitchen? Too much for just two people. Even if one of them did bleed out, the other should have died too. So unless they were slaughtering pigs down there, which may explain the iron hooks dangling in the walk-in, the numbers just don’t add up. This whole thing reeks of conspiracy, Mr Lestrade, but not on my end.’

Sherlock’s gut clenched, and he quickly accessed his internal memory files.

‘Do you also believe the moon landing was a fake?’ Lestrade said with a derisive laugh.

‘Why won’t John Watson talk to the press? The people want to hear his story, you know. But he ignores all my calls and emails.’

Sherlock frowned, momentarily distracted from his internal rummaging; he hadn’t known Kitty Riley had tried contacting John at all.

‘What’s he hiding? Or, rather, why is he being silenced?’

‘You forget who’s interrogating who. You have illegally obtained confidential materials, which you have wilfully disseminated with wanton abandon. That’s at least two charges right there. We’re talking jail time.’

‘A fine, at worst,’ Kitty sighed. ‘I’ve already spoken to legal counsel on the matter, before anything went to press. So here’s the thing. I didn’t seek out confidential materials. They were sent to my inbox, unsolicited. As a matter of rights of the press, any materials—sensitive or otherwise—handed over to a reporter, knowingly and without coercion, become the property of the news outlet, to do with as we best see fit. Time to brush up on your property law, Mr Lestrade. I’m an innocent party.’

He was not derailed. ‘So you received the photographs via email.’

‘That’s right.’

‘What did it say?’

‘Nothing. No text. Just the attachments. Not even a subject line.’

‘From who?’

‘A ghost account. I tried to reply, but . . .’ She shrugged. ‘My email bounced right back at me.’

‘Just the one email?’ asked Lestrade.

‘Just the one.’

‘And when did you receive it?’
‘Midnight. Two nights ago.’
‘Were you at home or the office?’
‘Home.’
‘Checking your personal email account? Or do you check your professional account when you’re off the clock?’
‘A good journalist _always_ checks her professional account. She’s always on the job—something you should know a thing or two about.’
‘Answer the question.’
She brushed the fringe out of her eyes again. ‘It came to my professional account.’
Sherlock snatched the mic up and hit the red button. ‘How many photos? Ask her. More than the six they printed?’
He saw Lestrade grimace a little bit, indicating that he had intended to pursue a different line of questioning and that he didn’t appreciate being jerked off track like that. Agitated, he pushed the chair back, stood, and started circling the table like a vulture.
‘How many photos were attached to the email?’
For the first time, she did not have a ready retort.
‘She’s going to lie,’ Donovan commented to him.
‘And we’re going to catch her at it,’ said Sherlock, grinning deviously.
Lestrade came to a stop behind her. When she continued in silence, he leant in, one hand bracing himself up on the table, his mouth close to her ear.
‘I believe I asked you a question, Ms Riley.’ Sherlock saw her eyes drop to her interlaced fingers.
‘The police took hundreds of photographs that night. How many were sent to you?’
Sherlock was getting excited. Mic in hand, he began pacing in what little space was available before the observation mirror. Donovan scowled.
‘Six. Just the six. We printed them all.’
‘You got her, Lestrade,’ said Sherlock. Then he continued in rapid earnest. ‘Open the paper. Ask her to point to the hooks she mentioned, the ones in the walk-in freezer. Make her show you.’
Lestrade reached for the copy of _The Sun_ and pushed it toward Kitty Riley. ‘Ms Riley,’ he said, ‘would you care to show me the photograph of the walk-in freezer?’
She eyed him suspiciously, then opened the paper. The photograph in question was situated at the bottom of the right-hand side of the spread with the caption _This utility-size freezer likely held the body of Mary S Morstan_. The shot was taken from outside the freezer where the door hung open, and was angled toward the blood-streaked stainless steel floor. The upper half of the freezer was not visible.
‘Well?’ she said.
‘You mentioned hooks,’ said Lestrade. ‘What hooks?’
Her eyes fell back to the photograph.
‘I must be mistaken in my recollection,’ she said, squaring her shoulders.
‘Or,’ he said, ‘you’re remembering another photograph you saw. The imagination doesn’t just supply those kinds of details.’
‘You’d be surprised.’
‘I’ll ask one more time. How many photographs were sent to you from this ghost account?’
She shifted in her seat and sat up straighter. ‘I think we’re done here, Mr Lestrade. I’d like to talk with my legal counsel now.’
He smiled menacingly back. ‘Sgt Donovan,’ he said loudly to the glass, ‘I think we’ve heard enough to have reasonable suspicion of Ms Riley’s criminal hindering of an investigation.’ He placed his hands flat on the table and pushed himself up to standing. ‘Let’s get a warrant to confiscate her personal computer and search her home, shall we?’
Sherlock and Donovan smiled.

***

Jack and Jill were found together in a skip less than a mile downwind of Shepherd’s Knoll. A paper note was fastened to Jack’s closed lips with a safety pin. It read:

_Ever drifting down the stream_

And to Jill’s lips, another:

_Life, what is it but a dream?_
At six in the morning, Lestrade’s phone rang. It was still in the pocket of his coat, which was draped on the opposite armrest of the sofa from where his head lay. With a great groan, he dragged himself up. He blinked, rubbed his stiff face, smacked his morning-dried lips, and reached for his coat even as the dream melted away, leaving him feeling like a dead weight was settled in his chest. Things weren’t getting much better, in that regard, Dr Quinton be damned.

The caller ID read Mycroft Holmes. He allowed himself another groan before answering.

‘What.’

‘A good morning to you, too.’

‘It’s still dark out, Mycroft. I was sleeping.’

He’d had another late one and hadn’t even made it out of his shirt, and barely out of his shoes, before collapsing on the sofa, his head buzzing dully with fatigue. Kitty Riley had been charged with perverting the course of justice and obstructing police officers, although the charges had required a fancy bit of law interpretation, given that she wasn’t withholding evidence but exposing it, and they had yet to prove that her source was not anonymous. Perhaps tech forensics would uncover something more damning on her personal computer, as police hadn’t turned up anything useful at her house. Donovan still held firm to the belief that whoever had sent the email to begin with had been the same source to reveal the information about the still-unrecovered items from the evidence lockers, and she was confident that it was a Yarder who had stolen them to begin with. She walked around the Yard glowering at everyone, suspecting all, trusting none.

When Ms Riley’s convoy of solicitors and barristers—paid for by The Sun—had shown up, they first instructed their client to stop talking, then began spouting diatribes on freedoms of the press and haranguing the Yard for its cowardice, incompetence, and scapegoating tactics. They announced that they would have Ms Riley free before noon the next day, and shame on the police for arresting an easy target when the real criminal was known and unmanaged. They meant Sherlock, of course, who had, by this time, returned with John to Baker Street and missed out on all the legal festivities. Lestrade had never wanted to be a copper less in his life.

Then, at nearly ten o’clock that night, just as he was getting ready to return home for a few hours of well-deserved rest, the call came in: two bodies found in a skip. Suspected but unconfirmed connection to the Slash Man killings. His night was just getting started.

Mycroft ignored his complaint. ‘I know about the messages left on those bodies.’

‘How?’

‘Sherlock told me, obviously. This may surprise you to learn, detective inspector, but we talked half the night. He was in a right state, trying discern the meaning and trajectory of these slayings. I rather think he forewent sleep entirely.’

That did surprise Lestrade, in fact. Not that Sherlock hadn’t slept—that was old habit—but that he had spent more than two minutes on the phone with his brother. ‘And? Did the two of you clunk heads and figure out what the notes mean?’

‘I’ve never had any interest in riddles.’

It was a Holmes’ way of admitting he didn’t know. In fact, it was nearly word for word what Sherlock had said, too, upon seeing the notes, shortly before launching into a lecture on the science of deduction being based on fact: the facts of the crime, the natural consequences to human actions, and the environmental conditions inherent therein. Riddles were puzzles of a fabricated and therefore artificial nature, a tease, not a science. But he knew he had to play. ‘I’ll work on it,’ he said in the end, resigned.

‘Leaving a note is a blatant taunt, as I’m sure you’ve inferred,’ Mycroft continued. ‘The killer is not at all attempting to obscure his identity, not if he’s leaving you hints. He thinks he’s clever—he is clever—and these latest victims do nothing to clarify the pattern but only obscure it further. Though his modus operandi has changed in some respects, I would not be so swift to leap to the conclusion that the victim profiles have as well. Rather, you have established the wrong profile and so you are misleading yourself.’

‘For someone who talks an awful lot, you’re not saying much. All we have to work from is the victim profiles! For all we know, these could be perfectly random hits!’

‘They’re not. There is no randomness here. I am sure that each victim was specially selected. But the reasons remain a mystery, and because of that, the stakes are growing ever more desperate. So even as we work on hunting these people down, we must take precautionary measures and protect what we can. I have another assignment for you, Greg.’

‘Of course you do.’

‘I need you to acquire some very sensitive information.’

‘You do have minions, right? Little errand boys and girls you can send to—’

‘Lestrade.’
Lestrade scrubbed his face even harder, as if he could scour the umbrage right off the skin. He was tired of Mycroft’s tasks, of losing night after night of sleep performing them and seeing few if any of the results of his work. Mycroft never gave him follow-up details. Were they accomplishing anything at all?

‘Yes, all right, what is it? What do I have to do?’

‘There is a certain box of files—’

‘Physical files?’

‘Yes, physical files. Any government agent worth his salt knows how easily digital records can be hacked and recklessly disseminated, only to appear in public forums the very next day. Careless.’

Lestrade withheld a sigh of annoyance.

‘This box is labelled MZ-106.5 RQ. Don’t write that down. Repeat it back to me.’

He did.

‘You need to locate the box, remove it to a safe location, and destroy it.’

‘Right,’ he said slowly. ‘And where might this mystery box be located?’

‘In a vault. Home Office, counter-terrorist division.’

Lestrade almost choked on his own morning spittle. ‘Shit, Mycroft! You’re shitting me!’

‘What a vulgar image.’

‘Just how the hell am I supposed to break into Home Office?’

‘I have it all in hand. You follow my instructions, step by step, and you’re in and out, easy as that.’

‘Oh no. No. Not this one. No, Mycroft. You know what happens if something—anything—goes wrong? If I get caught?’

‘Do have a little faith in my schemes.’

‘I shouldn’t even be having this conversation! Your people probably bugged my phone . . . ’ He rose to his feet and moved away from the window, his eyes stabbing the dark corners of his quiet sitting room, half expecting to see a bug.

Lestrade could almost hear the eye roll. ‘The line is secure, I promise you.’

Call it early-morning ire, he was in a state. He gesticulated wildly and shouted into the phone. ‘I don’t understand why you can’t just waltz in there and collect the stuff yourself. That’s your pitch, not mine.’

‘I could do that, yes. Easy as counting to three. But it would be best—for everyone—that no one know my interest in these particular files. It would be best if they just disappeared.’

Lestrade could feel himself caving. Mycroft was persuasive. When you stood beside him, you felt your smallness; when he pierced you with his omniscient stare, you felt the full measure of your mental simplicity. And even over the phone, when he spoke with a voice of authority, it was as if God himself were giving commandment, and you hastened to obey, if only to dodge a swift smiting. How John had ever withstood the man, he would probably never know.

At the very least, his curiosity was piqued. ‘Why?’ he asked. ‘What’s in them?’

‘That would be reckless, to speak of it.’

‘Oh, but talking about breaking into a government building isn’t? Or giving me the file number?’

‘Tell it to me again.’

‘For the love of—Fine. MZ-106.5 RQ.’

‘Very good. You’ve a knack for memorisation.’

‘It’s my proudest accomplishment.’

‘You’re making more of this than is needful. It is really a very straightforward and simple task I am asking you to perform. But if you are careless and do get caught, or if you are found in possession of these files before they can be obliterated, I will deny this conversation ever took place. I’ll throw you under the bus, as they say.’

‘You’re a true friend, Mycroft.’

‘Leave your house at 6.40 this evening and start walking. It doesn’t matter which direction. Make no plans. A car will pick you up at seven exactly wherever you are. Wear rubber soles and dark clothes to burn after.’

It just kept getting better.

‘Just—just assure me of one thing, Mycroft,’ he said. He recognised that he was relenting even as he spoke, and his inner voice mourned loudly. ‘This does have something to do with taking down Moriarty. His people, I mean. Doesn’t it?’

‘These days, everything I do is in that very interest. Everything you do, too, inspector.’
With that, the line went dead. The Holmes boys, it seemed, had never been taught the courtesy of a farewell.

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‘Are you comfortable? Can I get you bottled water?’

‘Yes. Thank you.’

John sat nervously while Ella stepped over to the mini fridge to extract a small bottle of Evian. They had sat together for three sessions now, talking about John’s daily routines, how (if) he envisioned his future, what seemed to be the most predictable triggers for his panic attacks, and how best to handle them. She’d done little more beyond that, other than change his anxiety medication, reissue Benzodiazepine, and encourage him to write. Yes, they were taking it slow, and he understood why. She was letting him get comfortable in that space, a space he had never been comfortable in before and couldn’t say he was now. But when she had asked why he had returned to her and not seen a specialist in the particular traumas he had experienced, he answered simply, ‘You know me.’ And that was the truth of it. Ella knew more of his history and past struggles than any other therapist, so he wouldn’t have to paint the canvas new. And with that familiarity came a level of trust. He knew how she worked. He knew that, unlike Dr Peabody, she had not spoken to the press about him. To that degree, he trusted her, so despite Sherlock’s doubts and Mycroft’s scoffs, he had come back to Ella Thompson.

Today, he knew, they weren’t going to ignore the closed box any longer. He took a long drink, half emptying the bottle. He thought how Sherlock would have anticipated this and brought him two.

‘I’d like us to try something different today,’ Ella said. ‘An exercise that is new to you. It’s helped many of my patients, and the literature on it reports encouraging results from case studies across Britain and France.’

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘It’s called safety zone therapy.’

‘Sounds kitschy.’

She smiled. ‘Let me explain how it works. It’s about encountering your fears in an environment you know and trust. Dr Ibrahim David offered the analogy of a child who is afraid of the dark. Alone in a dark room, the child’s imagination conjures all manner of monsters and dangers. But put on the light so the child can see his own, familiar room, and the fears go away. The light is important, but just as important is the space. The child’s bedroom itself is a place of safety and sanctuary. It has a power to protect all its own.

‘Of course, with adults, and with true trauma situations, things aren’t as simple as flipping a switch. But the principles are the same. Currently, John, you are unable to confront your traumas directly. But even as your conscious mind resists these troubling memories, you constantly dwell on them in a subconscious space. Asleep, these memories manifest as dreams—monsters and dangers, unbounded, like in a child’s imagination. Awake, they are still there, suppressed, until, when triggered, they push through into your reality. They instigate panic attacks, hallucinations, and other physiological stresses.’

He nodded stiffly.

‘To confront these traumas, as you must, it is imperative that you are at ease: calm and in control. Only then will you be confident in the knowledge that these memories have no further power to hurt you.’

Already, he was doubting the legitimacy of this exercise. He knew that trauma was reiterative, that it was memory itself that gave power to it and enabled it to hurt him at all. He was more inclined to believe that extracting the memories altogether and burning them in a pyre was more plausible than accepting the notion that recalling the horrors of that kitchen would ever lack the power to wound him again.

‘Like I said, we can’t just flip a switch. But we can tap into the same power of protective spaces that calm a frightened child. First, though, you need an appropriate space. I’m not talking about this office. I mean a mental space. I want you to imagine an appropriate space. This space needs to be peaceful, protected, a place in your mind you can retreat to when I tell you to go there. For this to be most effective, it is best that you envision a real-world place you already know intimately. So I want you to imagine that space now, John. Close your eyes. Good. Now think about a place you remember with fondness. Let this be a happy space, a secure space, one free of bad memories, worry, somor, or fear. It can be a childhood bedroom. Grandmother’s sitting room. A house on the beach you went to on holiday once upon a time.’

His brow furrowed as he searched the recesses of his mind for a place that met Ella’s criteria. He travelled cautiously down the corridors of his own memory, but every time he turned a corner, he halted, retreated; he feared what lay at the end of nearly every passageway.

‘You don’t need to say it aloud. In fact, it’s best that you don’t. It is your private space, so guard it; no one can enter it, not even me. Wherever it is, that is your sanctuary, John. Yours.’

She gave him a moment to think, and in that silence, in the dark of his mind, he saw that childhood bedroom where he had cried himself to sleep, a boy whose mother was ravaged by cancer. He considered the smatterings of miserable, little shared flats in his early bachelor days, and he could name none of them with partiality. He remembered the medical tents pitched in the Afghan desert and the stench of blood and saline and body odour. He thought of the austere one-room flat the Army pension afforded him, its bare walls, narrow bed, and single window. And when the image of the sitting room of 116 Porters Avenue resurfaced in his mind, he felt something wrench inside of him. He shoved that image aside and found himself standing in 221B.
‘Have you found one? Are you seeing it?’ she asked him.

It wasn’t a perfect fit—he knew it. In that flat, he had suffered his worst nightmares, his most debilitating panic attacks. Even before all that, his memory was littered with moments of unpleasantness, like finding a human head in the refrigerator; or drinking what he mistook for coffee but which turned out three-boiled halibut that had, for some reason, been stored in the coffee pot (he should have noted how the colour was off, but, in his defence, it had been a pretty early morning); or being woken at four in the morning by a series of mini explosions and the hiss of a fire extinguisher. But even at the thought of these things, his mouth quirked fondly. Even after all that had happened, 221B was where he felt—where he had always felt—most at home. It was more comforting than the flat he had grown up in as a child, more familiar than his many flats as a young bachelor, and more real, even, than the home he had known on Porters. Eyes still closed, he nodded.

‘Good. Now open your eyes. Here’s what we’re going to do, John,’ she continued. She passed him a notepad and a pen from her desk. ‘I’m going to ask you to recall an event, something that happened to you that still causes you distress. I want you to remember it fully and describe it out loud, in as much detail as you can bear. And whenever I ring this bell’—she reached for a small silver bell on her desk and shook it: a light tinkling noise, soft and friendly—‘I want you to write a number on that paper. On a scale of one to ten, I want you to rate your level of anxiety. One is perfectly calm and in control.’

‘And ten?’

‘I think you know what ten feels like. But I won’t let things escalate to a ten.’

He inhaled slowly and held it.

‘If you write any number higher than five, John, I want you to stop talking and to think of your safe zone, whatever space you have designated as your sanctuary. Imagine yourself there, and when you do, I want you to feel its positive energy and protective influence. Let the peace and power of that place absorb the undesirable emotions you feel.’

He worried, instead, about contaminating it. He looked down at the blank pad. ‘We’re really going to do this today, aren’t we?’

‘We’re going to do it right now. How would you rate your level of anxiety at this very moment?’

‘A four.’

His heart was making such a racket he was surprised she couldn’t hear it herself; his palms sweated into the armrests and around the pen.

‘That’s a bit high to start with.’

‘What can I say? I don’t want to do this.’

‘Maybe we should start in the safe zone then. Go on, John. Close your eyes again. Picture yourself in the space you’ve designated as secure. Empty it of any clutter, noise, or people. It’s just you.’

There was nothing for it: she was pushing him onward, and if he didn’t want to stumble, he’d best move his feet. So he imagined the sitting room of 221B at midday, with its well-used chairs in front of a cold hearth and the mirror hanging above the mantle; he imagined the long curtains framing the tall windows and the high bookshelves stuffed with encyclopaedias and dictionaries and nineteenth-century penny dreadfuls; he pictured the wooden floorboards and plush red-and-gold rugs; he saw the dark chocolate fleur de lys trellis on the walls, the skulls, the teacups and coffee mugs and open laptops and loose pages spreading across the desk. Clutter? Oh yes, and he’d forgotten which was his and which wasn’t. Not that it mattered. Not really. Nor was the flat a quiet space. Outside, the loud hum of cars and buses as they rolled by on the street; and from the kitchen, the clinking of beakers against flasks while a fresh brew of coffee dripped into the pot (he could smell it); from the stairs, familiar, eager footsteps; and just behind him, the sigh of a violin. He couldn’t see him—but he could hear him, feel him, in every corner of that space, all at once.

She had said to empty the space of everything and everyone but himself, but there was no 221B without Sherlock.

And now, the tinkling of a bell.

On the pad, he wrote the number two.

‘Tell me about the day you were kidnapped,’ said Ella gently.

The violin missed a note. But the smell of coffee still hung in the air.

‘I took the wrong cab,’ said John, beginning.

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The police did have some skill at finding people, even those who did not wish to be found, which was how Cleona Winters came to be in Bart’s mortuary, standing over the body of her slain son, whom she had not seen since he had run away from her thirteen years ago.

‘That’s him,’ she said. She was a tall woman, fifty years old, perhaps, and with a face hardened by a lifetime of bitterness. Her voice was husky, still accented by the Jamaica she had left as a girl to come to this country in search of a better life. What she got instead was poverty, abuse, and a murdered child. Though her expression was impassive, the tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

‘That’s my Ralston.’

Beyond the double doors, the father of Lynette Avery wailed unrestrainedly in the arms of a new
Molly stood to the side as Dr Torrence zipped up the heavy black bag, hiding the battered face of yet another victim. She had spent the last day and a half with those bodies, inside and out, cataloguing every abuse and running every test and making a full and urgent report. The similarities to the other victims were there: bound hands, sexual assault, evidence of strangling, and trace amounts of sodium hypochlorite. But whereas Winters had died from a blow to the head, Avery had died from blood loss. As with every corpse that came through her morgue, she had regarded the bodies in pieces: the eye, the liver, the toenail. She had to, or she wouldn’t have been able to do her job. It wasn’t until the loved ones came that the reality of their humanity struck her, and she could no longer divorce the soul from its tabernacle. Each time, it took all her all her remaining fortitude to keep herself from weeping with them. So it was today.

‘It’s him, isn’t it,’ said Ms Winters. ‘The one I’ve been reading about in the papers. He’s done this to those other homeless boys?’

‘You would have to talk to the police about that,’ said Dr Torrence, though not without sympathy.

‘Why have they not done something by now?’ she cried. ‘How many is it going to take? My boy’s dead, and he’s not the first, and look what they done to him. Just look!’ She suddenly started to shake. She bowed at the waist and covered her face in her hands.

Dr Torrence gave Molly a look that she understood at once, so often had she seen it over the years. She stepped forward, put an arm around the grieving woman, and steered her toward the door. It would be her job to settle her, get her to sign the appropriate paperwork, and see that she was taken care of.

By the time Molly left St Bartholomew’s for the day, it was six o’clock and the sun was already an hour gone from the sky. She caught the 46 bus, and as it rumbled through the city, she took out her phone to check for missed calls. There were none. She thought about phoning Greg, just to say hi, but she knew that with this latest double murder (Sherlock had been certain that they were killed in the same location, and though she had determined that they had died about a day apart, they were still being classified as a double murder), he was likely to be too occupied to take her call. And so, refusing to feel the stab of disappointment or the long ache of lonesomeness, she shoved the phone back inside her handbag, hugged herself tightly for warmth, and waited until the bus trundled to her stop.

Her postbox was empty, her neighbours’ windows dark. She rattled about in her handbag for her key and fitted it in the door, thinking of the hot shower she would take to wash away the stink of formaldehyde. The key turned easily. Pushing the door open, she entered the dark flat and groped for the light.

‘Cheshire!’ she called, followed by a xwshwshxw sound to summon her cat. At six months old, he was at last content to be left alone and now knew to use the scratcher board and not her wallpaper and curtains. She expected him to be lazying on the sofa, where she normally found him, but instead he came trotting in from the kitchen.

‘I hope you’ve not been naughty,’ she said, scooping him into her arms. She tapped her nose against his and stroked his striped, tabby fur. Then she dropped him on the sofa, shed her coat, and tossed her handbag onto a chair.

She was just removing her shoes when she noticed, on the cleared, round dining table, a single rose and a white card standing on its end. Her heart skipped a beat and a slow smile crept across her face, hardly daring to believe what she saw. She and Greg had exchanged keys two months ago, but neither had yet taken advantage of the implied invitation that they were both too shy to speak. But oh! He had left her a rose! Why would he have left her a rose? But of course, she remembered now. It was February 13. In all the madness of their lives and jobs, she had all but forgotten the approaching holiday. She was touched that he had not.

Still smiling, heart now tripping, she picked up the long stem and put the petals to her nose, breathing in deeply. She remembered that he had once suggested she put flowers in the mortuary, to ‘liven things up a bit’. A terrible suggestion, for reasons of practicality if not tact, but one she would never forget, and she supposed, now, that he had a liking for flowers. She’d actually never been given flowers, especially not as a romantic gesture, but she suddenly decided that she liked them, too. Very much.

Then she picked up the card. Her name appeared on the outside in a beautiful, looping scrawl. And inside, in the same hand, these words:

*Molly, put the kettle on.
We’ll all have tea.*

She laughed aloud as the nursery tune popped into her head. So this was a game, was it? She had heard of couples sending one another on scavenger hunts, but she’d never done something like this before. Leave it to a detective, though, to send her after clues.

Humming the tune, she left the card on the table but took the rose with her into the kitchen, still breathing in its fragrance, as though she could filter her whole world now through the scent of that flower. She turned on the tap and reached for the kettle. But when she lifted it, she felt something heavy already inside slide along the base. Her second clue? She set aside the flower and eagerly lifted the kettle lid.

Molly screamed. The kettle clattered loudly, fallen upon the kitchen tiles.

Inside the kettle lay a dead bird.
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2015

In her haste to leave the flat, Molly crammed the note into her pocket and scooped Cheshire into her arms, but she forgot her hat, gloves, and handbag. She hurried through crowded, lamp-lit London streets, hugging the squirming cat close to her chest beneath her coat. He wasn’t liking it one bit.

It wasn’t until the cat scratched her deeply across her collarbone and down her chest, wriggled his way out of her coat, and streaked for the skips that Molly was pulled out of her fearful stupor. She chased after him, calling his name and begging him to come back, but he disappeared into a dark alley. Molly’s feet came to a sudden stop on the threshold where lamplight met shadow.

“Oh Cheshire, please,” she said into the mouth of the alley. People continued along the pavement behind her like she was a stone in a stream, some offering a cursory glance, others sniggering heartlessly or tsking sympathetically, but they all moved along just the same. She stood there pleading as the minutes passed and cold crept beneath her coat and slid against her skin. She shivered. For a moment, she was on the verge of panic, clamping two hands across her mouth while pacing in front of the black alley.

“Trouble, miss?”

She gasped and turned to see a hefty man in a leather jacket and a flat cap, who stood in the centre of the pavement, hands deep in coat pockets and shoulders hunched against the cold.

“You looked upset, was all. Can I help?”

Without a word, she turned and ran.

She ran for who knows how long. When she finally came to herself, she realised how far she had gone, and how cold she was, and she knew she needed to call Greg. She came to a stop on a corner and shoved her hands, stiff and beginning to hurt with cold, into the pockets of her coat in search of her phone, only then remembering how she had put it in her forgotten handbag, which also carried cash and cards. She whimpered, tears building behind her sinuses. Why hadn’t she memorised his number? She couldn’t even pay the bus fare to his house, let alone cab fare, though she knew better than to take a cab. But it didn’t matter anyway—she’d left his key behind with everything else. How could she have been so careless? So foolish! She could return to the flat, she supposed, and bother the landlord, who kept residence on the ground floor, to let her in. But what if someone was waiting for her there? She hadn’t searched the bedroom or the bathroom, after all. What if someone had been in hiding, just behind a door or around a corner, waiting to— She couldn’t bear to think it. Just the thought of stepping foot inside her own home right now sent her quaking. She couldn’t do it. Not alone.

But her finger brushed the note in her pocket.

And that was when she realised she was walking again at a good clip, brushing tears from her cheeks and sniffing to keep her nose from running. Her feet were pointed toward Baker Street. She was going for an opinion. A consultation. That was all. Just to get his perspective. And, maybe, to get him to roll his eyes at her for this dramatic response to such little upsets. He would point out to her that there were perfectly logical explanations for everything—the rose, the note, the bird—and she’d simply been spending too much time around dead bodies lately. He would explain it all thoroughly and in one breath and let his tone and eyes alone berate her, and everything would be fine. There would be no need to bother Greg after all.

***

She pressed her thumb to the buzzer: two dashes, four dots, just like she’d been instructed back in December. Her initials. While she waited, she cleared her throat and patted her cheeks, hoping the redness and puffiness could be blamed on the cold.

She wasn’t buzzed in. Instead, she heard uneven footsteps descending the stairs, and moments later, the front door pulled open. It was John.

“Molly,” he said, half in welcome, half in surprise. A look of cold guardedness slid away, as though he had been anticipating a different MH.

“Hello John,” she said, her voice pitched higher than was natural. She swallowed hard. “How are you?”

“Come in, it’s freezing,” said John, treating her question as a salutation, nothing more.

She followed him up the first flight of stairs. He was walking without his cane, relying instead on the banister or the wall, and she wondered if this was a new thing, a positive thing. She wasn’t one to judge, especially because it felt like ages since she had seen John herself. In the morgue, while he was examining the bodies of that homeless couple, Sherlock had mentioned in passing that John had returned to his physical therapist (a thought inspired, it seemed, by the scar tissue on the woman’s leg, coupled with the uneven wearing of the bones in her feet that Sherlock thought might have indicated a limp). He hadn’t commented further on John’s condition. Since the day Sherlock had stated plainly that John couldn’t stand him, he hadn’t spoken to her at all about his state of being, physical or otherwise, though—and Molly wondered if she were being intuitive or just nosy in thinking it—it seemed that he wanted to.

“Is Sherlock—?”

“He’s out,” said John. They’d reached the landing, and he held the door open for her to pass into
221B. 'Doing what Sherlock does best.' There was a twinge of acrimony in his tone.

'Oh.' She felt suddenly embarrassed for coming, uninvited and unannounced. In the comfort of this flat, fleeing herself in such a state now seemed a very silly thing to have done. All she'd accomplished was stranding herself and losing her cat. But now, a feeling of calm and safety enveloped her, and if John didn’t mind, maybe she’d stay a while.

'Let me take your coat,' John said. 'Maybe get you some something dri— Molly, is that blood?'

Her coat was halfway down her shoulders, and she looked down at her shirt where a line of blood had soaked through her collar and left breast pocket.

'Cheshire,' she said, ‘my tabby. Still just a kitten, really. He . . . he ran away. On my way over.’

She saw his confusion and knew that she was making little sense, but he didn’t question her. His face softened and he took her arm, leading her to the kitchen. 'Let me help you clean it up,' he said. 'Cats’ claws can lead to nasty infections.’

He sat her at the table and busied himself in cupboards and at the sink, returning with a first aid kit, a bowl of warm water, and some white cotton flannels. He asked her to open her blouse a few buttons and hold back the collar while he cleaned the scratch over her collarbone. There were three scratches, about five inches long, but only the centre one was deep enough to bleed.

While he worked, she tried hard not to stare at him, but it was difficult not to. It wasn’t just the facial scars, the grooves in the skin left behind in the wake of a knife; it wasn’t the slightly offset nose, a remnant of a break; it wasn’t even the shiny skin on his neck, caught in just the right light, that spoke the burning of a leather strap. These things scared her. But it was more than the wounds in a living body that fascinated her: it was something she couldn’t name. It was in the way he carried them, an indescribable quality of shadow and light existing in the same plane. She could hardly believe that this was the man she had known three years ago, or the same man who had lain in a hospital bed in critical condition for so many days, just a matter of months ago. All three versions seemed to be different people entirely, men who couldn’t possibly share one life; and yet, in the man who sat beside her now, she saw echoes of the other two play across his face every time he turned his head.

'Thank you,' she said when he was finished. She buttoned her blouse again over the thin strip of gauze he had used to let the wound breathe. ‘You must think me pretty silly, coming all the way over here for help with a scratch.’

'Is that why you came?’

He began to repack the first aid kit. His tone was casual, but his eyes, when they glanced up to meet hers, were incisive.

She smiled to show she was all right, but she couldn’t hold it, and it slipped completely off her face, replaced by trembling lips. 'Sorry!' she said, her voice strained as new tears welled in her eyes. She stood and turned her back to wipe them away, moving into the sitting room. She had thought she had herself together, at least to the point where she could speak without a thick throat or falling to pieces. And maybe with Sherlock she would have been able to. She would have been on her guard, or at least in a more logical frame of mind. But for some reason, with John, her defences dropped away, exposing her disquiet and laying bare her fear. She couldn’t understand why this was so.

Molly felt his hand on her back as he stepped to her side and guided her to the sofa. There, he sat with her, keeping his hand steady between her shoulder blades. While she cried, he asked no questions but instead served as an empathetic vessel who, without her having to say a word and without knowing the cause, understood that she was afraid. And maybe that was why she knew that, if she could talk to anyone, she could talk to John, because hers was a fear he had known.

'Someone was in my flat today,’ she said shakily. ‘I came home, and there was a rose on the table, and a note.' Oh, it sounded so harmless! Even she was sceptical of any true danger now.

But John didn’t scoff. 'What did it say?’ he asked, his voice gentle as milk.

She nodded to where her coat hung by the door. John arose and put his hand in the pockets, extracting the crumpled note with her name on. After he read it, he lifted his head, his face grim.

‘There was a dead bird in the kettle,’ she said. ‘So I got out of there as quickly as I could.’ She covered her face with her hands. 'I thought the rose was from Greg!’ she cried. 'But it wasn’t him. It wasn’t him.’

The sofa sank again beside her, and John put his arms around her and pulled her close, letting her cry. He stroked her hair to soothe her.

‘They know, don’t they?’ she said into his gaunt shoulder, unable to keep her body from shaking. ‘That I’m the one who knew he was alive. They know!’

‘Shh, shh,’ he said.

‘They’ll think I’m important to him. And they want to hurt him, I know they do. So they’ll go through his friends. That’s what these people do.’

‘Molly, don’t—’

‘I can’t do it,’ she said, pulling herself back.

‘Do what?’

For a moment, she was unable to continue; her imagination conjured atrocities too terrible to name. He reached for the box of tissues on the coffee table and brought them nearer. She pulled
one out to wipe her face; she could feel how splotchy and puffy her skin still was. ‘I’m not strong like you are, John. I won’t hold up against that sort of . . . The kinds of things they did to . . . I’m sorry.’

She meant torture, but she couldn’t say the word. Ashamed, she cast her eyes down to her lap, but instead she saw John’s hand rested on his own knee. The scars from the wire cuffs stood out on his left wrist.

‘Don’t apologise,’ he murmured softly. He surreptitiously tugged his sleeve to cover the soft, pink lines.

‘I don’t have any more secrets,’ she said, unable to stop herself. ‘What if they have no reason to keep me alive at all?’

She waited for him to tell her that nothing like that would ever happen to her, that she was overplaying the danger or misunderstanding what she had seen in her flat. But he didn’t. He made no pretence of regarding her fears as anything less than reasonable. Instead, he stood. ‘Come with me,’ he said, extending a hand.

Confused, a little frightened, but trusting him all the same, she put her hand in his. He helped her rise and led her out of the sitting room and to the staircase leading to the second storey. As they ascended, John, still holding tightly to her hand, dropped the banister to pull his phone out of his pocket. She saw him scroll through a short address book and land on the name Sherlock. With a thumb, he quickly typed out a simple text:

Come home.

He brought her into what was clearly his bedroom, though it was hard to imagine that anyone really lived here. It was as sparse as a room could be: a bed, a dresser, and a bare three-legged bedside table with an unshaded lamp, all simple in design, all drab in colour. There was nothing on the walls, not even a mirror. Even the window stood un-curtained, revealing nothing but a rickety fire escape and a solid brick wall on the other side of the back alley.

John dropped her hand and walked to the headboard of his bed where he opened a small drawer and pulled out a black pistol. She tensed.

‘Here,’ he said, extending the weapon to her, grip first. ‘I want you to hold it.’

‘John, I can’t—’

‘Like this.’ He ignored her protests and stood closer to demonstrate a proper grip. ‘Right-handed, yeah? Tuck the grip right here, in the web between the thumb and forefinger. Three fingers curl around the grip, like this. See? Use your left hand to anchor yourself and stabilise your aim. Place it right here, over your other hand like this. Yeah? Like you’re praying.’

He taught her how to flip on the safety, and how to flip it off. He told her about sight alignment, how to look at the front sight on the slide and align it with the rear notch, and how to level it at a target. He explained to her how to squeeze the trigger, smoothly, and how to lean gently into the shot and anticipate a recoil.

Then, to show her the gun was harmless, he reached back into the drawer and extracted a magazine, which he tossed on the bed. He pulled the slide back swiftly to show her a hollow chamber. Finally, he pointed the gun at the opposite side of the room and pulled the trigger twice to show her that it was, indeed, empty. But with each click, she jumped all the same.

‘Hold it,’ he said, pressing the gun into her hands.

She curled her fingers around the grip, warm from his hands.

‘How does it feel?’

‘It’s heavy,’ she said, a little surprised by the weight.

‘And that’s without the magazine. It only gets heavier. Every pull of the trigger, the heavier it becomes. So fire it once, and make it count.’

A firm and unrelenting teacher, he made her hold it with two hands, just as he had shown her; he adjusted her grip, showed her how to lock her right arm and slightly bend her left, how to keep her arms straight as she raised them to aim at a target. Then he placed himself on the other side of the room, touched the centre of his chest at the sternum, and said, ‘Right here. This is a kill shot.

She nodded fearfully.

‘Take it.’

‘What?’

‘Practise aiming. Pull the trigger.’

‘I can’t, John.’

‘The gun is empty.’

She knew it was, but she asked anyway, ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

She hesitated.

‘You won’t get a chance to think about it when it counts, Molly, you have to be prepared. You have to know what it feels like. So when I tell you, you aim and shoot. Got it?’
'God, John.'

'Align your sight. This is your target.' He jabbed again at the centre of his chest.

'God, John!'

'Molly, now.'

She raised her arms and pulled the trigger. All she heard was a small click. But she could barely breathe.

'Good,' he said. 'That was good. You were a bit too quick, actually. You fired before you had locked onto your target. You just shot me in the stomach.'

Molly shook her head, apologetic and not sure why. 'That’s still lethal.'

'Yes, but it’s going to take me quite a lot longer to bleed out from it. And I’ll be in agony while I do. A quick, sure death is right here.' His fingers rammed his chest a third time, hard enough to bruise. ‘Fire.’

She lifted the gun and fired again; an imaginary recoil vibrated through her body, and she jumped.

'There it is,' he said, approvingly. He returned to her side of the room and took the gun out of her hands. She sighed with relief, but then he slammed the magazine back into the well, flicked the safety on, and put it back in her hands to make her feel its full weight.

'When you shoot, Molly,' he said gravely, a hand on her shoulder, 'you shoot to kill. Hear me? You don’t give him a second chance.'

***

'Man, I don’t think I should be talking to you.'

'Why not? You just said you were by Shepherd’s Knoll that night. If you saw or heard something —'

'Shit up, man, I ain’t saying nothing because’—the kid’s volume dropped and he looked around shadily—’I don’t want a target on my back.’

‘What target? Who’s making threats? Tell me, and I may be able to—’

‘Man, you’re the threat. Don’t you get it?’

Sherlock straightened and his mouth closed. The kid was maybe sixteen, and maybe still had a home to return to, if he wanted it. Sherlock was mistaken to think that a younger man would be ignorant of who he was and therefore be more likely to talk. The kid took another step backward, distancing himself.

'None of this would be happening if not for your bloody return from the dead. We all know it. Old Man Reaper, he ain’t satisfied, is he? He’s angry. You cheated him, and we’re the ones paying for it. That’s the word.’

‘That’s absurd.’

‘Yeah? Well.’ The young man kept shifting his weight, casting glances to the shadows. ‘Some of the blokes ain’t too happy with you. They’re thinking to do something about it, too. Evening the score, so to speak.’

‘How?’

The kid shrugged, checked the stretch of alley to his right, and said, ‘That’s all I got, man. Nah, man, I’m done.’ And he bolted.

Sherlock kicked a stone in anger and heard it skip down the street like a stone on a pond. This wasn’t the first time he’d had a reaction like that one.

He decided to continue on to Shepherd’s Knoll and question more patrons when his phone went off. He recognised the personalised text alert, but he was momentarily stunned by it, and it took him a moment to understand why: it was message from John, and it was the first time John had texted him in three-and-a-half years. It read:

Come home.

He didn’t even think twice. He stepped out into the street and hailed the first cab he saw. Sliding into the back, he said, ‘221 Baker,’ and moved his thumb to reply to the text to tell John he was on his way.

'Oi, I know that address.'

He lifted his eyes and saw the cabbie staring at him in the rearview mirror.

'Problem?'

'221 Baker, we all know that one. They print it in the paper every day, in one place or another. You’re him, ain’t you? You’re that Holmes character?'

'Hardly relevant. I’m paying you to do a job.'

'Nah, I don’t want none of your money. Out you git, Mr Holmes.'

'Pardon?'
'Not in my cab, no sir. It may be I’s just a cabbie, but this cabbie don’t chauffeur no criminals. Out you git, and don’t make me say it twice.'

Next he knew, he was standing again in the street as the black cab peeled away. He was incredulous, fuming. He was not a criminal, and damn them all for believing the twisted lies of Kitty Riley. Sheep. And damn her lawyers and The Sun for putting up bail. She would be sleeping comfortably in her own bed tonight while all of London quailed at the false words dripping from her pen.

Turning onto a more major road, he hailed the next cab he saw, kept his head down as he climbed in, and said, ‘Corner of Glentworth and Melcombe’, which was just around the corner from his front door. He sat back in the chair, kept his head down, and resolved to buy a hat as the cabbie, no questions asked, pulled away from her kerb.

He arrived on the doorstep approximately thirty minutes after receiving the text. He hit the buzzer to announce himself (three dots, four dots), and bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time, both eager and apprehensive to discover why he had been summoned. The text could be read as urgent, or terse, or annoyed; but any way he read it, the direction was clear, and he followed it.

To his surprise, he found Molly Hooper in the sitting room with John. She sat in his chair with her feet drawn under her and sipping what he could smell from the doorway was a strong cup of tea. John was in his own chair, also with a cup. They had apparently been involved in a very intense conversation—Sherlock knew the look of one. Their heads came around as he stepped into the room. Molly’s blush was fresh and she quickly dipped her head to sip again from her cup, but John just stared at him as though he had never seen him before. The expression was unfathomable.

‘What has happened?’ he asked, even as he scanned the room for clues. There were several spent tissues on the coffee table (Molly must have been crying when she first arrived); the first aid kit lay open on the kitchen table (she had been hurt); there was blood on her shirt; and John’s pistol lay in plain sight on the small table at John’s elbow. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good. He waited for an explanation.

John pushed himself to his feet, limped to the coffee table, and picked up a crumpled piece of paper. ‘When Molly got home today,’ he said, ‘she found that someone had been inside her flat. They left her a rose and this note.’ He passed Sherlock the note.

His brow furrowed as he opened it to find a nursery rhyme substituting the name Polly with Molly.

He sniffed and got a whiff of eau de cologne. Not Molly’s.

‘She looked in the kettle and found a dead bird,’ John finished.

Sherlock flattened the crumpled paper on the table top. Then he stepped over to the lamp in the corner and pulled the cord. He angled the card so that the light spilled across the writing, casting shadows into even the slightest impressions in the paper. More words, as though someone had written on a page set atop this one. He grabbed a pencil from the table, and with its flat edge rubbed gently across the indentations until the message, written in the same hand, began to appear:

You always did gravitate toward the unremarkable.
Or maybe she’s more delicious than she seems. xxx

He frowned. His mouth fell open, prepared to spew forth his deductions and launch into a string of questions. But then he saw the trepidation on Molly’s face, and the caution in John’s eyes, and he switched tracks.

‘John, a plastic bag, if you would.’

While John went to the kitchen to fetch one, Sherlock flattened the crumpled paper on the table top. He angled the card so that the light spilled across the writing, casting shadows into even the slightest impressions in the paper. More words, as though someone had written on a page set atop this one. He grabbed a pencil from the table, and with its flat edge rubbed gently across the indentations until the message, written in the same hand, began to appear:

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‘John, a plastic bag, if you would.’

While John went to the kitchen to fetch one, he stepped closer to Molly. ‘Are you all right?’

She nodded, but she did not look all right.

‘The blood—’

‘Cat scratch. Nothing serious.’

‘Have you called Lestrade?’

‘I . . . forgot my phone. Keys and everything. In the flat.’

He nodded.

John returned with the plastic bag into which Sherlock dropped the card. ‘Anything else left in your flat? Anything touched? Moved? Missing?’

Her look of distress deepened as she tried to remember. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I didn’t notice. When I found the bird . . .’

‘I need to have a look around, it seems. You are welcome to stay here, of course. John won’t mind.’

‘You’ll need me to get in,’ said Molly. ‘Mr Fazal, the landlord. He won’t let you in unless I’m with you.’

Sherlock grinned slyly and started to say, ‘I think I can manage—’ but John picked up the pistol, and as he tucked it into the back of his trousers, he said, ‘Looks like I’m coming, too.’

***

‘The flower was on the table, just here,’ said Molly, pointing. She moved into the room, but Sherlock had paused in the threshold. At first, she thought he was waiting, vampire-like, for an
invitation to enter, and her tongue fumbled a bit as she started to say, ‘Um, you can, that is, do you want to . . . ?’ But she trailed off as she realised that, like the flipping of a switch, he had entered deductive mode: he had stepped onto a crime scene, and his eyes were scanning wall to wall, floor to ceiling, and every inch in between. He sniffed the air like a hound and cocked his head to listen for any unusual sounds.

‘Er, Sherlock?’ said John, who still stood outside the door and was blocked from entering. ‘You want to let me in?’

Rather than answer, Sherlock stepped purposefully into the room, turning like a dancer, three hundred and sixty degrees, still observing, sedulously touching nothing. It occurred to her that, though she had seen him investigating many times before, she had never seen him at a crime scene. It was a different style, a different art, to that of examining corpses, and it was fascinating.

John came in behind. He had brought with him his cane, so clearly he was not off it completely. Just around the flat, it seemed. And though he, too, surveyed the room, his was an air less of inspection and more of vigilance, as though assessing the flat for weak points in the fortress and places to establish a night watch.

‘Where’s the rose now?’ asked Sherlock.

‘Kitchen,’ said Molly. ‘Shall I—?’

‘Show me how you found it.’

She re-entered the kitchen, gave wide berth to the fallen kettle, and grabbed the rose, which lay perched by the sink. Back in the sitting room, she lay it on the table.

‘Just like this,’ she said. ‘And the card was here.’

‘Who has access to your flat?’

‘Just Greg. And the landlord.’

‘And the landlord’s wife.’

‘Well, yes.’

It had been she, Mrs Fazal, who had let them in, as Mr Fazal was not at home.

‘Very well. I’ll need to see everything.’ He leant into his next step, but halted, re-evaluated, and, rocking back, added, somewhat perfunctorily, ‘May I?’

‘Whatever you need to do,’ she agreed.

He gave a sharp nod. ‘John. Check the integrity of the locks on the windows and door. Tell me if you see anything amiss.’

She watched them set to work, a little spellbound. Sherlock moved like a bird, flitting to and fro, if only methodically and with calculated purpose. He was high (stretching his neck to the tops of her bookcases) and low (crouching to look under the coffee table and below the sofa), back (to the door) and forth (measuring the steps to the dining table); and soon he had exhausted the sitting room and was fluttering about in the kitchen, opening cupboards and drawers, fiddling with the tap and the cooker and coffee pot. She heard him dealing with the bird, too (she heard the fridge door open, so she knew exactly where he had put it), but despite feeling sorry for it, she didn’t want to see it, so she stayed in the sitting room and watched John.

John worked with the painstaking efficiency of a practised surgeon: while not exactly slow, he certainly wasn’t rushed. He tested the double bolts Greg had had fitted on the windows and pressed fingers into every corner of the panes until he was satisfied that they were well and truly secured; and he spent a fair amount of time examining the strength of the lock on the front door and looking for signs of a forced entry.

‘Where’s the fire escape?’ he asked.

‘It’s just off the balcony,’ she said. ‘In the bedroom.’

John nodded and started in that direction, but Sherlock had just left for the bathroom, and Molly took John’s arm to stop his leaving.

‘John, what I said back at your flat,’ she said softly; she was suspicious of Sherlock’s sense of hearing. ‘Um, I maybe shouldn’t have told you what I did.’

‘I’m glad you said it,’ he said. The water kicked on in the bath. Seconds later, Sherlock exited the bathroom, leaving the showerhead running, and disappeared into the bedroom. ‘Really.’

‘I feel that I may have broken confidence. I want him to believe he can trust me.’

‘Molly, he does trust you. And he has every reason to.’

‘Yes, but—’

‘But I promise,’ he said, his eyes very serious, ‘I won’t let on that I know . . . anything . . . of what he said. All right?’

She nodded gratefully. But she couldn’t stop herself from adding, ‘I just want you to know, well, I mean, if there’s anything, anything at all, I can do, to help, that is . . .’

He smiled softly as a gesture of goodwill. ‘Let’s worry about you tonight, yeah?’

Sherlock was striding back toward them. Swinging from a lacy strap looped around one finger
was a black brassiere.

‘I take it this is not your own?’ he said mildly.

Molly’s eyes widened as she stared at the article draping Sherlock’s hand. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks, a sense of mortification she couldn’t account for, given that the item was definitely not her own. Still, the feeling of having been violated was keen. She shook her head vehemently.

His eyes flicked down to her chest. ‘I thought not,’ he said.

‘Sherlock,’ John scolded.

‘This is a C cup for a 32 bust,’ Sherlock returned, ever the practical one. ‘Molly’s barely a—’

‘Don’t!’ Molly said.

‘You’ve been in her underwear drawer?’ said John. ‘Sherlock—that’s not okay!’

‘I promised I would conduct a thorough search,’ said Sherlock, apparently not understanding the objection. ‘Sock drawer, underwear drawer, medicine cabinet—your Zolpidem is expired, by the way. I suggest you throw it out.’

Molly’s blush deepened, and John groaned and rubbed a hand across his face.

‘Problem?’ Sherlock looked to John.

‘Tell me you found more than a black bra, Sherlock.’

‘More than a—? John, you don’t see what this means? Of course I found plenty!’

He led them into the kitchen. The kettle was repositioned on the cooker; Molly knew she’d be spending a fair amount of time scrubbing it out.

‘Do you like claret, Molly?’ he asked, reaching into her cupboards.

‘Um, yes?’

‘Do you have any on hand?’ He pulled three wine glasses from the highest shelf and set them in a row.

‘No, I rarely buy it myself, but on special occ—’

He whirled to the fridge and pulled it open. Inside, she saw a single bottle of claret. Pulling it out, he shook it enough for both Molly and John to hear that it was half empty. ‘Someone’s been enjoying a splash of wine,’ he said, and plunked the bottle beside the glasses. He lifted one. ‘Two things, then. First,—he raised the glass to eye level and pointed—’the remaining drops of claret still pooled at the bottom of the glass.’

‘In all three glasses?’ asked John.

‘There’s a fourth.’ He pulled down another wine glass. ‘One for the hostess, and one for each of her three guests. Symbolically. Only one person was in this flat. These clues were planted, down to the drop. This one’—he turned the glass around so they could better see the other side of the rim where the imprint of dark crimson lipstick stained the glass—’is more telling. From a bottom lip, obviously. An observably deliberate gesture.’

He set down the glass and turned abruptly for the back of the flat. ‘Now, as for the bathroom—’

‘But Sherlock,’ said John, ‘what about the bird?’

‘It’s a wren. Moving on!’

Molly heard John sigh out his exasperation as he followed after her and Sherlock.

He had been running the shower, as hot as the water would go. When they entered, the warm, humid air engulfed them. Sherlock twisted the knob to off; he didn’t have to say a word beyond that. On the mirror, they could clearly see the image of a smiley face streaked across the glass. Sherlock quickly pulled out his phone, wiped clear the lens, and snapped a photo.

‘And now to the bedroom.’

Again, they trailed behind him until they entered Molly’s bedroom. All the sheets had been pulled off the bed, and her underwear drawer still hung open. She hurried to close it.

‘Nothing more of interest in there,’ Sherlock said offhandedly, ‘and nothing else in the room has been touched. Save by me.’

‘Then what are we doing in here?’ asked John.

‘I wanted Molly to see that it is perfectly safe in this room.’ He faced her head on. ‘I checked the balcony myself. It’s secure. She came in another way. Mostly likely straight through the front door.’

‘She?’ Molly and John said together.

Sherlock proffered a look of wonder at their combined average intellects. ‘Irene Adler.’ Then he marched out of the room in what looked to be a temper. ‘Obviously.’
Rhymes with 'Fall'

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2015

When Sherlock announced, ‘We’re spending the night’ as though it were simply a matter of course, Molly, though unused to having anyone else in her home, offered only a token objection. She fully expected it would be overridden, and it was. She really didn’t want to be alone in her flat. Not tonight. And Greg’s phone had gone straight to voicemail.

‘You’re sure you don’t mind?’ she said, continuing in the vein of apology for being such a burden.

‘Not remotely. John will do smartly on the sofa, won’t you John?’

John bobbed his head once. ‘Of course.’

‘What about you?’ Molly asked.

Sherlock smiled to reassure her. ‘Oh no, I’m fine. Couldn’t sleep if I tried, too much on the brain. May I borrow your laptop?’

After setting Sherlock up on her laptop and offering them both something to eat (John declined straightaway, and Sherlock said that he knew his way around her kitchen well enough and insisted that she not bother herself with tending to them), Molly passed through the kitchen, turning down the lights as she went, and on to the laundry where she stored extra blankets in a cupboard. It was just in sight of the sitting room and not quite out of earshot, and she noticed that, at her retreat, John had stepped closer to Sherlock, his head bowed a little, and he spoke out of the side of his mouth. Molly pretended to be occupied, but she held her breath to listen.

‘I’ve forgotten—that is, I haven’t taken my pills.’

From the corner of her eye, she watched Sherlock incline his head toward John, speaking just as softly. ‘I can go back. I’ll hurry—’

‘No no, it’s fine. Just. Erm. Just stay alert, yeah?’

Sherlock agreed with a nod. Then they parted.

When she was certain that the private moment had passed, she returned and set the stack of blankets at the end of the sofa.

‘You’re sure there’s nothing more I can get for you? Tea? Coffee, Sherlock, if you’re going to be up all night anyway?’

‘Thank you, Molly, but I’m fine. John? Chamomile?’

‘Nothing for me, thank you, Molly.’

At last, she retreated to her own bedroom (which she’d had Sherlock double check for anything amiss and John examine for security). With the door closed, she stood still and listened to the distant murmur of their voices, tones mild and words indistinct. She found she was glad to hear them, glad of their presence. It was a little odd, though, to hear men in her flat, to see men in her flat, especially men settling in for the night. And even though it was strangely comforting, she was still a little on edge. A woman—one she knew nothing about, beyond the memory of seeing her dead in her morgue—had been in her home, in her cupboards and bathroom and underwear drawer. Beyond naming her, Sherlock hadn’t said anything more about her, or even why he suspected (he must have suspected something) that the woman (was she a former lover?) had broken into Molly’s flat.

Still, just a woman. A crazy one, perhaps, a disgruntled ex most likely, but at least it wasn’t the man who had taken John. There was some relief in that. She felt rather foolish now for nearly losing it and crying in front of him. Tomorrow, they’d track her down, and they’d get Greg to arrest her on the charge of breaking and entering. And that would be that.

Thinking of him again, she went for her phone and called his number, but her heart sank when his voicemail picked up instead. She wanted to cry, or scream, or throw the phone against the wall. Seconds passed in silence after the tone as she debated what to do, what to say. In the end, she could manage only two words: ‘Call me.’ And she hung up.

***

Molly’s bedroom door had been closed for some twenty minutes, but neither Sherlock nor John made any sign of retiring to bed.

‘Well?’ said John. He sat forward on the sofa, elbows on knees and fingers loosely laced. Sherlock was reclined in the under-stuffed overstuffed armchair, fingertips templed, head inclined—his usual pose for intense contemplation.

Sherlock’s head came up. ‘Well what?’

‘I can practically hear you thinking. You’re joining dots, aren’t you? You’ve figured something out.’

‘I can’t claim to have solved the puzzle,’ said Sherlock, ‘but the picture is becoming clearer.’

‘Care to share?’

‘Do you really want to know?’
‘I think I ought to. If Molly’s in danger—’

‘Aren’t we all.’ He looked at John without turning his head. ‘Will you be leaving her the gun?’

‘I already have,’ said John simply. Then, to fill the pause, ‘It’s her best chance of defending herself, if she must.’

‘Where is it?’

‘In the top drawer of her bedside table. Taped to the ceiling of the drawer with a strip of duct tape.’

‘To avoid its being discovered too easily.’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

‘So will you tell me now?’

Sherlock considered. ‘How are we doing tonight?’

John nodded emphatically. ‘Fine. I feel fine. I’m a two.’

He was never a one.

Sherlock dropped his hands to the armrests where the fingers of his right hand began to drum the faded pink upholstery. He was eager to talk. ‘It has long been a question in my mind as to whether—’ he wrinkled in nose in distaste—‘that woman was playing any part in this scheme. Darren Hirsch we are certain is involved. Of Moran, we have every reason to suspect. But she might have been content to sit back and watch the pieces fall. I should have guessed she would have Moran on a shorter leash.’

John’s head cricked to the side at the word, but straightened again. ‘Why do you say that?’ he asked. ‘She may not have had her hand in all of it. The murders, I mean. Aside from a bit of a scare, Molly’s been left unharmed. Seems like a bit of a deviation from the pattern.’

‘Yes, but for an essential element: that which connects it to all the other crimes.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The note.’

John shook his head. ‘This is the first time there’s been a note.’

‘Not at all, though perhaps my choice of word is misleading. What I mean is, the message. All the messages have been, at their core, identical.’

‘What messages?’

‘Do keep up, John. You were there when we received the first.’

John stared at him, baffled. Then, ‘You mean, with the shoe in the tree? The text you received to your mobile?’

‘Yes. What did it say?’

‘It was a line from a rhyme. A nursery rhyme.’

‘And the line?’

‘The cradle will fall. From Rock-a-Bye. But what did that—?’

‘The second was more subtle. When we found O’Harris, we discovered his pockets had been stuffed with hemlock and rose petals.’

‘You never did explain that.’

‘I was still gathering data, piecing it all together. But it’s clearer to me now. Do you know what a small bunch of cut flowers is called, John?’

‘Um . . .’

‘A posy. I’ll leave you to the join those dots.’

John’s eyebrows knit together before they rose in surprise. ‘Ring a ring o’ roses,’ he said. ‘A pocket full of posies.’

‘Indeed. And how does it end?’

‘Atishoo, atishoo, we all fall down.’

‘Very good, you remember your nursery rhymes.’

‘Not much of a feat, that,’ said John, thinking Sherlock was taking the piss. ‘They are rather ingrained in us as children, aren’t they?’

But then he saw Sherlock’s slight frown. ‘I didn’t have them memorised. I had to research them.’

‘What? Why?’

‘In my nursery, John, the au pair was not permitted to read to me children’s tales or teach me
children’s songs. Father said simple stories nurtured simple minds, and he would have none of that. My earliest bedtime stories were *Crime and Punishment* and Machiavelli’s *The Prince.*

‘Damn,’ said John, lips fighting to keep in a straight line. ‘But surely you heard standard nursery rhymes. On the telly, or at school.’

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow as if to say, *Telly? In my house? If not, I went to public school, John.* ‘I’m not entirely unfamiliar with them.’ His tone was scathing, but John knew him well enough to detect a note of embarrassment. ‘One hears them often enough in parks and cafes, mothers speaking to their children . . . Look, that’s all beside the point. The point is the message: *The cradle will fall from the lullaby. We all fall down from Ring a Ring o’ Roses.*’

*London Bridge is falling down.*

‘Now you’re seeing it.’

‘And this latest? The bodies found in a skip?’

‘There was a note left,’ said Sherlock, a little evasively; he had told John very little about this one, though not a nursery rhyme. Like with the second murder, the message here was more subtle. The victims: Ralston Winters and Lynette Avery. On the street, they were commonly known as Jack and Jill.’

‘I see.’

‘You remember their fate, of course.’

‘Jack fell down and broke his crown.’

‘And Jill came tumbling after, yes. Molly places Winters’ death about twenty-four hours prior to Avery’s, so we know he “fell” first, as per the rhyme. His skull had been bash’d in—the crown of his head split like a melon. But a few curiosities with these murders. In the first place, these two victims broaden the victim profiles considerably. Jefferies, O’Harris, and Nichols were all homeless white men within nine years of age of one another. This suggested that the Slash Man had a type, and most officers down at the Yard believed that type to be, well, based on you. Forgive me, I believed it myself. Body type, hair colour, approximate age, and race—they were not far dissimilar to you, John.’

‘I noticed it, too,’ John said softly.

‘But Winters and Avery don’t fit that pattern. Winters and Avery were both black, and, obviously, Avery was a woman. She alone would have broadened the profile, but the two together in a double murder? A clear deviation. The reasons are unclear, but their deaths may have been in the sole interest of conforming more closely to the rhyme, which only intensifies the significance of the rhymes. Second, as far as I have been able to ascertain, they were known as Jack and Jill only to other homeless men and women, which makes sense, as they were the ones to dub them as such. This suggests to me not only that the culprit is indeed a member of that community but furthermore that every step of this has been planned. What is the likelihood of finding a homeless man and woman going by such monikers that merely happen to fit into an empty slot in the template? No, every victim has already been carefully, craftily selected. Five so far, but how many more? *That* I do not know. There are hundreds of nursery rhymes.’

‘But not all of them have to do with falling,’ said John.

‘In that you are right. *That* number is more limited. But that does not dispel their penchant for creativity. Look at Molly.’

‘Polly put the kettle on, we’ll all have tea,’ John recited. ‘You’re right. Nothing about falling in that.’ His eyes suddenly lit with understanding. ‘Oh. It got her to look in the kettle, though, didn’t it? Where she found the bird.’

‘Not just a bird. The point is that it was a wren. At least, I think there’s significance to the species. This winter has been a harsh one, and native wrens, being so small, perish easily in the conditions. Furthermore, they’re evasive, hard to spot, let alone catch. So the fact that there was a wren in the kettle seems to be a deliberate selection. I may be drawing lines where there is no intended connection, but given the their penchant for stories . . .’

‘Go on.’

‘There’s an old story. Not a fairy tale or nursery rhyme. A fable. German. It’s about how the wren came to be called the King of Birds. Do you know it?’

‘I can’t say I do.’

‘In short, it describes how all the birds desired one of their own kind to rule over them. To determine the most worthy, an owl fashioned a test: the bird to fly highest would become king of the birds.’

‘And the wren flew the highest?’ John asked.

‘No, it was the eagle. But the wren, thinking himself clever and suspecting that the eagle would fly higher than all the others, hid himself in the eagle’s feathers. And when the eagle flew as high as he could, the wren emerged and flew higher still.’

‘So . . . he won?’

‘That depends on the storyteller. But in the original version, no. The owl, when he heard what the wren had done, called him a trickster and a fraud. The eagle was named king of the birds, and the wren was reproved and punished to always keep close to the earth, never flying very high at all. Ultimately, the wren was shamed and despised of all other birds.’
‘I don’t see what this has to do with the bird in Molly’s kettle.’

‘If I’m right—and I’m not saying that I am—about their reasons for selecting a wren, then it appears that they are taking the bird’s punishment even further. Its wings were clipped. Not the feathers, the wings. The humerus—snipped on both sides. One of the wings was entirely detached, the other still clung on by only a flimsy bit of skin. And what happens to a bird that can’t fly?’

‘So it was a symbol.’

Sherlock shot forward in his chair. His hands spread wide like the spokes of a wheel. ‘All of it. A prelude of what is to come. This whole series of crimes, every piece of it, is one long charade, a narrative built around one central theme: the fall. My fall.’

John frowned. ‘You mean, when you . . .?’

‘Not that one.’

‘Sherlock—’

‘The one that is still to come.’

‘Sherlock, stop.’

John bowed his head into a hand, shielding his eyes from looking at Sherlock. As he let out a shaky breath, Sherlock settled back again into the chair and said, ‘I’m sorry. I should let you rest.’

‘No. It’s nothing. It’s just . . .’ He exhaled, straightened his back, lifted his head. ‘You can’t say that’s what will happen. You can’t. We can stop it. We can still stop it.’

‘I’m trying. But I need more answers. I know who the culprit is. I know how the victims died. I even know why they died. What I don’t know is—’

‘Who’s next,’ John finished. There was a loud pause in the room. Their eyes were locked; it was as if the room were spinning around them, and the only thing keeping them grounded was this.

‘So what do we do?’ John asked.

‘I don’t know. They’re at least two steps ahead of us, probably more. This whole thing has been planned, every part,’ Sherlock said again. ‘So if I could anticipate the next move, I could stop it. I could save whoever is next in line for the gallows. I could stop the Slash Man from ever hurting any more unwilling martyrs caught up in a crusade they know nothing of—avenging Moriarty. I can get one step closer to Moran and Adler.’

‘You said there was a note,’ said John, ‘on Jack and Jill. Not a nursery rhyme. What did it say?’

Sherlock’s templed fingers returned to his chin, and his head bowed as though in prayer, except that his eyes never closed, hardly blinked. He seemed to be debating whether to answer. ‘It was a riddle. I hate those.’

‘What did it say?’ John asked again.

‘On Jack: *Ever drifting down the stream,*’ he recounted. ‘And on Jill: *Life, what is it but a dream?*’

‘That sounds like *Row, Row, Row Your Boat,*’ said John. *Sort of. But that doesn’t have to do with falling, either. And it didn’t lead you to a symbol of falling, like with the kettle. So what does it mean?*

He let his hands fall again and said with an air of nonchalance, ‘I don’t know. The thing is, it’s not *quite Row Your Boat, is it? That’s why it’s a riddle. It has to be. It doesn’t fit the mould of any of the other messages. So if any piece of this is an outlier, it’s that.’

‘Then I guess it’s the key.’

‘That’s the key.’

***

After initial contact, Lestrade never heard anything from Mycroft Holmes until after he’d completed his mission, and if he tried to call back, he encountered a wall of silence. There was no question who was in control in this oddly functional if not disgruntled relationship. He never knew and seldom saw the other players. He was one cog in Mycroft’s large and complex pocket watch, in which none of the pieces knew what the others were doing or how many of them there were, but they all kept working just the same, turning, ticking, and grinding, at the winding of the master clockmaker. He knew who that reminded him of—he knew exactly who—and it did not rest well with him.

But he knew his part well enough. He knew, for instance, to leave his phone at home, lest someone try to trace, call, or identify him. He knew to check the hubcap back tyre of the vehicle that rolled to a stop to pick him up, as that was where he would find the subtle identifying marker ensuring the trustworthiness of the town car. And he knew that, once inside, it was pointless trying to talk to the driver. Instead, he was to locate the envelope in the six-digit password-protected attached case beneath the seat, read any further instructions, retrieve and affix the earpiece, and wait patiently for his drop-off. Only then would a digitally masked voice come to life within his ear and begin to give him step-by-step instructions, which he knew to follow to the letter. There was no sense in talking back, asking questions, debating actions. It was a one-way communication device. Lestrade was on his own, every time, and he knew it.
Whatever the voice in his ear said to do, he did, and less so because he trusted Mycroft or believed in their cause, but more so because he was afraid of what might happen if he didn’t. If the voice said to walk straight, he did. Turn left, he did. Stop in the shadows, he did. Though he was frustrated by it all outside of the scope of the mission, inside the confines of his spycraft, he was content to be a puppet. He was rarely, if ever, responsible for making any split-second matter-of-life-and-death decisions of his own, and he rather preferred it that way, if he was to be walking in the dark.

And that was how he found himself, at one o’clock in the morning, wearing the name tag for Charles Eddington, an MI5 man who would inexplicably be made redundant in two days’ time, and standing in a concrete stairwell, poised by a door that would take him to the counter-terrorist division of Home Office, half a mile’s walk from New Scotland Yard. His heart was drumming. If things didn’t go to plan, he thought fleetingly, he doubted whether he would ever see the Yard again.

‘When I tell you to,’ the distorted voice in his ear said after four full minutes of radio silence and Lestrade standing there feeling like an idiot waiting to be found out at any moment, ‘you’ll open the door and take your first left. At the end of the hall, before the next corner, stop.’

He nodded, repeating the instructions to himself. He licked his lips and wiped his palms on the front of his trousers.

‘Now.’

Trusting there was no one on the other side, Lestrade swiped Mr Eddington’s card into the reader to unlock the door and pulled it open, revealing an empty hallway branching in three directions. He hung a quick left and made it to the end of hallway. Then, per his instructions, he stopped, and waited to be directed further.

So it went. Down halls, around corners, through mazes of deserted cubicles, and in and out of doors locked by key cards and codes, Lestrade made his way closer and closer to what he understood was the ‘vault’ Mycroft had mentioned. He wondered whether he was being watched by the almighty watchman in the sky—through a camera, that was; or, for all he knew, his earpiece also served as a tracker; or maybe they were using heat sensor detection and could pinpoint his location that way; or maybe he had seen too many spy-tech films—or by one of the other cogs in the machine, someone who knew his movements and could therefore direct him when it was safe to go, exigent to stop, and so forth. He felt a little like a character in a video game, his every action the result of some kid with his thumb on the joy stick.

Until he was forced to act on his own.

He had just used the key card to enter another division of offices; the door locked behind him, and he knew that once a door had been unlocked once, he could not reuse his card there for at least fifteen minutes. He didn’t understand it, but he had been led to believe that it had something to do with circumventing the security alerts. So there he was, moving forward, slinking down a short hallway past an out-of-service water fountain and the men’s loo, when he heard voices.

‘. . . before we send them down to Albright in immigration.’

‘I’ll have it drawn up first thing in the morning.’

Lestrade halted and his heart stopped. He waited for instructions in his ear.

‘You’re heading straight into a snare. Retreat.’

He whirled around, but there was no place to retreat to! He couldn’t go back through the door he had just used—it might as well have been a dead end.

‘Hide in the bathroom. Go.’

‘Hang on, MacDowell, I’m just going to pop into the loo. Be right with you.’

Where the hell was the women’s loo!, he though desperately, casting around for another place to hide. For half a second, he felt paralysed. Any second now, that man would round the corner and find him standing half crouched and splay-legged, as though preparing either to sprint or shit himself. Then a memory jolted him. He sprang two steps back, snatched the out-of-service sign from off the water fountain, and slapped it soundlessly on the door of the men’s loo even as he disappeared inside of it and eased it closed behind him.

‘You’d be surprised how no one ever questions these,’ Molly had said, pointing to a handwritten sign reading Do Not Enter, which Sherlock had made himself. ‘I suppose that’s true.’

On the other side of the door, he held his breath, eyes round with fear, and waited.

‘Well, damn,’ said the male voice, and the sound of feet came to a stop. ‘Why does nothing ever get fixed around here?’

And to Lestrade’s amazement, the steps departed.

He caught himself in an audible moan of relief and clamped a hand across his mouth.

‘Hold your position,’ said the voice in his ear, unperturbed, seeming to know nothing about how he had almost been caught and blown the whole operation. ‘When I give the word, leave the bathroom and continue down the hallway. Take your first right. Pass two junctions and take a left. You’ll see an unmarked door with black glass and a key pad. Swipe your card, then punch in the code 6-6-9-8-3-0 and enter the room. On my mark, you will have seventy-five seconds once you leave the bathroom to enter the code and close the door behind you.’

He nodded, sweat dampening his face. He didn’t understand all the mechanics and ins-and-outs of it, but someone somewhere was changing the key codes to these rooms; to remain undetected,
those codes expired in usually under two minutes. Hand on the door awaiting his signal, he wiped his opposite sleeve across his brow.

‘Go. Commencing radio silence.’

Lestrade pulled the door open, trusting to see an empty hallway, which he did, and followed his orders, all the while counting—somewhat unreliably in his head, he thought—one sugarplum, two sugarplums, three . . . The hallways stretched longer than he had hoped, and he had to pick up his pace, because by the time he came in sight of the door with black glass, he had counted sixty-three sugarplums. He sped forward, and his silent monologue switched from marking seconds to repeating the code. He swiped his card and punched the numbers with the knuckle of his right forefinger:

6-6-9-8-3-0

With a small click, the red light turned green, and he entered the dark room. The door closed behind him.

And he waited.

A full minute passed, but the voice hadn’t returned.

Warily, he stepped further into the lightless room. He could barely make out the shadows of long rows of desks from the small lights blinking on sleeping computer monitors. It was a tech room of some kind, both long and deep. As he slowly walked past the rows and his eyes adjusted to the dark, he figured that there must have been sixty, seventy computer stations in that room. And at the back was another door.

Again, he awaited instruction. Another two minutes went by, and nothing.

Lestrade ran a hand across his face, thinking. He reviewed his instructions carefully, wondering if he had missed something, but he was positive that he had not been told what to do once he was in the room. Should he try to get into the next room? Try to go back? But the key codes would have changed by now! He hated just standing there, waiting for the sky to fall. Unable to keep still, he turned and headed back toward the first door.

That’s when he noticed one of the computer screens was awake, something he had not been able to see when he had first entered. The background was black, but a little cursor blinked in the upper left-hand corner. And a single letter in pale, digital green: L

Swallowing with a dry throat, Lestrade put forth a hand, hesitated, then tapped the L on the keyboard.

A command appeared:

Enter alphanumeric code.

And a countdown appeared beneath it: 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .

He stared. Code. What code? The code he had entered to get into the room to begin with were just numbers. What was he supposed to enter? He wiggled the earpiece set deep inside his ear, wondering fearfully if it had stopped working.

7 . . . 6 . . . 5 . .

Shit! Shit! Shit!

4 . . . 3 . .

In desperation, he quickly typed in the only alphanumeric code he could remember: MZ1065QR—no! RQ! And he hit enter.

There was a loud hum and click behind him. He whirled and saw that the door in the back of the room now had a green light. It had been unlocked. Before he went for the door, however, he took one last glance at the screen:

You have four minutes before the room seals. Retrieve the box and get out.

He cursed under his breath and spun about once again, hurrying to the back door.

What he found on the other side could only have been described as a library. There were rows and rows of tall filing cabinets, and rows and rows of shelving holding not books but narrow boxes, all uniform in a non-descript grey-brown, in shape, and in size, with little indexed labels on. He stared. Then he cursed Mycroft seven ways till Sunday for not giving him more information about the layout of this room—was this, this, the vault?—as the voice remained infuriatingly silent.

But there was nothing for it. As the seconds ticked by, he ran to the first cabinet and found it locked; so he abandoned it and darted to the first row of shelves, feeling like the least suave, least competent James Bond imaginable. He pulled the first box off the shelf to check its number: AA-029.1 FD.

He jumped to the next row and found that the two leading letters began DB. Thank god, it was alphabetical. He jumped again to the next row (the Fs) and to the next (beginning with Is) and so forth until he found the first M and hurried down the row, eyes grazing the spines of the boxes, his heart in his throat and his breath caught somewhere below that.

More than half his time was expired (he knew it) by the time he found his first MZ, and another thirty seconds gone before he located the 100s on a shelf higher than his head. By the time he spotted it—MZ-106.5 RQ—he had no more than twenty seconds left. He grabbed it off the shelf, double checked the index label, and laughed in half-relief, half-exasperation. It was wider than a
But John was crying in earnest. 'I can't find her! Mary, oh Mary! Ah—!' His head snapped to the
more insistent now. 'John. John, can you hear me? It's Sherlock. I need you to wake up.'

Sherlock repositioned so that his knees touched the floor and steadied him. His voice was a bit
'She's crying,' he said as tears stained his own cheeks. 'Oh God! They're hurting her!'

You're okay, John. You're safe—'

'there's no one else here,' said Sherlock, unfazed by this abruptness. 'It's just you and me.
though he were being shocked. 'I hear her. I can hear her!'

Molly jumped at the sudden transformation. His arms shook, making his whole body tremble as
John shook his head in anger and he punched both fists into the cushions on either side of him.

'Sleep,' Sherlock repeated.

revealing an emotional state too raw, too real, to be borne; she felt her eyes begin to burn.
couldn't find the words. In this state of unconsciousness and unreality, he was unmasked,

In an instant, she took in the scene. John, blankets slung about his waist and drooping onto the
darkened hallway toward the dim glow emanating from a single lamp in the sitting room. The overstuffed
armchair came into her view first, but it was unoccupied, save for her open laptop, which had
been left on the ottoman. Just before she reached the corner of the wall, she heard it again, and this
time knew what it was—a dry sob joined with the words, pitched high and distressed, no no no,
followed immediately by a softer though sturdier voice, speaking words so low she couldn't make
them out.

Something was wrong; she could feel it like electricity in the midnight air, gathering to strike. But
she hesitated in rounding the corner, debating within herself whether she should return to her room
and give them privacy, or look to see what was happening. Finally, her heart compelled her, and,
keeping to the shadows, she peered into the room.

In a drawer of the bedside table, John had left her the pistol. Before taping it on the underside of
the table top, he had shown her that the safety was on and reminded her that it was fully loaded.
She had been uncomfortable with its presence, but now she was of half a mind to grab it as her
imagination supplied her with all manner of spooks and villains. But then she heard the sound
again. It came from beyond her bedroom door, from the front room, where she was unaccustomed
to hearing midnight noises. She swung her feet over the side of the bed and crept toward the door,
ear cocked. A rumble, like thunder, disguised as a voice; and another, a songbird in panic.

She hurriedly slipped into her oversized terry dressing gown and eased open the bedroom door.
Her bare feet were soundless against the cold floor as she toed her way down the darkened
hallway, listening for the shadows to move.

In an instant, she took in the scene. John, blankets slung about his waist and drooping onto the
floor, was sitting upright on the edge of the sofa, perched like he might fall off at any moment if
bumped by the wrong sweep of air. His head hung low and his shoulders were hunched, and he
rocked where he sat, left and right, always on the verge of rising to his feet. But Sherlock, who
was crouched down in front of him with his back to Molly, wouldn't let him. If he went right,
Sherlock touched his right arm; if he went left, Sherlock touched his left. They were gentle
touches but had the effect on John as though he were without gravity—one tap, and he floated in
the opposite direction. Sherlock kept him from floating very far.

'Where is she? John was saying, his voice tense in panic. Hands fisted the blankets tangled in his
lap. 'Where have you taken her?"

'Shh, shh, just lie back down,' said Sherlock calmly. Molly couldn't see his face—she could see
only John's—but his voice was like a mother's lullaby: at once tender and consoling, unwavering
and strong. She'd never heard him speak like that before.

John's hard breaths stuttered and strained to escape. 'I—I heard—'

'You're sleeping, John. This is a dream. You're still asleep.'

And he was right. Molly had never seen it before, but at Sherlock's words she recognised the
glassy eyes, the lack of light and focus. In their place was darkness and fear. Tears slid unnoticed
down John's face, across his lips, which were upturned and quivering as he tried to speak but
couldn't find the words. In this state of unconsciousness and unreality, he was unmasked,
revealing an emotional state too raw, too real, to be borne; she felt her eyes begin to burn.

'Sleep,' Sherlock repeated.

John shook his head in anger and he punched both fists into the cushions on either side of him.
Molly jumped at the sudden transformation. His arms shook, making his whole body tremble as
though he were being shocked. 'I hear her. I can hear her!'

'There's no one else here,' said Sherlock, unfazed by this abruptness. 'It's just you and me.
You're okay, John. You're safe—'

'She's crying,' he said as tears stained his own cheeks. 'Oh God! They're hurting her!'
Sherlock repositioned so that his knees touched the floor and steadied him. His voice was a bit
more insistently now. 'John. John, can you hear me? It's Sherlock. I need you to wake up.'

But John was crying in earnest. 'I can't find her! Mary, oh Mary! Ah—!' His head snapped to the
side as though he’d been struck.

Molly covered her mouth with both hands, her own tears flowing freely now. Oh God, she’d never seen anything like this. She felt paralysed, unable to either turn away or move forward to help—not that she would have any idea what to do, other than grab him, shake him, scream at him to wake up and escape wherever he believed himself to be.

Another unseen hand struck him and his head wrenched around on his neck as he cried out in pain.

But Sherlock did not shake him, or shout at him. He only kept speaking to him, low and steady, saying his name, and barely touching him at all; only when John’s hands began to draw together did Sherlock reach forward to guide them apart—serenely, gently, like handling a delicate instrument made of glass.

And so it went. For uncounted minutes, John, imprisoned within the torture chamber of his own mind, relived the horrors of that kitchen. He called out for Mary, jerked away from invisible blows, and wept. Sherlock, his voice never failing, called him back from the brink time and again; but when it seemed that he was calming, quieting, and that he just might be returning to a more restful sleep, the ugly memories flared again to life, and the terror started playing itself out again.

“They’ve taken her, they’ve taken her and they cut off her hair and they’re frightening her, they’re frightening her, and I can’t stop them, he won’t let me, won’t let me move, won’t let me see her, and she doesn’t know anything, she doesn’t!”

‘Breathe, John. Please. You’re hyperventilating. I need you to breathe.’

‘Please, she doesn’t know him! She never knew him! He’s dead! He’s dead!’

She thought she heard Sherlock choke back a sound and his head dipped a little, and when it did, when his hand fell on John’s knee, John’s whole leg spasmed, jolting his whole body like an electrical shock. His back arched and his head flung back. Sherlock jerked his hand away and was poised to retreat entirely. But as John came back down, he reached forward and gripped Sherlock at the shoulder as though for balance, to keep himself from tipping off the sofa. He kneaded Sherlock’s shoulder for a short while, taking his time to regain his breath. Then his hand moved up and wrapped around the back of Sherlock’s neck, pulling him closer. Sherlock looked up, and their eyes met, and for the first time Molly doubted whether John really was asleep: he looked straight into Sherlock’s face like he was really seeing him. His fingernails were sunken into the skin of the back of Sherlock’s neck, latched fiercely, but Sherlock had stilled like a statue.

When John next spoke, he was so quiet that Molly might have missed his words if she had not been watching his lips.

“You can’t be here,’ he said, leaning in even closer, like he was sharing a secret. ‘They put you in the earth, and after, no one came back to bring you flowers. Not even me.’

It was too much. Molly couldn’t stand to watch another second, but nor could she abandon him and return to her room. So she placed her back to the wall and slipped down to the floor, and listened. To keep silent, she left her hands clamped across her mouth but let the tears fall. She had had no idea that this was what things were like for John and Sherlock now, but though she was struck with sorrow at John’s suffering, she was left in awe at Sherlock’s care of him. She had caught glimpses of it before, perhaps, or at least suspected that he was capable of such feeling, but she had never witnessed it in action; and that, as much as anything else, was what glued her to that hallway wall.

The clock ticked in the kitchen as the hour passed with her on the floor, Sherlock on his knees, and John in a prison miles away from them both. The cycle kept repeating. Until finally, Sherlock broke it.

‘Please, oh god please no. Please no, I’ll do anything,’ John was saying again. His words were almost unintelligible, mangled in tears and panting.

‘John, stop,’ said Sherlock. His voice was unexpectedly forceful, and Molly recoiled. Then, just as quickly, it softened again. ‘Tell me about her.’

For the first time since finding him in this state, Molly heard silence from the sitting room. She rolled her head slowly along the wall to see beyond the corner. Staring into nothing, John was unmoving, but for one hand, which trembled relentlessly. Carefully, Sherlock covered that hand with his own. Two, three seconds of stillness followed. Then John's other hand locked atop Sherlock's. Sherlock rested his free hand on John’s knee. This time, John made no move to pull away.

Sherlock continued, even more tenderly than before. ‘Tell me about Mary, John. Please. What was she like?’

Tick. Tick. And no response, only a loud, nasal breathing punctuating the quiet. Sherlock prompted one more time, softly, one string on the cello. ‘What was she like, John? Your Mary?’

‘She loved me,’ John said in wonder.

His voice was changed—the pitch had dropped, slowed. He sounded utterly spent.

“Yes, she did,” answered Sherlock. ‘Very much. What else?’

‘She told me so. Right before he . . . before he . . .’

‘No, John, tell me about the day you met. You and Mary. Do you remember?’

“Yes.’ A pause, drawn out like a musical rest. ‘She was looking for Sherlock. She needed a detective and found me instead.’ Another pause. Then, what sounded like a small laugh, if Molly
believed John were capable of such anymore. ‘She faked chest pains to get an appointment at St E’s. When I first saw her . . .’ His voice drifted away, remembering quietly, until Sherlock urged him to continue aloud. ‘She wore a paper gown, no makeup, and her long, ginger hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.’

His voice was slipping away, and though he continued to talk and Sherlock continued to ask questions, both men spoke so softly that she couldn’t make out what was said after that. As for herself, she continued to sit on the cold floor, straining to hear, fearing that any movement of hers, any sound louder than blinking, and the spell might break.

Then suddenly, Sherlock’s tall shadow stood over her.

Startled, she gasped into her hands. Then she hastily wiped at the wetness on her cheeks, feeling ashamed to have been discovered. But he said nothing, only extended a hand. She was embarrassed to offer him her tear-stained fingers, but he made no sign of displeasure, only gripped her hand and pulled her off the floor.

‘I’m so sorry!’ she whispered. ‘I know I shouldn’t have—’

He hushed her and stepped aside to show her that John lay sleeping once again, curled on his side on her sofa, his head tucked halfway beneath a blanket. Then he turned her about and walked her back to her bedroom. She felt like a little girl being caught awake past curfew, being put to bed by a stern parent, never mind that this was her flat and Sherlock was a guest in it. But when he entered the room and sat with her on the edge of the mattress, she realised that she had been mistaken in her evaluation—his mood wasn’t one of displeasure. He seemed too tired to show displeasure.

‘He has good nights,’ he told her, his voice rolling like far-away thunder, ‘and bad. They aren’t predictable.’ They sat in the dark, the only light coming from far down the hall where John slept. Sherlock was just a shadow, expressionless, ghost-like.

‘You should have gone home,’ said Molly, matching his low volume. ‘If he were in his own bed . . .’

‘He doesn’t sleep in his own bed. He sleeps on the sofa, every night.’

‘He does? Why?’

‘I don’t know, precisely. He can’t abide total darkness, and his room gets very dark at night. There are solutions to that, but he won’t talk about them. I don’t know why he prefers the sitting room.’

They lapsed into silence. Molly tried to think of something to say, something wise or optimistic or comforting, but she could come up with nothing that could make right what she had just seen. She knew only that she didn’t want to make things worse. ‘In the morning,’ she said, ‘what should I do?’

‘Nothing. He won’t remember.’

‘What? Nothing?’

‘If anything, he may remember a bad dream. But he won’t want to talk about it. He won’t know what he did, what he said. He never does. He doesn’t remember when he walks around the flat or moves things about or tries to hurt himself. I tried to tell him, once, that he had spoken Moran’s name in his sleep, and he got angry and left the room. So I can’t tell him about the other things. I don’t know what else to do. But it would upset him, Molly, if he knew you had seen him in that state.’

She nodded her understanding, but realising that he couldn’t see her in that dark, she said, ‘I won’t say a word.’

‘Thank you.’

He stood and moved toward the exit. ‘He’s resting now, but I don’t know if he’ll make it until morning. If you hear something . . . Just try to sleep. I’ll watch over him.’

He put a hand on the door to pull it closed. Before he could close it, she said, ‘Sherlock?’

The door swung only halfway closed, and paused.

She couldn’t quite put into words all she was feeling, and her tongue fumbled in her mouth. At last, she said simply, ‘You’re a good friend to him. I think it’s good that he’s with you.’

His dark outline didn’t move. For a few seconds, she thought he might say something in return, either to disabuse her of the notion or acknowledge that she was right. But whatever he was thinking, he kept locked up inside. Softly, he closed the door.
She awoke to a dark London sky. The sun was rising gradually earlier as the winter slowly, recalcitrantly, wore itself out, but she still needed to be to Bart's by eight, and, what with the questionable morning commute, she would want to leave the flat no later than a quarter past seven, just as the sun was peeking over the horizon. She reached for her phone: 06.05, and no missed calls, no unread texts.

She clipped on the bedside lamp and pulled back the covers, rather amazed she had slept at all. After Sherlock had left her bedroom, she remembered lying back while listening for any more sounds coming from the sitting room and trying not to cry. At some point, despite herself, she must have slipped off into a dreamless sleep. If she didn’t know better, she would have believed this was a morning like any other: she would rise, shower, feed the cat, feed herself, and be off. But she did know better. This was no ordinary morning: there were two extraordinary men in her sitting room, a dead bird in her refrigerator, and no cat at all.

For a few seconds, wondering whether she had the strength even to face the day, she considered calling in sick, but there was no sense in it. She would drive herself mad cooped up in this place, and she couldn’t likely intrude any longer on Sherlock and John. She was in perfect health, she knew, so she might as well make herself useful. She shivered into her slippers and dressing gown and eased open the door. The hallway was darkened, as was the sitting room; at some point in the night, Sherlock must have turned off the lamp. Stepping lightly, she drew closer, expecting Sherlock to be settled in her armchair. Instead, she saw the once-again empty seat and the now-closed laptop, this time set on the coffee table. Two more soundless steps, and the sofa came into view.

The streetlamps pressed enough light through the windows for her to see them clearly: John slept peacefully, stretched out on his back. One leg was bent and propped against the back cushions, and one hand rested on his stomach. His head had slipped off the pillow and now lay near the edge of the sofa, his face turned outward toward the room. And seated on the floor, his back propped against the sofa at John’s head, Sherlock slept, too. In imitation of John, one leg was bent, the other stretched out, and his interlocked fingers lay across his stomach. His head had drooped back against the armrest of the sofa, barely supported. His and John’s heads were close together, nearly touching.

He might have chosen the armchair. Though not an ideal bed, it certainly would have been more comfortable than the floor. And he hadn’t even touched the spare blankets she had set out. She was no Sherlock, but something about the scene suggested to her that he had intended to keep vigil all night, like a parent watching over an ailing child, or a dog guarding his master. But sleep—exhaustion, more like—had overcome him. And rather than leave John’s side, if only to cross the room and seek out greater comfort, he had opted for the security that came from physical proximity. And maybe, Molly thought, that was why John always slept in the sitting room.

Not wanting to disturb even a few minutes’ worth of precious sleep, she slipped back toward the kitchen and switched on the single, low light above the cooker, trusting it wouldn’t disturb them. Trying to make as little noise as possible, she filled the coffee pot with water from the tap and set the machine to percolate. Meanwhile, as the rich smell of roast coffee swirled into the air, she pulled down three mugs (assiduously checking each for signs of lipstick) and the sugar bowl. The creamer was in the fridge, which meant she wouldn’t bother with it this morning, despite her preference.

When the coffee was ready, she began to spoon out the sugar: two for the first mug, two for the second, and she was just turning the spoon over into the third when a long hand reached forward and covered it from rim to rim. Sugar crystals spilled and scattered. She jumped and turned. ‘John takes his black,’ Sherlock said with a grin. He spoke just above a whisper, and his early-morning voice was low and rough. He picked up the mug beside John’s, blew over the surface, and took a sip. He made an appreciative noise in the back of his throat.

‘I didn’t hear you,’ she said, matching his voice for volume.

‘Obviously.’

She blushed and tried to recover herself. ‘Biscuits? Toast?’ She moved toward the cupboard.

‘Thank you, no. Any word from Lestrade? ’

She shook her head, trying to hide her disappointment behind a devil-may-care mask of unconcern. ‘His phone keeps going to voicemail.’

‘Ah.’

‘Is John awake?’

‘Not yet.’

But he lifted John’s mug anyway and returned to the sitting room. He set the coffee on the side table nearest John’s head, then settled himself again in the armchair and pulled Molly’s laptop close, perfectly at home. Perhaps he meant to give John the impression that he had spent the whole night in that very spot, and not on the floor. She wondered whether John would even question it.

She finished her own coffee in the kitchen and tidied up a bit. Then she poked her head around the corner. ‘I’m just going to pop into the shower,’ she said quietly.

‘Don’t touch the mirror,’ said Sherlock by way of response, though he didn’t bother to glance up.
He took another sip from his mug. Whatever he was reading on her laptop had his full attention.

John didn’t stir.

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Lestrade was huffing by the time he rounded the corner and came within sight of Molly’s front door. The sky was greying with light, and the sun would be breaking over the horizon soon, so he hoped she hadn’t left for work yet. He wanted to surprise her. It was Valentine’s Day, after all, and for the first time in more years than he could bother remembering (including those during the latter years of his failing marriage), he had someone to share it with.

He carried a bouquet of roses wrapped in green cellophane—picked up from floral department at the closest Tesco just twenty minutes before—and had bothered with a red tie and some cologne, feeling only a little foolish. It had been a long time since he had wanted to impress a woman, and he didn’t want to overdo it. But he wanted the gestures to be clear.

He also wanted the flowers to serve as an apology. When he had finally made it home last night (or rather, early that morning), he had every intention of crashing right there on the sofa. Sod the stairs, the empty bed. He was exhausted. Though he had been led out of the building without incident, there was no car to meet him on the street. Instead, the instruction kept coming: walk here, turn there, stop, wait, go, hide! Until, some twenty minutes later, while crouching in the shadows of a particularly rank skip, clutching the box to his ribs, a car had finally rolled up and taken him home. He had felt a little worse for wear. He still didn’t know what was in that top-secret box now hiding in a crawlspace in the larder, but right then, he couldn’t be arsed to care. He would deal with it soon. First, he needed what few short hours of sleep were left to him before he was expected at a morning briefing at the Yard. But before he could fall half-conscious onto the sitting room sofa, he had at least turned his phone back on.

Two missed calls, both from Molly. And a voicemail. ‘Call me,’ she had said, though her tone was indiscernible. Was it disappointment in his unreliableness? Frustration that they’d not spoken in, what was it, three days now? Anger at him for being such a crap boyfriend? He wasn’t able to make much of those two words, but he was damn near positive that it presaged a row: the pause before speaking, the brevity of the message, and the late hour she had called were all ominous. He knew he had done wrong by her, and she would let him know it. That was not an unfamiliar scenario, and he groaned to think that he was making the same mistakes all over again as he had with Angela. He was halfway to calling her back when he checked the time: 03.13. Chances were, she was now asleep, and experience (with Angela) told him that she would appreciate being woken up at such an hour even less.

He had promised her that he would answer when she called, whenever she called. He had meant to be her knight in shining armour, prepared to drop anything to reach her side at any moment, and he had failed. Damn that Mycroft Holmes.

So now he needed to make amends.

He approached the front door and was shifting the roses from one hand to the other to ring the bell when he felt something rub against his leg. Looking down, he saw a tabby cat.

‘Cheshire?’

The cat mewed.

‘What are you doing out here?’ He hadn’t thought Molly ever allowed the cat out of doors. He scooped it up and tucked it in the crook of his arm as he pressed a thumb to the bell. The cat squirmed, but he juggled it with his elbows before catching it by the scruff and shifting it back into his arms. The flowers crumpled only a little.

Two seconds later, he was buzzed in. That was quick, he thought. She must have seen him coming through the window that overlooked the street. The lack of greeting through the speaker, though, was yet another sign that he was in for it. If she was anything at all like Angela, she would be hopping mad and ready to let him have it. He didn’t expect the flailing against his upper arms and chest (and once his face), not from Molly, but he steeled himself for a tongue lashing as he mentally prepared a long and heartfelt apology.

But when he achieved the landing, he stopped short, and the look of contrition slid from his face entirely.

‘Sherlock!’

Sherlock Holmes was leaning against the doorjamb, one hand in his pocket, sipping coffee.

‘Morning, Greg,’ he said equably, the hint of a smile on his face. Lestrade could feel the blood draining from his own. Then Sherlock quirked an eyebrow at him and cocked his head. ‘A dozen roses? A tad cliché, isn’t it, Lestrade? Don’t get me wrong, I’m terribly flattered, but really, you shouldn’t have.’

‘I—’

‘The cat, though, may earn you a few points.’

‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘You ask me that a lot.’

‘You have a habit of showing up in places you’re not’—he bit his tongue to stop himself from saying wanted—’expected. Well? Why are you here . . . so early?’ He thought he was doing a decent job of sounding merely curious, perhaps concerned, but not jealous. No, definitely not that. But he shouldn’t have any reason to be! Should he?

‘Come now, Lestrade, I thought you were a proper detective. By my flattened hair, yesterday’s
attire, and shoeless feet’—his tongue clicked the t—’you should be able to deduce that I spent the night.’ He proffered another close-lipped smile and took another swig of coffee. ‘Did you know, he continued with an air of casual dismissiveness at Lestrade’s dropped jaw, ‘that Molly doesn’t own a single article of black underwear? Pink, yes. What might we make of that?’

Lestrade made a strange noise somewhere in the back of his throat that sent the blood returning to his face.

‘He’s just ragging you, Greg.’

To his further surprise, John Watson came into view behind Sherlock. He was also in his socks and day clothes, and he looked halfway to amused by the conversation he was overhearing and what must have been a look of alarm on Lestrade’s face. Lestrade was struck with both relief (a sentiment he currently did not wish to explore) and increased consternation: with the Baker Street boys both in attendance, something must have happened.

‘Let the man in, Sherlock.’

The bastard kept smirking even as he moved aside, but as Lestrade stepped past him, he felt Sherlock’s eyes give him one of his specialty once-overs—scanning him head to toe, making him feel like he was being x-rayed—and the insufferable sod even leant in and gave him a sniff.

‘My, my, what have you been up to?’

‘Back up a bit, eh, mate?’ He dropped the cat on the sofa. Then his eyes swept the flat for Molly, but all that he could see different was a stack of folded blankets on the end of the sofa. He also heard the water running in the bathroom. ‘Molly in the shower, is she?’ he asked.

‘Your detective skills are spectacular for so early an hour,’ said Sherlock. ‘What tipped you off?’

Lestrade gritted his teeth and turned to John. ‘Did you let him have too much sugar in his coffee again?’ he seethed. ‘I’ve warned you how fussy it makes him.’

‘Shall I pour you a cup, inspector?’ Sherlock returned, unfazed. ‘Or perhaps you’ve already had too much. Clearly, you were up half the night. Not exactly about your copper duties, though, that’s plain. Tell me: How’s Mycroft?’

John was staring with wide-eyed astonishment.

‘Would somebody tell me what the bloody hell is going on?’ Lestrade shouted. He knew his face was flushing again, and it was all he could do not to whack the flowers he was holding in Sherlock’s face. ‘Why are you two even here? Did something happen to Molly?’

‘There was a break-in,’ John supplied before Sherlock could get another dig in. ‘Nothing taken, no one hurt. But it gave Molly a bit of a scare.’

‘What? Did you call the police?’

‘He wasn’t answering his phone,’ Sherlock said snidely, sitting in the armchair and crossing a leg over.

‘Shherlock,’ said John.

‘Don’t worry yourself, inspector, I saved you all the interesting bits. The brassiere, the claret, the mutilated bird . . .’

At John’s sharp look, Sherlock at last backed off and entered what sounded like a rehearsed monologue of facts and timelines and hypotheses. As he spoke, Lestrade felt his anger rising like the mercury in a thermometer. How could Sherlock be so blasé about this? This! Irene Adler! The first hint of the woman, and she’d been inside Molly’s flat. Molly’s! They were targeting Molly!

They must have known about her, what she had done, the trust Sherlock had placed in her. Damn that Sherlock Holmes. Could he not take a step without dragging those around him into the crossfire? And furthermore, why had there been no missed phone calls from Sherlock? Had the thought of calling him not even entered his sodding computer of a brain? And if it had, why the hell had he dismissed it? Did Sherlock really find him that inconsequential? After all, he had brought John—John!—who had, of his own volition, stepped back from cases like these.

‘I guess that answers everything then, doesn’t it?’ said Lestrade, curt and hot around the collar as Sherlock concluded with his supposition that Irene Adler had walked through the front door, despite its being bolted. He failed to disguise the bitterness in his voice.

Sherlock’s eyebrows knitted, regarding him. ‘Not quite. There’s still the matter of where you were last night, and why you neglected your phone for several hours.’

‘You’re the genius,’ Lestrade said tightly. ‘Deduce it.’

‘Oh, I am.’

Lestrade’s jaw clenched. ‘I may not be the most intelligent man in this room, but at least my maladaptive behaviours don’t lure homicidal psychopaths to my doorstep, and the doorsteps of my friends.’

‘Hey,’ said John softly but intensely, taking a step forward to place himself between them. He held up a hand, palm flattened, as though to keep Lestrade at bay.

But Lestrade was spared from responding, for the moment anyway, because behind him, he heard a tiny voice say his name—a timid, hopeful query: ‘Greg?’

He turned. Molly was standing in the hallway, fresh from the shower and dressed in a mauve polo neck jumper, her shoulder-length hair pulled into a simple French plait on the side of her head.
Her hands were clenched together in front of her as she stared at him. She looked so beautiful, and he was so damn sorry.

‘God, Molly,’ he began. ‘Are you—?’

But she didn’t let him finish. At a near-run, she crossed the distance between them and threw her arms around his waist. She buried her face in his chest and instantly began to cry.

Lestrade was shocked. Shocked, but not unmoved. He shoved the bouquet of roses into Sherlock’s arms so that his own were free to wrap around her, and he put a hand on her head to hold her close. He felt like such a fool. Again. Again! He had been wrong to compare this woman in any way to his ex-wife, to think that Angela’s intolerance for his faults, her withholding nature, and her perpetual grudges would translate themselves in Molly Hooper. He was not expecting this instant forgiveness, this ready embrace. Above all, he was not expecting her tears at the sight of him. He could scarcely comprehend them. They were tears neither of anger nor fear. They seemed to be tears of release. She had been longing for him, _him_, and that was a wondrous thing indeed.

Jesus, he wanted to throttle Mycroft.

‘Is she all right?’ said Sherlock in a rare tone of bewilderment. ‘All signs indicated that she was coping admirably, given the unfavourable circumstances, and—’

‘Time to go, Sherlock,’ said John, reaching for his cane.

Lestrade didn’t raise his head, and Molly didn’t move, unless it was to fit herself even closer into the warmth of his body. A few seconds later, the front door closed, but still, neither of them moved an inch.

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‘What was all that about then?’ John asked.

‘Mmm?’ said Sherlock, pulling his eyes away from the window where he kept himself distracted from monitoring John’s plate while occasionally remembering to eat from his own.

‘About Mycroft. You said something to Lestrade about Mycroft.’

‘Ah. Yes. Well.’ He took a bite of buttered toast, silently encouraging John to keep working on that bowl of hot porridge. ‘I suspect Mycroft had his hand in our dear inspector’s absence last night.’

‘How so?’ John dragged his spoon through the colourless gruel, but he seemed more interested in watching it slide off his spoon than eating it. It had been Sherlock’s suggestion that they stop for breakfast before returning to the flat. On the pretence of already having eaten, John had politely turned down Molly’s offer to cook something up last night or call for takeaway. Most likely, however, he had not had a bite of anything in more than fourteen hours, and Sherlock wanted to make sure he had something substantial in his stomach before he took his medication, for which he was already twelve hours overdue. And so, the simple invitation: ‘Breakfast?’ If recent history was any indication, John would decline, and Sherlock would end up scraping something from the fridge together with the hope that John would eat. So it came as a surprise when, after a moment’s pause, John had answered, ‘Yes, all right.’

Sherlock downplayed both his delight and relief, but when they stopped at a café, his heart sank a little upon observing the breakfast menu, which consisted of variations on the traditional full English, and therefore was filled with things that—for one reason or another—John would not or could not manage: grilled tomatoes, beans, fried eggs, sausages. John spotted the problem, too, though neither of them spoke it aloud. In the end, they’d both ordered simple plates _à la carte_ (Sherlock: toast, chips, and bacon; John: porridge and an orange; both had tea), but even then, John had taken only a few bites so far and was already showing signs of premature satisfaction. But maybe if they sat there long enough, eating would simply seem like the thing to do.

‘I’ve suspected that my _dear brother_ has been occupying Lestrade’s so-called “free” time with odds-and-ends spy work for a while now.’

John looked up from his bowl in surprise. Two seconds later, he scooped some porridge into his mouth. ‘Based on what?’

‘A hunch.’

‘A hunch? You don’t work on hunches.’ Another bite.

Sherlock shrugged, determined not to show any pleasure in John’s diverted eating. ‘Lestrade has demonstrated to me that they can sometimes be useful.’ He made himself take another bite of toast. ‘One of his groundless _hunch_ proved accurate last October, and therefore valuable.’

John sidestepped that. ‘You must have _some_ reason for thinking Lestrade’s working for Mycroft.’

‘Nothing solid. The compendium of information he’s given me access to—directly and indirectly, I _know_ he’s leaving things on his computer for me to hack—is not the sort of intelligence the Yard concerns itself with. It’s more, shall we say, military. Lestrade has no business concerning himself with files like that. I’ve noticed the way he holds his breath whenever Mycroft is mentioned, how he tries ever so slyly to shift the course of the conversation. I’ll give him credit: he’s quite good at it. But not good enough to fool me. Last night, his phone went straight to voicemail. Why would a copper ever turn his phone off? He’s not an undercover police officer, so his doing so went against protocol; therefore, it couldn’t have been a job associated with the Metropolitan Police. Conclusion? He didn’t want it to be traced. He was somewhere he should not have been. It was an assignment, one he didn’t want me to know about. Why not? He was instructed not to tell me. And who has a long and proud history of not telling me things? Mycroft.’

John was shaking his head, a wry expression on his face. ‘You don’t know what the word _hunch_
‘Lestrade thinks he’s clever, hiding this all from me. It makes him feel special, so I’ve let him get away with it until now. But for Molly’s untimely return from her shower, I would have pressed him. But I suppose it can wait.’

‘You may want to back off him a bit,’ John said, stirring his porridge. ‘He’s not doing so well these days.’

Sherlock’s eyebrows lowered in confusion. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, he’s seeing a therapist himself, isn’t he? So things can’t be good.’

‘He is? What for? How do you know?’

‘Maybe I’m having a little hunch of my own.’

‘No, really—how?’

John sighed. ‘You heard him. Maladaptive behaviour. That’s a shrink’s term.’

Sherlock closed his eyes and tilted his head back. ‘Of course,’ he whispered. ‘Obvious.’

‘So maybe a little less needling.’ But John’s lips twitched; the corner of his mouth turned up by degrees. ‘You’re perfectly awful, you know that? Not a single article of black underwear,’ he quoted. ‘Jesus, Sherlock. The look on the poor man’s face. You do know you’re being cruel.’

‘I was ragging. This is how blokes rag each other, is it not?’

‘When they’re twenty, utter wankers, and not standing in the scene of a crime committed against one of the bloke’s girlfriends. Where, I might add, the blokes happened to spend the night.’

‘You caught on.’

‘I know your slanted sense of humour. And I also know that you’re really not very good at telling jokes. You might try being a little less deadpanned about it. It’s always a bit startling, hearing you josh. Like hearing your granny tell a dirty joke.’

‘I never knew my grandmothers.’

‘Mrs Hudson, then.’ Sherlock smiled at this, and John set down the spoon, not even half the bowl gone, the orange untouched. ‘Right then. You finished?’

Sherlock realised he hadn’t touched his food for too many seconds in a row, making John think he was done. Before he could lie and say he was still working on it though, John had grabbed his cane and was pushing back from the table.

From Molly’s, their flat wasn’t far by cab. The conversation over breakfast was ended, but the silence between them now was . . . companionable. Easy. In a way it hadn’t been for a long time. Sherlock was amazed, if not a little puzzled. Last night’s nightmare had been a bad one, one of the worst, and it had lasted nearly two hours. But John seemed untouched by it, as though it hadn’t even happened. Did he even remember it? After he had fallen back into a more restful sleep, John had moved only once—to stretch himself out onto his back, a sleeping position he hadn’t observably assumed since his long stay in hospital. These were little changes, little evidences of progress in his wellbeing, almost too slight to merit mention to anyone who didn’t watch John as closely and Sherlock did.

The cab rolled to a stop a few doors down from 221 (John had looked curiously at Sherlock when he gave the wrong address, but he didn’t question him). They were just arriving at the front door when Mrs Hudson stepped out of it, buttoning her coat.

‘Oh, boys! Were you out all night?’

‘On a case, Mrs Hudson,’ said Sherlock with restrained pleasure.

‘Look at you, such a cheeky smile. It’s good to see.’ She turned to John. ‘He’s not running you ragged, I hope. You’ve still got a bit of resting up to do.’

No one but Mrs Hudson could make such unconcealed remarks about his condition, and John took it in stride. ‘I rest when I need to,’ he said agreeably.

‘I’m popping off to do the shopping. I was thinking, tonight, of a hearty cock-a-leekie. How does that sound to melt the chill off the bone?’

‘Lovely, Mrs Hudson.’

She bid them farewell, and John and Sherlock entered the flat.

For a few seconds, as they ascended the stairs, Sherlock felt seized by a bout of euphoria. He was a tightly wound ball of energy, and the only thing stopping him from bounding up the steps, taking them two or three at a time, was that John went before him at his slower though suddenly less gruelling pace. He began unwinding his scarf and pulling off his coat.

When they finally stepped through their door, however, Sherlock noticed three things too late: John’s blankets had been folded on the sofa and the items on the table tidied; lines in the rug indicated a recent hoovering; and a sharp, sterile scent hung in the air—ammonium hydroxide. Mrs Hudson had been cleaning.

He spun and cried out a warning, ‘John, wait—!’

But it was too late. John was bolting for the bathroom, knocking past the kitchen chair and
banging into walls in his haste to reach the toilet. Seconds later, Sherlock heard the lid slam open and a loud retching pulling deep from a half-full stomach. Dropping his coat, he hurried down the hall, and coming to the bathroom door saw John on his knees, hands splayed on either side of the bowl to brace himself as another fit squeezed his stomach muscles, and he threw up again.

The smell of household ammonia was even more pungent in the enclosed space of the bathroom and on a toilet most likely coated in it. It might have even been in the bowl itself, mixed with the water and half-digested porridge. Sherlock reached over him and flushed the toilet even as John violently retched a third time, spilling stomach acids from an emptying belly. As the blood rushed to his gut, John’s limbs were left bloodless; his fingers curled into claws he couldn’t unclench, and he began to shiver uncontrollably even as his face flushed with heat.

‘We need to get you out of the bathroom,’ said Sherlock urgently. But John, sweating and shivering, shook his head dazedly; his muscles clenched again, and he vomited some more.

Ammonium hydroxide. It was the solution Moran had used to soak the rag that had served as John’s gag. It had made the simple functions of breathing and swallowing acts of torture as the long exposure and fumes scoured his gums, tongue, and throat. The gag had effectively silenced him when they forced it on him, but even when they didn’t, the lingering burn made speech painful, and eventually he had stopped talking altogether.

Now, John’s stomach continued to convulse, and he gagged over the bowl, but nothing else was coming up. He was empty, but with every breath he was bombarded anew with the stench of the ammonia, the sharpness of memory, and he vomited dry air. He gasped and his eyes streamed, and he retched again without result, exhausting his overworked body. Sherlock knew he had to get him away from the smell. But the flat was full of it. Mrs Hudson had been too thorough. The only place she knew never to touch was his own bedroom.

He kicked the bathroom door wide, seized John under the armpits, and dragged him bodily from the bathroom. John cried aloud, either in pain or panic, but Sherlock didn’t stop until he had dropped John onto his bed, closed fast the door, and thrown open every window to let the cold London air swirl into the room. Then he grabbed an old chemistry magazine from his shelves, sat on the edge of the mattress, and began fanning John’s hot face.

John lay panting, eyes squeezed shut and fighting to uncurl his rigid fingers. He was still sweating profusely and began pulling at his coat with weak, uncooperative fingers, anxious to relieve the heat and constriction. Seeing this, Sherlock set aside the magazine and assisted by pulling the coat down his shoulders, off his arms, and letting it drop over the side of the bed. Then he returned to the fan.

A few minutes passed while he churned the air in front of John’s face and John breathed, shivering occasionally as the temperature in the room dropped and the cool air circulated in and out of his body. Sherlock heard him begin to mutter to himself, his face pressed into the duvet: ‘I know he is not here. I know I am not mad. I know this will pass.’

He repeated these words over and over. It sounded like a rehearsed mantra, and Sherlock could only suppose that it had been Ella, his therapist, who had recommended it.

And maybe it was working. John was coherent enough to think of it, to use it, in a moment of the kind of crisis that had, in the past, triggered intrusive images and flashbacks. And perhaps he was having them now. But if he was—and Sherlock couldn’t be sure—he at least knew that the hallucinations weren’t real and was making attempts to dispel them and regain mental, if not physical, control. Sherlock only wished it hadn’t happened on this morning, when, for the first time, things had been going so well. It felt like an abrupt setback, pulling the rug out from under them at the first sign of a positive turn.

‘I know he is not here. I know I am not mad . . . ’

John was flexing his fingers now as the blood returned and his breathing steadied. Stale perspiration still beaded along his brow, but Sherlock mopped it up with a tissue, and his skin remained dry.

‘I know this will pass.’

‘John?’

John opened his eyes, shivered. Without moving a muscle, he lifted his eyes to see Sherlock. ‘It’s cold,’ he said.

Sherlock stood and pulled the duvet up from the other side of the bed to wrap around him. It was less constricting than the coat, anyway.

‘Is it passing?’ he asked.

John nodded tiredly.

‘Just rest. I’m going to air out the flat, bring you some water.’

‘God, I hate this,’ he said.

‘I know. I’m sorry. But it’s . . . ’ He hesitated, then said it: ‘It’s getting better.’

John sighed, and as Sherlock slipped out the door, he heard him say drollly, ‘At least now I have an excuse never to clean the toilet again.’

***

They hadn’t been home an hour when Lestrade phoned Sherlock.

‘You’re needed back here. You and John both.’
'What's wrong?'

He heard Molly's voice in the background. 'Tell him we're fine!'

'Nothing's wrong,' said Lestrade, 'so to speak, but—'

'Tell him to move his arse.'

Sherlock frowned at the less familiar voice. 'Who's that?'

'Dimmock.'

'DI Dimmock?'

'Yes.'

'You called it in, did you?'

'Of course I called it in, which is what you should have done last night!' There was a huff of air on the other end of the phone, and when Lestrade spoke again he was suddenly much calmer. 'Look, it's not my case. I'm homicide, after all, and there's no . . . overt connection between the Slain Man murders and this break-in. Yet.' The full extent of Irene Adler's involvement was unknown to the Metropolitan Police. The official record still listed her as dead, and Sherlock's word on the matter had been dismissed as an 'unsubstantiated claim', being that he was the only person to have seen her alive in more than three years. 'In any case, I'm too intimately connected with the victim in this one, so it's fallen to Dimmock.'

'So what do you need me for?'

'Tell him I don't appreciate him tampering with my crime scene!' Dimmock hollered from the background. 'I'll thump him one, I swear to the Lord God Almighty.'

Lestrade spoke more loudly to override him. 'Forensics will be here soon, but you spent the night in the flat and handled the evidence. He wants to question you. And John.'

'Can't it wait? We're . . . unwinding.'

John came limping in from the kitchen, an arm around his middle and a little wan, but upright and moving. 'Are we needed?' he asked.

'If it were up to me, I'd give you all the time in the world . . .'

'lt's not up to you.' Dimmock again, louder this time, as though he were speaking right into the receiver. 'You're lucky I'm not sending officers to bring you here in handcuffs, Holmes.'

'Oi! Back off!' Lestrade growled. Then, mildly, as if nothing had happened, 'How soon can you be here?'

'This really isn't the best time, Lestrade,' said Sherlock.

'No, it's fine,' said John. 'It'd probably be good to get out, actually.'

'Dimmock's not kidding about the cuffs, Sherlock,' said Lestrade. 'Let's not do that again.'

Sherlock paused, debating. But John gave him a sharp nod. 'On our way,' he said.

***

In the end, Sherlock wished he had resisted more strenuously.

They arrived to find an overly agitated DI Dimmock in a heated conversation with Lestrade, though both fell silent once Sherlock and John stepped into the room. Molly—who evidently would not be going to work that morning after all—stood by the window where she had anxiously been watching the street for their arrival. Another officer, a burly sergeant by the name of Gannon, hid his own discomfort with the pretence of examining Molly’s inharmonious collection of anatomical texts and Victorian romance novels, stacked haphazardly in her bookcase. Its lack of organisation made Sherlock itch.

The first thing Dimmock did was send Lestrade away, as he was 'compromising the integrity of the investigation'.

'Take your girlfriend out for a morning latte,' he said somewhat snidely, meaning no offense to Molly but plenty to Lestrade.

'I'd rather stay, if it's all the same to you,' said Lestrade.

'It's not, in fact. I can't do my job with you hovering about, giving Holmes daddy’s coattails to hide behind.'

Lestrade’s eyes flashed in anger, and his jaw dropped with a ready retort, but Sherlock stepped on his first word. 'It’s fine, Lestrade. Let the detective inspector feel like a big boy for a change.' Dimmock sneered.

So, reluctantly, they went. Once Dimmock had them alone, he and Sherlock stood facing each other for a moment in silence, one sizing up the other. Sherlock had the advantage of height and a naturally intimidating bearing, but Dimmock had arrogance on his side. He was a little man who had struggled all his life to be taken seriously, and he had developed a rather sore attitude about being proven wrong. Four years ago, he might have been inclined to trust, even admire, a man like Sherlock Holmes, a hobby detective who was right far more often than wrong and who had the stamp of approval from a well-respected senior officer, Greg Lestrade. But then came the fall, the
proof that all Sherlock claimed to be was just a lie. And Lestrade fell with him. Dimmock felt foolish ever to have been taken in by them, and the disillusionment he had cultivated and disappointment he had nursed for so long did not dissipate with Sherlock’s return and acquittal. Dimmock had spent the last three years determined to prove not only that his own detective skills were worth something in their own right, but that they were superior—not a glitzy fabrication worthy of the tabloids but solid, credible police work. He would prove it again today. He interrogated them together (and interrogate was exactly the word), demanding to know anything and everything they may have touched, questioning their unwillingness to call the police (‘Something you’re trying to hide, Holmes?’), and expressing his dubiousness over Sherlock’s conclusions, such as the intruder having waltzed through the front door, as his own theory suggested the fire escape. He was appalled to see how Sherlock had altered the original state of the note, touched the wineglasses with bare hands, removed the black brassiere from the drawer where it had been found, and even bagged the bird, claiming he had surely contaminated evidence. He was just laying into John about aiding and abetting criminal behaviour when the forensics team arrived.

‘Just stay right there, you two,’ Dimmock said with a warning finger, ‘I’m not through with you.’ He set about barking orders as the team filed through the door, ordering them to sweep for prints and gather samples of hairs and fibres and to photograph every corner and surface from at least three different angles.

‘Is his head a little larger, John,’ Sherlock muttered, just loud enough for Dimmock to hear, ‘or is my memory off?’

‘You’ve always had an impeccable memory, Sherlock,’ John replied. ‘From what I’ve observed, you still do.’

Dimmock’s face went red, but he snorted as if unstung. ‘This coming from the man who failed to observe he was being kidnapped?’

John’s face fell, Sherlock’s eyes blazed, and Dimmock realised his mistake at once.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ he said hastily. His face quickly adopted an entirely different shade of red. ‘That was entirely uncalled for, grossly inappropriate. I’m sincerely sorry, Dr Watson.’

Recognising his defeat, he turned away, muttering half-heartedly, ‘Just stay put a moment, yeah?’

As he slunk away to the kitchen, Sherlock seethed between his teeth, ‘Insufferable maggot.’

‘It’s fine,’ said John, though he leant more heavily on the cane and stared at his shoes.

‘It’s not fine, it’s—’ But his jaw snapped shut as the last of the forensics team entered the room.

‘Right then, chaps,’ said Anderson, hefting a black bag; he was already wearing latex gloves, ‘a classic housebreak, I’m told. Let’s start with a standard top-to-bottom sweep . . . ’ Then he caught sight of Sherlock standing near the windows, and John with him. ‘The hell?’

Sherlock’s chest swelled indignantly. ‘I thought you were suspended from cases like these, Anderson.’

Anderson ruffled in return. ‘Yeah, well, you heard wrong.’

‘Did I.’

With an air of petulance, Anderson shifted his weight to face them more squarely. ‘I’m not suspended. Lestrade and I have simply agreed not to work together anymore. Conflicting personalities, as it were. A professional decision. Not that you’d know anything about working a legitimate job. The real question is, what are you doing here?’

‘I need some air,’ said John suddenly. He crossed the room and pushed past Anderson, who was blocking the door.

Anderson winced and sucked air through his teeth. With feigned sympathy, he said to Sherlock, ‘Not doing so well, is he?’

Sherlock could hear John descending the stairs; his steps were heavy for a man so light. He felt a sudden and violent need for a cigarette.

‘I should go after him. Apologise. You know. For what was said that night.’

‘You can stay the hell away from him,’ said Sherlock, and he made to follow after.

‘Oi! Sherlock Holmes! Just where do you think you’re skiving off to?’ Dimmock shouted. ‘I’m not finished with you!’

‘Arrest me.’

He found John just outside the front door, shifting his weight to stave off the sudden cold.

‘Hell of a day so far,’ John said. He may have meant to pass it off as a joke, but his breath was ragged and his left fist clenched and unclenched at his side. But this wasn’t panic. It was anger.

‘We can go,’ said Sherlock. ‘Dimmock’s heard everything he needs to. He just wants to bully us.’

‘I hate to be chased away by that.’

‘Anderson’s a right tosser.’

‘He is a bit, yeah,’ John agreed, exhaling slowly. He scrubbed a hand across his eyes, trying to calm down. ‘Have we bungled this? I mean, by not calling the police to start with.’
‘Nah,’ said Sherlock, leaning up against the building. He reached inside a pocket to pull out his gloves. ‘No laws were broken. I was working in my capacity as a private detective. Or, if you’d prefer, you were exercising your role as one of the Yard’s official consultants, and I tagged along as your faithful assistant.’

John shook his head, though a light of amusement shone in his eyes. ‘Right, a medical consultant, someone hired to examine dead bodies, called in to check the locks.’

‘There was a dead wren,’ said Sherlock, smiling. ‘Your professional opinion, doctor?’

‘Death by nursery rhyme.’

‘There’s a bit of that going around.’

They locked eyes again. There was something close to a grin on John’s face, and his left hand had relaxed.

‘Shall we?’ Sherlock asked, nodding down the street.

‘Hang on, Sherlock, I think there’s still someone you need to talk to.’ And John nodded in the opposite direction.

A man walking down the pavement slowed and pulled a ring of keys from his pocket. He was on the higher end of middle aged, copper-toned skin, and bearing the unmistakable look of a landlord: too many keys on the ring.

Sherlock stood taller and tugged his coat straight. ‘Mr Fazal, I presume,’ he said, walking straight up to the man and stepping into his path.

The man stopped short and his head snapped up. ‘Hullo, yes, who are you?’

‘I’m here on behalf of Ms Hooper, a tenant of yours.’

‘Are you with the police?’

‘I literally am, yes. You’ve noticed, of course, the funny little cars with lights on.’

Mr Fazal looked around and started, only now noticing the line of panda cars in front of the building. ‘Blimey. What’s all this about then, eh?’

‘Were you at home yesterday, Mr Fazal?’

Behind him, Sherlock heard the front door to the building squeak open. He carried on, though. If it was Dimmock coming to fetch him back, he was determined to squeeze as much information out of Mr Fazal before he was forcibly made to stop.

‘I was, yes. Well, not all day. I stepped out ‘round four, four-thirty. What’s this about?’

But it wasn’t Dimmock’s voice he heard.

‘Thought I’d step out, nip this craving in the bud.’ Sherlock’s head spun on his shoulder to see that Anderson had joined John on the side of the building. He was pulling out a pack of smokes and lighting up. ‘Might be a long day. Care for one?’ He extended the pack to John.

‘Did something happen to Ms Hooper?’ Mr Fazal said.

Sherlock was of half a mind to ignore Mr Fazal entirely and shout Anderson back up to the flat. But then Mr Fazal said, ‘Is she hurt? In trouble? Is that why her sister came ‘round?’

His head whipped back so quickly his neck cricked painfully. ‘Sister?’

‘I know, I know,’ Anderson was saying. ‘Bad for the lungs, eh? Well, good for you, staying healthy. More or less.’

‘Yes, Molly’s sister,’ said Mr Fazal. ‘Came calling yesterday. Real looker, that one.’

‘Describe her. What did she look like?’

‘Look, Watson. John. What I’ve been meaning to say: I’m sorry. For what was said that night. That was bang out of line.’

‘You know, pretty girl. Stunning. Dark hair, eyes. Nothing like Molly. I’d never take them for sisters if I hadn’t been told.’

His attention was dangerously divided, but he had to pursue this line of questioning. ‘That’s what she told you, is it? That they’re sisters?’

‘Yes. Are they not?’

‘So you just let her in?’

‘So no hard feelings, eh mate?’

‘Yes. She said she’s been visiting a couple days. She’d slept in, Molly’d already gone off to work, and she’d accidentally locked herself out of the flat getting the post.’

‘You know, you might at least try to smile.’

‘She wore nothing but a dressing gown. And I mean’—he leant in conspiratorially—‘nothing but a dressing gown, if you follow.’ He winked.
'Might do you some good.'

'Couldn't just leave the poor bird locked out of her flat all day, could I?'

'Then one of these days, you might get over this self-pitying act . . .'

'Sorry. Who did you say you were again?'

'. . . and stop walking around like you've still got some bloke's dick up your arse.'

Something broke. Exploded. Sherlock saw white, like a bursting star, and felt red—heat and blood and rage. There was a roaring in his ears, and when he came to himself, he realised it was him. Anderson was on the ground, blood gushing from his nose and smeared across the knuckles of Sherlock's gloved fist. His eyes were rolling in his head and he swam in and out of consciousness, but Sherlock still shouted, tightening his fists around what turned out to be the front of Anderson's suit coat as he lifted his upper body off the pavement, shaking him like a rag doll.

People were shouting at him to stop, to let go, shouting his name and malicious substitutes. But he couldn't let go. He wanted to stamp the man's face with his foot and rub it into the pavement.

'Sherlock, stop!'

In the end, it was John who pulled him off, who backed him away with one hand pushing against his heaving chest, and who said calmly, 'Don't. Don't.' John's eyes were blurring with tears. 'Don't.'

Sherlock looked over John's head and saw what he'd done. Anderson lay unmoving, his face a mess of blood. Someone was checking for a pulse. Someone was calling for a paramedic. And Dimmock, staring aghast from the doorway, turned to his sergeant, nodded at Sherlock, and said, 'Cuff him.'
Over the next few days, Sherlock Holmes was the top story on BBC News, Channel 4 News, ITN, Sky News, and CTV London, and his face—never smiling, deliberately darkened, caught at unfavourable angles—sullied the front page of every major Sunday newspaper in the city, and most of the minor ones. But it was the article in The Sun, penned by its star investigative journalist, that had the inside scoop.

**Sham Genius Sherlock Holmes Busted for Assault**

by Senior Reporter Kitty Riley

London – The verdict is in: Sherlock Holmes is a dangerous and violent madman.

On February 14, a day celebrated by most as a time of love and romance, Sherlock Holmes of 221B Baker Street, Westminster, London, launched a vicious and unprovoked attack on Scott Anderson, Head of Forensics at New Scotland Yard, while the latter was in the course of his duties. Officers in the vicinity arrested Holmes on sight.

The brutal attack left Anderson with a severely broken nose, burst ocular blood vessels, and numerous severe contusions (see page 3 for photographs).

When Anderson regained consciousness, he was surprised to discover himself in hospital. The 44-year-old forensics specialist from Reading recounts the seconds preceding Holmes’ ruthless assault:

‘He came out of nowhere. I was minding my own business, not talking to him at all, when he just snapped. Went completely mental. I thought he wanted to kill me, and I hadn’t done a thing to him. Not a thing.’

Witness Nakul Fazal, an innocent bystander, adds, ‘It was Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde right before my eyes. One minute, I am talking to a sane man. Then I blinked, and he had become a monster.’

Inside sources claim that Holmes has been mentally and emotionally unstable ever since his sudden return to London after more than three years of lying about his own death, an elaborate stunt enacted to evade charges of kidnapping and homicide. More recently, however, his volatility has been exacerbated due to ex-girlfriend Molly Hooper’s continual rebuffs of his renewed advances. Hooper was involved with Holmes back in June 2011 when she assisted him in faking his own death, going so far as to forge the medical certificate of death and to sign her name to the falsified autopsy report. Charges against Ms Hooper for these illegal actions are pending.

However it is that Hooper assisted Holmes in the past, their relationship of late has not been amicable. According to anonymous insiders, Holmes had been terrorizing Hooper for weeks by sending her threatening text messages and phone calls, abducting her cat, and leaving the corpses of mutilated animals in her flat. Reportedly, the night before the attack on Anderson, which took place just outside Hooper’s building, Holmes locked Hooper inside her own flat and refused to let her leave or use her phone to call her boyfriend, Metropolitan Police detective inspector Gregory Lestrade, Holmes’ long-time professional rival.

DI Lestrade was not available for comment, nor was Dr John Watson, Holmes’ associate and recent victim in the St Mary’s abductions, which is rumoured to be another of the amateur detective’s schemes. It has been suggested, however, that Watson, too, was being detained alongside Hooper and is still too traumatised by his prior captivity to comment.

Although Mr Holmes has been arrested and charged, it is too early to know what his fate will be. One can only wonder whether the Yard will issue a formal apology for its gross misjudgement of Holmes’ character, and for excusing his past crimes. As for Mr Anderson, forgiveness will come slowly, if it comes at all.

‘If he’d only been arrested back in October,’ he said, ‘I wouldn’t be sitting in a hospital bed today.’

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She came in to see him late Sunday evening, while he was spooning ambiguously flavoured red hospital jelly into his mouth. The flavour didn’t matter, though. With the busted nose, he really couldn’t taste much of anything.

‘Sally?’

‘Hi,’ she said with a small smile, stepping closer to the bed. There was a startling look of contrition about her. She squeezed his big toe through the blanket and gave it a friendly wiggle.

‘Damn, look at you. That nose has got to hurt something awful.’

The truth was, he was pumped full of enough painkillers that all he could really make out was dull buzzing in the middle of his black-and-blue face. But Sally Donovan was offering her sympathies, and he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to take advantage of this rare treat. So he nodded miserably as she sat in the chair beside him where his mum had spent a good portion of the morning before heading back to Reading, promising to bring him a whole sack of those Jelly Babies he liked so much when she returned.

‘You know,’ Donovan said slowly. Her eyes were downcast, staring at the palms of her hands before looking up at him through long lashes. He had always found her eyes alluring with their
rich brown irises, so dark they were almost black. ‘It’s not easy for me to admit that I was ever wrong . . .’

Oh lord, she was finally seeing it. A red-letter day. He wanted to reach out and touch her. He knew, maybe better than anyone, how smooth her skin was. Sally was a hard and rigid woman, but there was so much about her that was soft, supple.

‘. . . that I was mistaken in my judgement . . .’

If she came just a little closer, he could touch the tight spirals of her hair. He had once loved getting his fingers tangled in its deceptive, unnavigable pathways.

‘. . . a judgement I once defended openly, despite myself, despite others’ warnings and disapproval. But I was wrong from the start. Wasn’t I?’

He nodded benevolently and parted his lips to console her, to say that they all made mistakes from time to time, and he was ready to accept her apology and forgive . . .

‘It was my own fault, I suppose, for ever getting involved with a married man. That should have told me something about his moral depravity right there.’

‘Wait, what?’

‘I can’t help but hate myself a little. Just a little.’

‘You’re talking about me?’

‘Dear old Anderson,’ she said with a sigh, no longer hiding the contempt in her eyes, ‘we’ve been through so much together. So you can be honest with me. Are you shagging Kitty Riley?’

‘What?’

‘You know, sweet Kitty, the poor, struggling journalist from The Sun, whose passion is and always has been to bring the “truth” to the people. Are. You. Shagging. Her?’

Anderson spluttered and the weak, warm jelly sploshed around in the bowl.

‘Or is the price of your collusion a little higher than a good shag? The cost of divorce can be pretty devastating, can’t it? Did Susan take you for all you were worth? Pity, that. What did you agree to so you could get back on top? Five thousand pounds? Ten thousand?’

‘Stop it.’

‘Ooh, more than ten thousand? I think you’re looking at something more severe than just getting sacked, am I right? I think you’re looking at serving time.’

‘What are you talking about? I didn’t take any money! Holmes attacked me! Look what he did to me!’ He waved a hand at his busted face.

‘Oh please, I’ve seen worse beatings in pub brawls. Go on, be honest: Was it really Sherlock’s smacking you about that made you black out, or did you faint at the sight of your own blood?’

He gaped at her.

‘For someone who works in blood-splattered crime scenes, you can be awfully squeamish at the sight of your own.’

‘This is outrageous! Holmes came at me like an animal!’

‘Yes, and after what you did to incite him, it’s a wonder you’re not sucking that jelly through a straw.’

‘I didn’t do a damn thing! I was talking to Watson, trying apologise . . .’

She shot to her feet, planted a locked arm on either side of where he lay in his elevated bed, and hissed, ‘You’re a goddam liar. Holmes was very detailed about what happened, the horrid things you said, and Watson confirmed every word.’

‘Watson’s delusional! He’s impressionable! They probably concocted the whole thing together.’

He suddenly backtracked. ‘In any case, what word? What was I supposed to have said? But more importantly, what the hell does it matter? Even if I’d said that—that—that—that Watson was a blithering moron for taking on with that freak again, you think that justifies his going berserk and caving my face in?’

‘You’re a real pansy, you know that? You’re barely hurt. John Watson’s broken nose was the least of his problems. You want to feel sorry for someone? Feel sorry for him. But no. You have a go at him anyway but practically piss yourself when Sherlock turns a hard glance at you. Who spends two days and a night in hospital for a broken nose anyway?’

‘I did nothing to deserve—!’

She guffawed loudly, straightened, glared down at him dangerously. ‘Kitty Riley might try to draw you as some hapless victim or tragic hero, but you forget: I was there when you made an arse of yourself the first time. A dozen of us heard you that night, mocking the victim of a vicious rape about his rape, so we all know you’re an out-and-out tit. You torment a man who was brutalised for ten days, and you want me to feel sorry for your well-deserved collision with someone who wasn’t about to tolerate any more of your bullshit?’

‘I told you! I didn’t say anything to Watson besides sorry! You weren’t there! You didn’t see how Holmes came unhinged! It’s like I’ve been telling you for weeks: He’s dangerous, he’s mad, he was bound to hurt someone. I was just the unlucky sod he decided to turn on.’
‘See, here’s the difference between you and Sherlock—besides the size of your brains. Someone has a go at you, and, coward that you are, you retaliate by going after one of his mates. But you get on the wrong side of Sherlock or one of his mates, and he’ll just go after you. Something admirable in that, and I’m not loathe to admit it.’

‘I wasn’t having a go at anyone. I. Did. Nothing.’

She shrugged, though her scowl defied her indifference. ‘Is that the version you’re sticking with? Fine. I guess it will all come out during the inquest.’

‘The what?’

‘That’s why I’m here.’ She pulled out an envelope from the inside of her leather attaché. ‘All of London may be sopping up the sob story you and Ms Riley have concocted . . .’

‘Wait just a minute—’

‘. . . but the Yard is proceeding with both eyes open. You already have two official strikes against you, Anderson. One: The unsanctioned interview you gave to the press last October; and two: the obtuse comment you let slip in January that led to your three-day suspension. As of today, you are officially on unpaid mandatory leave. An internal investigation into your recent unsavoury behaviour will be conducted to determine whether you keep your job at the Yard.’

‘You can’t be serious. Because of a scuffle?’

‘What scuffle, Anderson? Just seconds ago you were calling it a vicious attack.’

His mind was spinning rapidly, in near blind panic. ‘They can’t find me guilty of saying something I never said,’ he said weakly. ‘And even if they did, they wouldn’t sack me over, um, words.’

‘Officially,’ she said with a sneer, ‘this is an investigation into the more serious matter of your supposed collusion with Kitty Riley and her campaign to paint Holmes as the blackest of villains.’

‘Absurd,’ he said without breath.

‘That’s behaviour unbecoming an employee of New Scotland Yard.’ She laid the envelope on his blanketed lap, her smile belying the intensity of her vindictiveness.

‘You—’ he said tremulously, ‘you’re not, that is, they wouldn’t let you conduct the investigation. Right?’

‘Me? With our history? Oh no, of course not.’ She headed toward the door, her heels clicking with each step. ‘No, I’m being called to testify.’

‘But you weren’t there!’

‘Character witness, love,’ she said.

She disappeared through the open doorway. He stared after her, horror-struck. Then, with shaking hands, he picked up the envelope, but before he could tear open the flap, another body darkened the doorway. He looked up to see Greg Lestrade, suit coat unbuttoned and hands deep in trouser pockets.

‘Lord, you didn’t just get on the wrong side of Sally Donovan, did you?’ he asked. Then he winced and shook his head in affected pity. ‘Rotten luck, mate. No man has ever come through that unscathed. Ask any of us. Sherlock Holmes included.’

There was no humour in his eyes, no hint of a smile, only hatred. ‘Cheers,’ said Lestrade, and he turned his back and left.

***

Sherlock Holmes was kept in a holding cell for twenty-three hours before he was officially charged. After that, he was detained further while it was decided whether his release was a public danger. Once the legal thirty-six hours had expired, he was at last detained pending bail only. And though bail was promptly paid, a hold-up in processing the paperwork postponed his release even further. All told, he spent a full two nights and three days in police custody, where he was virtually ignored by the custody sergeant, before being released on bail and given a mandate to appear for his court hearing, which was scheduled for March 2, still two weeks away.

Meanwhile, as he languished within solitary grey walls and behind a steel door, the full consequences of Kitty Riley’s article were only beginning to unfold.

Within twenty-four hours, Molly Hooper received official sanctions at work, prohibiting her from handling bodies and restricting her to lab work. She was to have nothing to do whatsoever with criminal or even suspected criminal deaths. Dr Torrence, though cordial as ever, now regarded her with an unprecedented measure of caution, and her colleagues made a point to avoid her, some simply for lack of knowing what to say, but most because she was tangled with Sherlock Holmes, whom they all knew was a bad piece of work. Criminal charges now stood against her, and though no one said it aloud, they were embarrassed by the association and how her actions might sully their department, if not their profession. They hoped, secretly, that Molly would do what she did best: to leave, and to do so quietly.

And then her landlord, Nakul Fazal, asked her to move out. He had no legal grounds to evict her—though he looked for one—but he made it clear that he disliked the company she kept, and that the neighbours, too, had lately expressed their unease. Molly, who was not one to deal easily with confrontations of the sort Fazal presented, agreed to be out within the week. Though his request was inconvenient (and hurtful), she couldn’t claim to be heartbroken. She’d not been there even
half a year, after all. And frankly, she no longer felt safe within those walls, anyway.

‘Stay with me,’ Lestrade said the moment she told him. The words jumped from his lips without a second’s hesitation, as if he had anticipated this happening, or had at least been preparing to offer it regardless.

‘You wouldn’t mind?’

He gave her a look that suggested both incredulity and teasing. But not presumption.

‘You know I have more space than I really need. The guest bedroom, the upstairs bathroom, it’s yours. You can stay as long as you like. That is, if you don’t have anywhere else to go.’

But she didn’t see moving in with him, however temporarily, a matter of last recourse. She had been hoping he would offer.

As for Lestrade, he was formally without fault, given that Dimmock had propitiously ordered him away from the scene. Nevertheless, he had fallen a few pegs in the eyes of the chief superintendent because it had been he who had vouched for Holmes in the beginning and assured Gregson that if anyone could solve the Slash Man serial killings, it was Sherlock. But the bodies kept turning up, the public grew more and more afraid every day, and now one of their own had been beaten soundly by the very man they had cleared of all suspicion not six weeks before.

‘You promised me,’ said Gregson to Lestrade behind closed doors, ‘that we could trust him. You gave me your word I wouldn’t regret bringing him on.’

To this, Lestrade had only one reply. ‘I meant what I said. And I stand by it.’

Lestrade’s convictions be damned: they retracted all permissions that had been granted to Sherlock in the name of good faith. He was not allowed anywhere near a crime scene ever again (that was, if he wasn’t serving time for the assault on Anderson, and Yarders were already taking bets); he was not to handle or even to know of evidence; and neither Lestrade nor anyone else was to discuss any aspect of the investigation that was not related directly to Holmes’ or Watson’s basic safety. The resolution of this matter was strictly of concern to the Metropolitan Police.

Opinions in the Yard were divided, not as to the matter of whether Holmes should have been permitted to continue to investigate with the Met—everyone had disagreed with that from the start—but as to whether Holmes had been justified in knocking Anderson out cold with just two solid strikes, as was reported. They were torn between their hatred of Holmes and their general dislike of Anderson. Most, of course, defended Anderson to the hilt, because no matter the circumstance or provocation (if there was indeed provocation, and not everyone—particularly readers of The Sun—were convinced that there had been), there was no cause for such a violent outburst. ‘What if it had been you?’ they asked one another. ‘Or what if he’d attacked your partner? Holmes is unsafe, always has been, and it’s all finally coming out.’

But Holmes had been interrogated, Watson interviewed, and the gossip of what they said—of what Anderson had said—circulated quickly. For some, the balance was tipping in Holmes’ favour. ‘Anderson said what to Watson?’ ‘Good lord, what is his problem?’ ‘Yeah, I would have broken his nose, too!’ And when some questioned their loyalty to a fellow Yarder, they turned it around and questioned theirs: ‘If it had been your mate? If Anderson had said that to a friend of yours?’ The defenders were few in number, but they were unwavering.

As for John. After giving his statement and being denied his request to talk to Sherlock or visit him in holding, he found himself standing alone on the street before the station with nothing but his aluminium cane, a mobile, and a handful of crumpled banknotes in his pocket. Not enough for a cab, and he didn’t think he could handle a crowded bus or train. Not today.

Before he could decide what to do, a shiny black town car rolled to a stop in front of him. He fell back a step, and his empty stomach tensed unpleasantly. When Mycroft Holmes stepped out of the car, it didn’t relax.

‘John.’

‘He’s in there,’ John said, gesturing with his head.

‘I know,’ Mycroft said with a sigh and a pitiable shake of his head. ‘But I’m here for you. You need a lift.’

John didn’t move. ‘Sherlock’s been arrested, and you won’t go in and see him?’

‘I will, eventually. He’s not going anywhere.’ John sniffed in disapproval. ‘First, I’m going to take you home.’

‘No thank you.’

‘You can’t walk,’ said Mycroft. ‘And I know your aversion to cabbies and public transport.’

John looked away, contemplating the time and distance it would take to limp all the way home. Already his leg was bothering him. ‘I’ll call Lestrade.’

‘He’s busy. My brother’s certainly seen to that. Get in the car, John. Don’t make me beg.’

John hesitated a few moments longer, weighing his options, knowing it was a sensible decision but being disinclined to make it. Mycroft waited him out. At last, he stepped forward, saying drily, ‘Wouldn’t that be a sight.’

Mycroft held the door for him as he climbed inside, then stepped around to the other side of the car and joined him in the backseat. ‘Baker Street,’ he said to the driver. ‘Unless,’ he turned his head to John, ‘you’d rather stay somewhere else tonight? I have multiple guest rooms—’
'Mrs Hudson is expecting me for dinner,' said John quickly.

'All the same, should you be in want of company . . .'

'Why? Are you?'

Mycroft's smile was small and tight. 'Just an offer.'

John turned his head away and stared out of the window. He had already considered what Mycroft was implying, but it was a private matter, and he resented Mycroft's perceptiveness. John hadn't spent a night alone—that was, a night without Sherlock nearby—since leaving his prolonged stay in hospital. Even there, Sherlock had invited himself to stay in the room with him. He hadn't really considered it before, but he knew now, anticipating an absence, that there had been comfort in falling asleep, even when he dreaded falling asleep, because of the assurance that if anything happened, if he had a living nightmare or panic attack, Sherlock would be there to set him right. Tonight, he wouldn't have that. But worse than the thought of sleeping in an empty flat was the thought that somebody, like Mycroft, would see him in such a deplorable state and discover what a mess he still was. Now, his only comfort was in knowing that the pistol was now with Molly. If worse came to worst, at least he wouldn't shoot anyone.

To cut through the oppressive silence that had followed John into the car, Mycroft said, 'I understand that there was a bit of a to-do at Ms Hooper's last night.' His tone was conversational, inconsequential. 'How is she?'

'Molly's fine,' said John shortly.

'There was a break-in, as I understand. Anything taken?'

'Don't pretend you don't know. '

'As a point of fact, I don't. I heard about an incident in her flat only upon learning of Sherlock's arrest. All other details have been slow in coming. I was hoping you could enlighten me.'

'I'm not one of your informants.'

'John—'  

'Look, just so I know, because this has been gnawing at me since I learnt otherwise, but just so I know now, what else have you been lying to me about?'

'When did I ever lie to you?'

'Did you know, did you know, that Irene Adler wasn't really dead?'

'Ms Adler?' he said, as though in genuine surprise.

'If you can stand to be bloody honest with me for just two seconds, did you know she was never killed? All that rubbish about witness protection schemes and protecting Sherlock, was it just about keeping me in the dark in the end? Did the two of you concoct that one together?'

'I promise you, I believed her dead for years, right up until Sherlock told me otherwise.'

'But you knew she was dangerous. From the start, you knew that.'

'Dangerous? Yes. As a conwoman and an extortionist, I knew it. But I never imagined . . . that is, I couldn't fathom what she was truly capable of.'

A sharp burst of pain spiked up John's leg and reverberated in his knee. He flinched and squeezed the muscles there, the pressure lessening the pain, if only a little. 'I bet you couldn't,' he said, breathless.

'I should never have allowed Sherlock to take part in that case. I know that now. It is one of the deepest regrets of my life. And where Sherlock is concerned, I have many.'

John sensed that Mycroft was trying to catch his eye, but he couldn't look at him; instead, he stared determinedly out the window.

'I am sorry I let her go. It was an act of cruelty, and I knew it, though I believed it was against her. Instead, it has proved to be a turn of malice against my own brother. I regret that very much indeed. Not least of all because of what my folly has meant for you.'

John cleared his throat uncomfortably.

'I don't expect you to believe me, and I doubt the usefulness of the words, but I am sorry, John.'

He didn't know what to say to that. He couldn't accept it, he couldn't reject it. He was feeling too much, and he didn't want to. So he kept his mouth closed and watched the city flash by.

'What I did know,' Mycroft continued, 'was the truth about Sherlock.' John started visibly at this, and Mycroft, seeing it, hurried to clarify. 'Not that he was alive. No, not that. But the truth of who he is as a man. People around him, people close to him—they get hurt. He's toxic, John, and I should have warned you from the start. He doesn't mean to be, he doesn't want to be. But he is.'

'Why are you saying this?'

'I'm saying this because Sherlock won't. He feels an obligation to you, but you should know that you have none to him.'

'Obligation,' John repeated softly.

'No one can deny that your association with him has taxed you greatly. You've given him
enough. No one is asking you to give any more.'

John’s head was spinning. The conversation had taken an unwelcome turn, and he could scarcely make sense of it. What was Mycroft suggesting that he do? Leave? The very thought felt like a dead weight in his chest. Where would he go? What would he do? He couldn’t return to that kind of life, not yet, he wasn’t strong enough.

Whatever it meant, he needed to square it with the conversation he and Molly had had as they sat tea together in 221B:

‘He should be here, soon,’ John said, handing her a cup. ‘You know Sherlock—he’ll make quick sense of everything. He’ll be a fair bit more useful to you than I am.’

‘I’m just glad you were home,’ Molly replied. ‘You know. To talk to. I was in a bit of a state. He’s not so great with people like that.’ He wasn’t sure how to respond to that, wasn’t sure how to either sympathise or disagree, and so he said nothing. Molly wrapped a hand around the bottom of the cup to feel its warmth. ‘I’m lucky you didn’t go out with him.’

‘And slow him down? Best not. I’m a bit of millstone these days.’

She smiled with concern. ‘I’m sure he doesn’t think that. He, you know, needs you. He relies on your being there.’

‘That’s just the addict in him.’

‘Pardon?’

‘He’s a man of habit, isn’t he. Once he gets used to something, it becomes part of his daily routine, good or bad. So yeah. He came to rely on me, after a fashion, once. There was a time he even called me a stimulant.’ He shook his head, half exasperated, half something else. ‘I might as well be cocaine as far as he’s concerned.’ Then his tone turned sour. ‘Withdrawals must have been hard on the poor bastard. Lucky now he gets his daily fix.’

At this, Molly appeared, to John’s surprise and regret, alarmed. ‘Surely, you don’t actually—’

She stopped short, and her cheeks flushed.

‘What?’ he asked. When she pursed her lips and shook her head apologetically, he pressed her. ‘I don’t what, Molly?’

‘I shouldn’t say . . .’

‘You’ve already started.’

She winced. ‘Surely, you don’t really . . . hate him?’

Whatever he had been expecting her to say, it wasn’t that. He stared at her, nonplussed. When he found his voice again, he said, ‘Hate him? Why would you say that?’

But she seemed to realise she was in error, divulging a confidence, and bit her bottom lip. Only at his continued urging did she finish. ‘He thinks you can’t stand him. He told me that you tolerate him only because you need him to find . . . them. That’s why, he says, you came back to Baker Street.’

‘To use him?’

‘Yes. And once he’s done it, you’ll be done with him. Then you’ll leave.’

John had forgotten about his tea. He sat back deep in his chair, stunned.

‘Will you?’ she asked at last.

But at that moment, the bell sounded: S-H.

‘This is far enough,’ said John, shifting forward in his seat and taking hold of his cane.

‘What’s that?’

‘Here. Right here. Stop the car.’

The driver glanced questioningly at Mycroft in the rearview mirror.

‘John, don’t be ridiculous,’ said Mycroft. ‘We’ve still miles to go before—’

‘I’m getting out. Excuse me’—he leant forward to address the driver directly—‘stop the car.’

‘This is a bit of an overreaction.’

John said nothing as the car rolled to the corner, but before it had even stopped completely, he had opened the door to leave. He had one foot out the door when he paused just long enough to say,

‘You have it the wrong way ‘round, Mycroft. Why do you think he disappeared for three years? Why do you think he’s at this very moment sitting in a jail cell? I’m the toxic one, not Sherlock.’

***
By the time John finally arrived back at 221, his leg was on fire and hot beads of sweat slipped down his wind-chilled cheeks. Then, with the door bolted behind him, he rested a shoulder against the wall at the foot of the stairs to catch his breath. He was unwilling to make the climb to the empty flat, and though he could hear Mrs Hudson bustling about in her kitchen, already preparing dinner, he didn’t want for company. So he sat on the stair and stretched his leg out in front of him,
massaging the aching calf at the scar tissue, and time fell away from him, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, forty, listening to Mrs Hudson move about as he cooled and calmed and tried to forget his encounter with Mycroft Holmes.

As promised, he joined Mrs Hudson in her flat for a simple dinner of cock-a-leekie soup. At first, he excused Sherlock’s absence to her with an unspecific though accurate justification: ‘He’s been detained.’ But as the dinner progressed, after she was done fussing over him and bemoaning the unyielding cold, he confessed to her where Sherlock really was, knowing it was bound to come out sooner or later (though he was not fully anticipating the news stories that would appear the next morning). He spared her the details, used words like hit and not assault, assured her that the charge wasn’t too serious, and reminded her that this wasn’t his first arrest. They reasoned together, eating slowly, that Sherlock would most likely be back home tomorrow.

‘Mycroft will take care of it,’ he said, hiding his dubiousness.

‘He’s a funny one, that Mycroft,’ said Mrs Hudson, expressing her own.

They sat at the table while the soup cooled on the cooker, talking of things inconsequential and light for an hour after eating: Mrs Hudson’s plans for changing the wallpaper in her bedroom, a new programme on the telly about home makeover disasters, and the closing of Mrs Hudson’s favourite retail outlet. While she carried on, John’s mind wandered to the street outside of Molly’s flat. He tried to put himself to work straightening up the kitchen and Sherlock’s experiments, but Mrs Hudson had already done a thorough job of cleaning what could be cleaned and leaving what Sherlock wouldn’t want touched. After that, he found himself in the bathroom, contemplating a shower, but he knew, ultimately, that he still couldn’t do it—completely undress, that was. And tonight wasn’t a night to risk any degree of panic. So he spot-cleaned, as was now his custom—arms, pits, neck, and face—leaving the rest for the morning, when he was rested and sleep was again many hours away.

But then he found himself back in the sitting room; the hour was getting later, and the thought of sleep—and maybe it was just Mycroft in his head—made him queasy. He thought of Ella’s exercises—counting and breathing and safe zones—but he didn’t want to do any of it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it. He hated it.

His mobile rang.

‘Hello?’

‘John? It’s Greg Lestrade.’

‘Did they finally let you in to see him?’

‘Only because I had Mycroft with me.’ He laughed shortly. ‘You’d think I’d have a little more sway.’

‘How is he?’

‘Bored. You know Sherlock. He’s a man who needs an occupation. He hates just sitting around.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘Look, John—’

‘So what happens next?’

‘Well, legally, they can’t hold him longer that twenty-four hours without charging him. Then they’ll set bail. Why don’t I stop by on my way home? We can talk more.’

John paused, suspecting what Lestrade was really asking. Why he was asking. He felt his cheeks flush a little. ‘Don’t trouble yourself.’

‘It’s not an inconvenience. Actually, I’d like—’

‘No. Really, Greg. I’m good. You can tell Sherlock I’m good.’ He meant it, too. He was home now, and though he’d had an attack earlier that day, he’d managed it well enough, and he’d be sure to avoid any other triggers. As for nightmares? He handled those on his own anyway. Lately, he had been waking in the morning following a bad dream feeling . . . better. More stable. So no one had to know.

‘Are you sure, John?’ said Lestrade, understanding that they were speaking the same language now, even without breaking euphemism. ‘It’s no trouble. Really.’

‘Mrs Hudson and I had dinner together.’ Then he lied. ‘She and I will just be watching telly all night. But, you know, thanks, all the same.’
There wasn’t an immediate response. Lestrade was trying to think of the most tactful way to continue insisting. So John stepped on his first word. ‘I’ll talk to you later, yeah? Bye, Greg.’ And before he could be otherwise persuaded or backtrack himself, he hung up.

He set the phone on the desk, realising in the space of a skipped heartbeat that he had just thrown away the lifeline Sherlock had thrown him. He could call back. Of course he could. But what use would that be? What could Lestrade do? He was fine. He knew he was fine. Even so, even as he made a beeline for the cupboard for a glass of water from the tap, he recited to himself under his breath, ‘I am in control. I know what I feel isn’t real. I know this will pass.’ He drank two full glasses at the sink, filled another, and returned to the sitting room.

There, his eyes fell to his and Sherlock’s closed laptops, resting across from one another on the desk. He needed an occupation. He needed to be . . . useful. In light of that morning’s events, he hadn’t given much more thought to their conversation last night. Maybe that’s what Sherlock was doing right now, but he didn’t have access to all his resources. John did.

He sat on Sherlock’s side of the table, opened Sherlock’s laptop, and entered Sherlock’s password. Whatever work Sherlock had done on his own would be kept here: files, charts, spreadsheets, all of it. But John started by opening a web browser. He would first review the nursery rhymes Sherlock had researched by checking his internet history.

The story of Jack and Jill came up first as the most recent website Sherlock had visited, and John was on the verge of clicking the web page open when he paused. Below a short list linking to original nursery rhymes and analyses, John saw a different string of websites: J & A Beare, Frederick Phelps, Stringers Music, and Cardiff Violins—all violin shops. John frowned as he scrolled down further. Dozens of visits to dozens of different pages, all violins. Since his own had been destroyed, Sherlock hadn’t once mentioned it. But John should have known it was more than a physical loss: the violin was to Sherlock like a second voice, expressing emotions he would never, or could never, put into words. That was what John believed, anyway, and had ever since the first time Irene Adler had died.

His musings about the loss of the violin paused and John’s finger stilled as he read the other names of sites and searches, pages titled ‘How to help someone with PTSD’, ‘Panic disorder treatment’, ‘Side effects of benzodiazepine’, and ‘Should you wake a sleepwalker?’

Sleepwalker? Surely, Sherlock didn’t mean him. He did a quick search for all the websites related to sleepwalking that Sherlock had visited and found a lengthy list dating back to early January. Searches included questions: ‘Is sleepwalking dangerous?’ and ‘What triggers sleepwalking?’ and ‘Sleepwalkers and sleeptalkers—What do they remember?’

Was he really sleepwalking? He must have been! What other reason would Sherlock have to search this topic so many times in so many ways? But how often? And what did he do? Where did he try to go? His heart was pounding again, and his level of anxiety increased from a three to a four.

‘Damn it,’ he said, pushing himself to his feet. He paced across the floor, feeling his hands begin to shake. ‘Damn it,’ he repeated. He limped back to the desk, grabbed up his phone, and dialled quickly.

‘This is Dr Thompson.’

‘Ella.’ He rubbed a trembling hand across his face. Suddenly, he didn’t know what to say.

‘John? Are you all right?’

‘Yes. No. I don’t know.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m . . . at home. You said,’ he swallowed hard, cleared his throat, ‘you said I could call. When I needed to.’

‘Of course you can. Whenever you need to. John. What’s wrong?’

‘I’ve lost my, um, my safety net.’

‘Okay. I understand. First, are you taking care of yourself? Have you taken your medication today?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sleeping well?’

‘Yes, I . . . Well, I don’t know anymore. Maybe not. I’m just feeling a little anxious right now. I don’t want it to get out of control. Not when . . . That is, I’m sort of on my own tonight.’

‘Okay. John, I want you to remember: all control comes from you. Everything else is just aids—your medication, your safety zone, even your safety net. Right?’

‘Right. I know that. I’m just . . . feeling . . .’

‘It’s okay. Let’s talk about it.’

For the next twenty minutes, they talked, and though John never got specific—there were still some things he couldn’t speak aloud, certain emotions he couldn’t confess—he was never dishonest. And once he could claim to be a two-and-a-half on the scale, she said, ‘Now that you’re feeling calmer, there’s one more thing I want you to do before you try to sleep tonight.’

‘What?’
Write.

"Write?"

"It’s the one exercise I’ve given you that you have yet to do."

"I . . . can’t write about . . . those things. Not tonight."

"Don’t write about that. Write about tonight, the things you are feeling. Just write. I’ve told you that writing is your way of making sense of things, including yourself. You’ll feel better, John. I promise."

". . . Okay."

They said goodbye. For a few seconds, John didn’t move, just stared at the mobile in his hand, wishing Sherlock would text, wishing Lestrade would come over anyway, wishing Mrs Hudson would pop up for no reason at all. But these things weren’t going to happen. He was alone.

So he sat at the desk and opened the computer. Seconds later, he was staring at a blank screen, the text cursor blinking in the upper left-hand side of a white page. His fingers hovered over the keyboard until the tips of his index fingers brushed the little lined grooves on the black keys below them. And froze.

He didn’t know how to start, what to say. He didn’t want to write about himself. He never had. All those months blogging, he had never seen himself as a subject of interest, and now that he was, he couldn’t bear to explore what he had become. He had avoided writing about his experiences for that very reason, and because he had already related it all—for Lestrade, for Sherlock, and now, bit by bit, for Ella. Each time was hell, and he couldn’t bring himself to write a word of it.

But there had always been Sherlock. Sherlock’s life, cases, habits, character. The words had once come easily, writing had been a pleasure, and though he had believed he would never take up the subject again, he had missed it, the act of writing, of telling Sherlock’s story.

And so he began:

Molly Hooper came to the flat last night, frightened but faithful, looking for Sherlock, consulting detective.

As before, he became the spectator in the story, less a player, more an observer. He delved into his memories of the last thirty hours and translated them into clear images and verbatim dialogue onto the page.

He sniffed the air as he entered her flat, like a hound searching out the same scent as had been left on the note. ‘Where’s the rose now?’ he asked Molly, and she retrieved it from the kitchen.

His fingers plucked out the needed letters with greater speed now, eagerly listening to Sherlock explain about the claret, following him into the bathroom where the message had been left on the mirror, and then to the bedroom where he made his final reveal.

And there he made known what should have been obvious to us from the start. The intruder had been none other than Irene Adler.

He recounted in near-perfect accuracy his conversation with Sherlock, after Molly had gone to bed: the notes, the rhymes, the fall, the riddles. And as he typed out from memory the notes that had been left on Winters and Avery, he paused in a moment of clarity and understanding that was washed clean away the second he tried to examine it, like forgetting a dream upon awakening, like holding water in a closed fist, and he decided that he had understood nothing after all.

He elided the uneventful night and carried the story through Lestrade’s morning arrival and their return to the flat—omitting, of course, the very first thing that had happened upon stepping through their door—and so far as to their being called back to the scene of the break-in, Dimmock’s anger, and the forensics team’s appearance in the flat.

There, he stopped. He couldn’t describe what Sherlock had done to Anderson, not without repeating what had been said, and he could not think about Anderson’s words without remembering Moran’s. They had been like a spell, conjuring the devastating memory of that basement kitchen and the words your mind and body are forevermore filled with me.

He shuddered. He closed his eyes and breathed, counting to five. Then he found himself on his feet and with his cane suddenly in hand, hastening to Sherlock’s bedroom where he knew Sherlock kept a BK&T combat knife in his sock drawer. He unsheathed the blade and tested it with his thumb, breathing hard. He would sleep with it tonight, under his pillow.

Then he returned to the computer where he deleted the long document, every word, and slammed the laptop closed.

***

The night of Sherlock’s arrest, John Watson couldn’t sleep, and across the city, Molly Hooper couldn’t either. Somewhere in London, Kitty Riley sat at a computer typing feverishly, Anderson slept in drug-induced bliss, Mycroft Holmes paced worriedly before a roaring fireplace, Sherlock sat rigidly in a dark cell, and homeless men and women stood in rings, whispering about vicious shadows and evil men and what might be done. The next morning, Ms Riley’s article would appear, setting new wheels in motion, but tonight, as the vestiges of an unobserved Valentine’s Day dissolved into nothing, Molly sat up in a borrowed bed, feeling the disquiet of the day and the foreboding of tomorrow wrap around her.

Greg’s room was just down the hall. It had been more than an hour, now, since he had reassured her that his home was secured, showed her how to jiggle the handle on the toilet to get it to flush
properly, and wished her good night, making no presumptions about her first night staying under
his roof while her own flat, still a crime scene, sat empty. Tomorrow, she would learn that Mr
Fazal wanted her out, and tomorrow Dr Torrence would place her on occupational reprimand, but
those were as yet unknown concerns. Tonight, in the quiet of her head and the stillness of the
room, she closed her eyes and saw a strange woman without a face enter her flat, touch her things,
and plant threats in the form of roses and birds. And she saw John in hospital, hooked up to life-
supporting instruments, every inch of skin testifying of acts more hateful than any she had ever
known. She shuddered and hugged herself around the middle. Her flannel pyjamas and the heavy
duvet seemed useless against the kind of cold she felt now. Softly, she set her feet on the rug,
grabbed her dressing gown from the back of a chair, and stepped into the hall.

When she opened the door to Greg’s darkened room, she saw his silhouette outlined in the soft
blue light coming in through the window. He was awake, too, sitting on the edge of the mattress
with his back to the door. His arms braced against his knees, and his head hung low and heavy.

She knocked lightly on the open door, hoping not to startle him. ‘Greg?’

His head came up and he looked over his shoulder. ‘Molly,’ he said. He twisted around and
brought his knee up on the bed to see her better. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘I just . . .’ she started. Why was she being so timid? ‘I’m jumping out of my skin. I keep hearing
things, feeling things. I just don’t want to be alone. Not tonight.’

She couldn’t make out his face for the dark, but she saw his arm extend out toward her across the
bed, the palm open and inviting. She came forward and reached for him. With her hand securely
in his, he drew her close, and together they lay down upon the bed. He pulled the blankets up
around them, and when she felt her shiver, he wrapped an arm around her waist and pressed his
warm body into her back.

‘I’m sorry this has happened,’ he murmured. She felt his words pass from his body into hers, a soft
vibration.

‘Will they be okay?’ she said. ‘Sherlock and John?’

‘I have to believe they will be,’ he said.

She closed her eyes and laid her arm along his, and in the comfort of his embrace, she felt herself
sinking into sleep. It was not a night for passion, but they shared an intimacy they had not
permitted themselves before, one of softest affection and care, and in the moment before sleep
stole her from the present, she thought she felt his lips kiss her hair, thought she heard him say,
‘You should never have to feel afraid. I’ll do anything I can to protect you.’ But she didn’t
answer. In his arms, she was suddenly fast asleep.
The wind stung his face the moment he stepped onto the street and away from the courthouse. He stood in the same spot that John had two days and four hours prior, but, unlike for John, no long black car rolled up to meet him and take him home.

It was dark out, coming on ten o’clock, and he had already resigned himself to another sleepless night of pacing, fretting, and cursing at the custody sergeant for not allowing him to make a phone call whenever—if ever—they opened the door to slide him food or tea or let him use the loo.

Soon, soon, they kept telling him, as though it would assuage him in the moment and he would forget, like a child. They’d denied him visitors, too. He was certain, certain, John had tried to come see him repeatedly the past couple of days and been turned away. Mycroft had come just the once. Lestrade was the only one who managed to get through, but only because he had brought with him the moronic solicitor. ‘What they’re doing isn’t legal,’ Lestrade said. ‘You’ve been charged, not convicted. They’re deliberately slowing the paperwork. Hang tight, Sherlock. I’ll fix this.’

Lestrade must have done, because he was out now, though there was no sign of Lestrade. Their excuse for keeping him so long and releasing him so late in the day? To protect and to discourage the reporters who had been camping out on the pavement, waiting to catch him. A rumour had been leaked that he was being ‘uncooperative and hostile’, giving them cause to keep him in there another night at least. Neither descriptor was true. But that was no excuse for holding him two nights to begin with. Nor for ‘forgetting’ to take off the unnecessarily tightened cuffs for three days straight even while he sat in a solitary cell, behind a metal door with a single, glassed peephole no wider than four inches in diameter. He rubbed his wrists now to assuage the ache of raw, rubbed skin.

With the mandate that he not leave the city and that he report to a probation officer every seventy-two hours, he was released on bail and due back in magistrate’s court in two weeks’ time to answer the charge of assault. Lestrade had assured him, when visiting earlier that day (the only time he’d been free of the cuffs, thanks to the barking, infuriated DI), that it was a summary offence, for which he would most likely be fined. He also predicted a non-molestation order would be set up, but that was yet to be determined. For now, his property—coat, scarf, keys, wallet, and phone—were returned to him, and he was free to go. They kept his blood-stained gloves as evidence.

But when he took his phone out of pocket to call John and let him know he was on his way back to the flat, he saw that the days it had spent locked away in a little cardboard box had expired the charge, and the battery was dead. He sighed in annoyance and stepped toward the kerb to hail a cab.

Before he could flag one down, however, he caught sight of a young woman edging nearer him from behind a closed newsstand. She had been loitering a few seconds ago (he had not failed to notice her), but now she was inching her way closer like a nervous cat, her eyes wary and darting left and right, as though afraid to be seen of anyone but him. His temper was shot, so with a scowl, he turned to face her directly and said loudly, ‘Well? Have out with it.’

Realising her failure at being furtive, she straightened more boldly and took large steps closer, though she stopped short before coming within arms’ length. ‘You the Detective? Sherlock Holmes?’ she asked. Her shoulders were hunched against the wind, her back curved.

‘Yes,’ he answered plainly.

He observed her clothing: a dark green coat weathered by constant wear and wet, fingerless gloves that were ineffectual in protecting from the cold, a woollen bobble hat fraying at the edges and along the seam, and boots two sizes too big. Her fingertips were darkened with newspaper print and old mud, her cheeks coloured with city grime, and her hair had been pulled into the same plait for over a month. She was obviously one of the homeless.

‘Thank god, I’ve been waiting forever in this fucking weather.’ Her accent screamed streetwise.

‘What do you want?’

‘Ain’t no joke, Mr Holmes.’
‘Who gave this to you?’

‘A friend,’ she replied. She began to edge away. ‘We all want the same thing, don’t we? They wanna talk, but only to you. You bring the fuzz, just forget it.’ Then she shifted inside her coat and turned away.

He entertained only a moment’s debate. He needed to get back to John, needed to see that he was okay. But if this opportunity gave him the key to bringing down the Slash Man, how could he dismiss it? He was desperate for more information, more clues, that could point him in the right direction and end this once and for all.

When the cab pulled up, he directed it to Old Church Street.

***

Sherlock stood fifteen minutes on the bank—a mixture of sand, dirt, and rock—looking out across the river and thinking wistfully of cigarettes and hot tea. It was downright cold, and he had his coat buttoned to the collar where his scarf was tucked securely under his chin. His bare hands were little protected inside his pockets. He did not care for hats, but right now he understood the appeal as the biting wind burned his ears red. Regretfully, he thought of 221B, and a part of him understood that he should have returned there first, if anything to dress more warmly. But the more dominant part—the one that needed information—knew that, given the opportunity, he would not have made any other choice.

Stomping his feet just to see if he could still feel his toes, he decided that he would wait only two minutes more. Two minutes for his mystery informant to show, and if not, he was gone. They knew where he could be found. Hell, half the newspaper-reading city knew. So maybe just one more minute. One more—

‘Hey, freak!’

He turned about to answer. That’s when he saw a line of (he counted quickly) nine men and one woman approaching from farther down the bank, coming from the direction of Battersea Bridge. Above them, the A312 traffic zipped by, streaks of light in the black world.

‘That him?’ one asked another.

‘That’s him.’

They framed him like a crescent moon, and he stood to face them with his back to the water. The dark obscured their faces, but the lights behind them highlighted their frames. He took the measure of them: Two were taller than he, three matched him for height, and the rest were shorter. But it didn’t matter. The maths was easy. He was outnumbered.

‘What is this then?’ he said. ‘A lure? How clever of you.’

One of the shadows spoke. ‘Shut up. We’re the ones doing the talking tonight.’

‘S’right,’ said another. ‘And you’re going to listen up, understand?’

‘I’m all ears,’ Sherlock drawled. He assessed the weak points in their human barricade. The little man, third from the left, would go down easily, as would the fat one in the middle, the one with girth, not bulk, and a centre of gravity that would be easy to topple. Logical, sound, but that didn’t stop his heart from beginning to race.

‘Then we’ll get straight to it, won’t we?’ said the first. ‘You’re in trouble, Mr Holmes.’

He maintained a tone of dispassionate curiosity. ‘Am I?’

‘S’right. An’ lemme tell ya why. It’s cause we ain’t gonna take this no more.’

‘By this, I assume you mean—’

‘We’re dying. Our kind, you know. The sods of the streets. The Gaffer, Jack and Jill, and who knows who’s yet to get snuffed. One by one, he’s picking us off. You know who I’m talking bout, don’t you, Mr Holmes?’

‘Of course.’

‘And you know whose fault that is?’

‘I should think it is the fault of the killer.’

‘It’s your fault as much as his!’ shouted another shadow, anger shooting forth like water from a crack in a dam.

‘You come back to life, and look what happens!’ cried another.

‘Don’t be absurd,’ said Sherlock. ‘The Slash Man was active long before I returned.’

‘Ain’t nobody died, though,’ said the spokesman. ‘And we think we know why. It’s your mate, isn’t it?’

‘That’s who Old Slash really wants—the one that got away.’

He flinched visibly at the echo. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Sherlock growled.

‘So here’s what we aim to do,’ the man continued. ‘We give him back. Watson. We give him who he really wants, and the attacks will stop.’
He cried out in pain even as one of the men shouted in triumph, ‘Got ’im!’

trying to clear his burning eyes, when a sharp pain erupted in the side of his head.

the cold, wet soil, he started pushing himself up to his knees. He passed a hand across his face,

his eyes stung with blinding grime, he could sense them moving away. Setting his bare hands into

They were backing away from him now, widening the entrapping circle—he could feel it. Though

rocks and damp pressing through his thin shirt.

the hands release him. Someone kicked him hard in the ribs, and he rolled onto his stomach, the

coat, his suit coat, and his belt. Then they ripped the scarf from around his throat. Only then did

the other, then his socks, and meanwhile the swarm of hands above divested him of his Belstaff

kick out, but they held him down, two men to a leg, so he couldn’t move. One shoe came off, then

Suddenly, he was on his back, and hands were everywhere, pulling at his feet, yanking at his coat.

'If you even dare—!' Sherlock roared.

The man shoved him backward, two hands punching hard into his shoulders. 'Fuck you, you
don’t get it, man. You don’t get it. You don’t see what’s happening to us, do you? You just turn a
blind eye. Ain’t that right.'

'And a deaf ear,’ said another.

'He’s a ruddy coward.’

The wind howled across the river and the cars rolled ignorantly by up on the road. Above their
heads, the rolling winter storm clouds winked out the stars.

'Listen to me,’ said Sherlock, digging his feet into the ground, bracing. ’I understand why you’re
frustrated and scared. Believe me, I do. No one should have to suffer like this. And I promise you,
I’m doing everything I can think of to—'

They started screaming at him, calling him a liar and a coward and a cad, shouting accusations of
betrayal and conspiring against them, and when Sherlock shouted in return, beseeching them to
stop, to listen, the leader said, ’I think we’ve heard enough outta you,’ and a dark fist came up out
of the shadow of their ring and slammed into his face.

In an instant, he was down on one knee, balanced on one hand, stunned, but he felt the crescent
wrap around until he was encircled on all sides, in front and behind. There wasn’t another moment
to waste. He sprang forward, catching the leader in the gut with his shoulder and driving him to
the ground. He made to break through the barrier of bodies, but he wasn’t fast enough.
‘Grab ’im! Grab ’im!’ they cried, and before he could land more than two blows, they had seized
his arms at the shoulders, elbows, and wrists, and dragged him back, planting him on his knees.

‘Killing me won’t stop the Slash Man!’ he said. 'It won’t stop anything!’

'Shut him up.’

Someone kicked him in the stomach and kneed him in the face, but though his body tried to curl
inward, the gripping arms didn’t permit him to fall. Then a hand seized his hair and yanked his
head back, forcing his mouth to gape wide. ’This’ll stopper that goddamn mouth,’ one said as a
large hand carrying a heap of muck from the riverbank clamped across his mouth. Cold mud hit
the back of his throat, and he choked, spluttered, but the man didn’t release him. Instead, the hand
rubbed viciously back and forth, and Sherlock felt the sand and chips of slate cut along his gums
and lips. He twisted furiously in their arms until the hand was withdrawn and he could spit and
cough up the mud, but they weren’t finished. Someone else was coming forward now, another
large hand carrying a heap of muck from the riverbank clamped across his mouth. Cold mud hit
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fistful of sludge and sand, to rub into his eyes, and from behind, more mud to shove into his ears.

He grunted and groaned and pulled and flailed, but to no avail. His resistance was met with slaps
and lips. He twisted furiously in their arms until the hand was withdrawn and he could spit and
cough up the mud, but they weren’t finished. Someone else was coming forward now, another
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fistful of sludge and sand, to rub into his eyes, and from behind, more mud to shove into his ears.

Suddenly, he was on his back, and hands were everywhere, pulling at his feet, yanking at his coat.
They didn’t bother with the buttons—they just juggled wildly until the threads tore. He tried to
kick out, but they held him down, two men to a leg, so he couldn’t move. One shoe came off, then
the other, then his socks, and meanwhile the swarm of hands above divested him of his Belstaff
coat, his suit coat, and his belt. Then they ripped the scarf from around his throat. Only then did
the hands release him. Someone kicked him hard in the ribs, and he rolled onto his stomach, the
rocks and damp pressing through his thin shirt.

They were backing away from him now, widening the entrapring circle—he could feel it. Though
his eyes stung with blinding grime, he could sense them moving away. Setting his bare hands into
the cold, wet soil, he started pushing himself up to his knees. He passed a hand across his face,
trying to clear his burning eyes, when a sharp pain erupted in the side of his head.

He cried out in pain even as one of the men shouted in triumph, ‘Got ’im!’
Warm blood slid down his face, but before he could give it any attention, another unexpected pain burst in shoulder, and then another at the hip. They were hurling stones. The fourth missed—he heard it land heavily in the earth beside him—but the fifth smashed into his right hand, which was raised to shield his head. They pelted him with rocks, all about the size of a closed fist, jagged and hurled with great force, and he lay helpless on the ground, still choking on dirt, still unable to see, never knowing where the next rock would fall. His only protection was his own arms wrapped around his head like a split helmet while the missiles landed like a storm of rocks along his exposed body, tearing away fabric and flesh, grazing his neck, slicing across his scalp.

‘Had enough, Mr Holmes? We get through to you yet?’

He shook with cold and with anger and with pain. He had no intention of giving answer, and they expected none. Instead, they came at him again and seized him under the arms. They lifted him bodily and dragged him toward the water. There, they flung him face-first into the lapping shallows of the wintry river.

***

‘Hello?’

‘Hello, Auntie!’

‘Bless me, is this Gillian?’

‘Of course it is! How are you, Auntie?’

‘Oh lovely, dear, just lovely. Well, there’s the hip, but that’s old news now, isn’t it? And it’s getting more and more difficult to warm these old bones. Your mother was the same way, wasn’t she? Lord, I sound just like her these days! But don’t let me natter on. Go on, it’s been ages since we had a proper chat. How’s Robert?’

‘He’s fine, we’re all fine.’

‘And the twins? Oh, how I miss those little rascals.’

‘We’re all fine, Auntie. Look, there’s a reason I’m calling.’

‘And that mean dog of yours? Rufus, Rufie, I forget his name.’

‘Ralph, and we put him down last summer.’

‘Oh, that’s right, I remember.’ That had been the last time she’d called. ‘The motorbike.’

‘Auntie, are you listening?’

‘Of course, I am, dear.’

‘Here’s the thing. We’ve been reading the paper and seeing things on the news—’

‘How’s the weather up your way?’

‘Same as it is in London. Listen, it’s about your tenant. Sherlock Holmes . . . Auntie? You still there?’

‘I’m here, dear. What about my Sherlock?’

‘Rob and I are concerned. I don’t know how closely you’ve been following the news, but yesterday we read something in the paper about this guy, and he seems, well, God, Auntie, he seems downright scary.’

‘Sherlock? No . . .’

‘But have you heard what he’s done? All of it? Just the other day he beat up a police officer! For no goddamn reason!’

‘Language, Gillian, goodness, if the children should hear!’

‘It’s not safe. Not anymore. We want you to come stay here with us. For a time. The twins adore you, you know they do, and there’s no reason for you to be living on your own like that anymore, with no one to look after you.’

‘I’m fine, dear! I’ve never been happier.’

‘We’ll get someone to manage the property for you, have the tenants removed, find new ones, everything. You won’t have to lift a finger. And Auntie, maybe it’s time you start thinking about selling.’

‘I’m fine, dear! I’ve never been happier.’

‘But there’s nothing for you in London anymore. No work, no family.’

‘Now now, there’s plenty of both.’

‘It’s not safe. Goddamn, Auntie, the man’s a psychopath! He’s a killer! And he’s living right above you!’

‘Sorry, sweetheart, that’ll be the kettle—’

‘Please, listen to me!’
‘I’ve got to dash. You’ll give my love to Robert and the children, won’t you?’

‘Aunt—!’

Mrs Hudson lay the phone back in the cradle beside the cool kettle. Then she dabbed the tears from beneath her eyes with a handkerchief and sat down to think.

***

He felt like he had been thrown into a fire—pain so intense it went beyond hot or cold. The freezing water set his every nerve screaming in anguish, shocking his system so terribly he didn’t have air enough to gasp. Instead, he thrashed until he could get his limbs under himself again and pushed himself up and out of the water. He stumbled, lost balance, and fell back to his knees. His lungs felt like they had collapsed. The murky water, dripping off his face, stole away most of the mud, and together with his tears of pain began to clear his sight. But as he crawled out of the bitterly cold water on hands and knees onto a damp bank, he could see no sign of his attackers. They had fled as swiftly as they had come.

Upon the shore again, he rose trembling to his bare feet and shuffled forward, but a pain searing his side made him keel over. He stayed on his knees a moment, unmoving, waiting for the fire and pain to ebb, but both persevered. Again, he struggled to his feet. The jagged shale, mixed with sand and broken bottles and other rubbish, stabbed with each step, but with each ticking second, he lost more and more feeling in his toes, feet, and legs. Wet from head to toe, he shivered violently, ceaselessly, his shoulders heaving and jarring his whole frame. His head pounded, his teeth rattled, his bones felt wrenched, but he kept moving, crossed the gritty bank, and headed back toward the nearest stone incline to get himself to the street. Once there, the wind pushed him across the road.

Staggering, he made it back to Old Church Street, to the same corner where he had directed the cabbie to drop him off. The night was still young, but the street was quiet, not a cab in sight, and the cars that did pass by paid him as much attention as if he were an alley dog. When he tried to step into the street to flag one down, it swerved soundlessly around him and sped away.

Along with his coat and jacket, they had also stolen his wallet, keys, and battery-drained phone. Now, he had nothing, not even a pair of shoes. He barely had his own body heat. It rose off him as steam, a ghostlike fog, and it was thinning quickly.

The first cab he saw, on the corner of Old Church and King, he waved down urgently, his extended hand trembling, making him look jittery, drugged. The cabbie, deciding he looked like trouble, didn’t even slow. He carried on, feet nothing more than pale, numb stumps, not bleeding more profusely only for the constriction of veins and capillaries. He calculated quickly, while he still could: Baker Street was still three miles away. Walking without impediment would take him a good hour. He didn’t have a good hour.

He was surrounded by gated flats and parallel-parked cars, darkened furniture shops and closed dress shops. At last, he spotted a corner pub. There, he could stop inside where it was warm, use the phone, call John. It was the only clear thought in his head: get to John. Wincing, he heaved the door open and stepped inside. He was reeling toward the bar when the host stepped in his way.

‘Oi, I know you. I seen your ugly mug on the telly. Sherlock Holmes?’

The half-empty pub heard the name. Silence fell, and all turned to look.

He cast his own eyes away, anxious not to meet theirs. ‘I j-just n-need the phone,’ he said.

‘Look at that,’ said a man who sat drinking at the bar. ‘Full-on pissed, he is.’

‘A right mess,’ said another. ‘Looks like someone finally gave him the what-for.’

‘Heard he was a paedo, on top of everything else. Probably got roughed up for that, and good riddance.’

‘Out you get, you ruddy wanker,’ said the host, and he grabbed him up by the scruff of his sopping, torn shirt and hauled him out, back onto the street.

He was having trouble breathing now. Each inhalation felt like a knife in his sides, and each cold rush of wind knocked the air out of him. He made it another two streets, leaving red footprints in his wake, before stumbling into the middle of the road where a car screeched to halt. Sherlock looked up and saw a little yellow light reading Taxi. His hands landed on the bonnet, as though he had the power to hold the entire vehicle in place. Then he sidestepped around the car, pulled open the back door, and crawled in.

‘Blimey, you okay?’ said the cabbie, appraising him through the rearview mirror.

Sherlock kept his head hung low and turned aside, keeping to the shadows.

‘B-baker,’ he said haltingly, ‘Sssstreet.’

The cabbie put the car back into first gear and began rolling. ‘Baker Street? That what you say? Hey mate, you don’t look so good. Sure I can’t take you to A&E?’

‘N-no.’

‘You need a doctor, mate.’

That’s what he’d been saying. Didn’t the man understand? ‘B-baker Street,’ he said again, and the driver nodded his concession.

The back of the taxi was warmer than the street, but he was still wet, dripping, and shivering like mad. The ache went down to the bone. He willed the man to drive faster, and whatever positive
energy he sent to the front of the taxi seemed to be working. The cabbie laid his foot down on the accelerator and zipped around corners, pressing Sherlock’s body into the door. His eyes were growing heavy, and he wanted to sleep. All the while, the cabbie kept glancing in his mirror, watching him.

He never said the words 221B, but that’s exactly where the cabbie took him.

***

For John, it had been a wretched two nights, and what looked to be going on a third.

Saturday night, he’d barely slept at all, but for once, when, pushed far past mental exhaustion, he had dozed off at the desk, his head on his arms. But he started awake sometime in the darkest of the pre-dawn hours when he thought he heard a thump from below, then heavy footsteps on the stair, and a soft whistling. Those weren’t Sherlock’s steps, and they definitely weren’t Mrs Hudson’s. He grabbed the combat knife, removed it from its leather sheath, and forced himself out onto the landing, turning on every light within reach as he went. But the staircase was bare, the entryway empty. Heart in his throat, he returned to the flat and bolted the door.

Sunday, he returned to the courthouse with Lestrade where he sat for hours waiting for permission to see Sherlock, permission that was never granted. Lestrade fumed and paced, making phone call after phone call to every judge and influential law enforcement officer he knew, but to no avail. They only told him to be patient, stop overreacting, and let the system work. Lestrade and Molly took him to lunch to get his mind off things and away from the reporters who were trying to snap photographs or catch a word, and while he appreciated the gestures, he mostly just wanted to be alone. So he declined the dinner invitation, ate instead with Mrs Hudson, and locked himself away in the flat once again.

He pushed through the night, reading every page of Sherlock’s internet history since early December until the words blurred together and his thoughts were hazy like clouds. He attempted to write, but never managed more than five minutes’ worth of material before stopping, deleting, and downing another coffee. In the corners of his eyes, the shadows were moving. Three times he felt hot breath on the back of his neck. And once, when he passed in front of the mirror hanging over the hearth, he saw someone standing just behind him. He cried out and whirled, but there was no one there.

Once he recovered, he removed the mirror, lest he shatter it like he had the first.

Monday, he didn’t leave the flat. He ignored Lestrade’s repeated attempts to phone him, texting back that he was fine and wanted to be alone. He told Mrs Hudson he wasn’t hungry. And for the first time since they had started, he missed his afternoon session with Ella.

He had work to do. The day passed, and night fell, and he had work to do.

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The buzzer skittered, and John’s head came around from where he had just pinned another note to the wall. Automatically, as if by some new internal programming, his heart began to race. That was not Morse.

He didn’t move, though the tremor in his hand reawakened. He clamped his other fist around it to keep it still.

After a long pause, the buzzer sounded again. This time it was the code, and it slowly, painstakingly, spelled out SH. But he didn’t move to answer it. Sherlock was still in custody. Surely he would have texted if he were on his way back, which couldn’t be the case, given the hour. And anyway, Sherlock could let himself in, and John heard no steps on the stairs. He closed his eyes to focus on his breathing, but he couldn’t shake the fear: someone was at the door who had Sherlock’s code.

After another long pause, a new message began to be transmitted: N-O K-E-Y.

Might it be Sherlock after all? Why didn’t he call?

John turned away from the wall where he had been organising his work and was halfway to the window before remembering that all the panes had been boarded up—no one could see in or out.

He could just ignore the bell. Pretend no one was at home. But then he heard it: a shout from the street: ‘John!’

He knew this one. It wasn’t the eager I’ve-found-something John, or the angry the-police-are-all-twats John. It was an urgent, fraught, I-need-your-help John. Sherlock was in trouble.

Forgetting his cane, he rushed out the flat and was halfway down the stairs before the deep ache flared to life. He caught himself against the wall, suppressed a deep moan and grinded his teeth, then pushed himself forward.

Wrenching open the door, he found the man himself leaning wearily against the building, his forehead resting on the white stone framing the door. John stared, aghast. Sherlock’s face was pale blue like the moon, bruised, and bleeding; his hair was flattened as though with rain, and his shirt, clinging wetly to his chest and shoulders, was muddy and torn. He wore no coat at all. Nor shoes.

‘B-be so g-good as to p-pay the cabbie, J-john,’ he said, his whole frame shaking with his words. Meanwhile, the taxi pulled away behind him. ‘T’ve lost my w-wallet.’

‘Oh God,’ John breathed, and he caught Sherlock as he fell forward, his foot having failed to clear the threshold.

John flung one of Sherlock’s arms around his neck and shoulders to keep him from hitting the ground, hefted him up with an arm around the narrow waist, and, kicking the front door closed,
He watched as Sherlock lifted a leg and gingerly set a long, white foot on the bottommost step, as though testing its solidity. John realised that Sherlock’s foot must be almost entirely numb. The cold encasing his body was bleeding into John’s own, and when he shivered, John shivered with him. He grasped Sherlock’s wet trouser leg at the knee and lifted it for him. ‘Good, you’re doing good,’ he said encouragingly, and together, slowly, they ascended.

When they reached the flat, he left Sherlock standing hunched in the centre of the room and returned to the landing. ‘Mrs Hudson!’

He flew back to Sherlock’s side, straightened him, and began quickly unbuttoning his shirt. ‘You’re shivering, Sherlock. That’s good,’ he said. ‘Keep it up. Don’t try to stop.’ He heard Mrs Hudson’s door open below, then her quick steps on the stair. John began peeling the wet shirt down Sherlock’s shoulder, but he froze in shock when he saw a back peppered with deep bruises and open wounds. Mrs Hudson stepped into the flat, and a hand flew to her mouth to hide a gasp. John regained himself. ‘He’s half frozen,’ he told her, calm, though carrying a certain exigency in his manner. He continued peeling off the ruined shirt and tossed it to the side. ‘I need dry towels, blankets. Hand me that blanket just there.’ It was the one John slept with at night, a heavy, woven material.

She hastened to obey and opened the blanket and to set it delicately around Sherlock’s shoulders while John undid his trousers.

‘Towels, Mrs Hudson,’ John said. She scuttled off to the bathroom, and John shimmied the trousers down Sherlock’s hips, their wetness hampering the ease of pulling them off. When they were finally down around his ankles, John, crouched low and, ignoring the pain in his own leg, directed, ‘Step out.’ Sherlock tried to lift his leg but seemed unable to bend his bobbing knee. ‘Okay, no, it’s fine. Here.’ John stood again, tugged the blanket closed around him, and helped him shuffle over to the sofa. ‘Keep shivering, Sherlock. Don’t stop. Tuck your arms in.’

With him now seated on the sofa, John was able to get the trousers off completely, followed by his underwear, by the time Mrs Hudson returned with a full stack of towels and another couple of blankets.

‘Wrap his legs, feet. Let’s dry him off.’

Together they worked to get him dry, and Sherlock sat doubled over, trying to get warm. But when John rubbed a towel across his hair, Sherlock winced and sucked air through his teeth. John pushed back the towel, now stained red: Peering closer, John saw a gash across his scalp and blood coating his hair. ‘Shit,’ he said softly. Then, to Mrs Hudson. ‘Sherlock, the emergency kit’s in the kitchen. And I need you to run a bath. Warm water, not hot. About body temperature. And prepare something hot to drink.’

‘Chocolate, if we have it. More calories. Sherlock, can you cough?’

Sherlock coughed and nodded.

‘If you can cough, you can swallow. Chocolate, Mrs Hudson. Hot.’

She nodded and hurried off for the kitchen.

John slipped his warm hands inside the blanket, splayed one across Sherlock’s chest, the other on his back, feeling for two things: the temperature of his skin, and the vibrations of his breathing. When he had the right instruments, he’d be able to tell more, but already he knew that it wasn’t good. He withdrew the hands and gently drew Sherlock’s head closer to examine the wounds in his scalp.

He parted the damp curls, the better to see the damage. One laceration was long, though not so deep. Cold and mud, acting as a sealant, had kept it from bleeding too terribly. Still, he would likely need stitches. Another wound looked more like a direct hit: the skin was ruptured like the points of a compass. He would clean and treat the wounds once he could get Sherlock into the bath, but he was likely concussed.

Keeping a light hand on the back of his neck, John asked gently, ‘Who did this to you?’ When Sherlock didn’t speak, just shivered, John fought to keep the anger from his voice as he further questioned, ‘Was it the police?’

‘No.’

Softer now, more timorous. ‘Was it them?’

But Sherlock shook his head. John sat closer, wrapped an arm around his back, rubbing firmly, trying to share body warmth. ‘Street people,’ said Sherlock at last. ‘Homeless. They jumped me. By the river.’ He took a ragged breath, coughed, sniffed. ‘Should’ve come . . . home.’

John heard the bath running, and Mrs Hudson returned with the emergency medical kit.

‘What more can I do?’ she asked.

‘Sit there on that side of him. Keep him warm.’

‘Should I rub his legs and feet? They looked so pale.’

‘Trunk first. We don’t want to push too much blood to the heart by warming his extremities before they’re ready.’

John opened the kit, taking out the digital thermometer first and placing it in Sherlock’s mouth under the tongue. Then he removed the stethoscope, settled the tips in his ears, and breathed hot
air onto the diaphragm. He pulled the blanket down Sherlock’s back a little, seeing again evidence of bruising and broken skin. Anger curled in his blood, and he breathed between gritted teeth, fighting for calm. Then he placed the diaphragm against Sherlock’s back and instructed him to breathe deeply. There was the faintest rattle.

The thermometer beeped, and John removed it, but he was startled to see that Sherlock’s saliva had turned the white rod a sickly brown.

‘How long were you out there?’ he asked as he read the screen: 31°. Moderate hypothermia.

‘Don’t know. Less than an hour, maybe.’

He pulled out a pen light and moved to crouch in front of Sherlock; meanwhile, Mrs Hudson’s arm replaced John’s around Sherlock’s shoulders. ‘Look at me,’ he directed, but Sherlock, quaking more severely now, was bent double and couldn’t lift his head.

‘Hurt-s-s.’

‘I know, Sherlock,’ he said, rubbing a knee, trying to coax him into looking up. ‘That’s a good thing. It needs to hurt. That’s how you heal.’ He clicked the pen light on. ‘It means you’re warming up.’ He lifted Sherlock’s head by the chin and flashed the light into his eyes and away again, testing for dilation and constriction: ‘Any nausea?’

‘No.’

‘Double vision? Black spots? White spots?’

‘N-no.’

‘I’ll go check on the bath,’ said Mrs Hudson. ‘Chocolate should be ready soon.’

John set aside the kit. Then he brushed a thumb across a dark streak at the corner of Sherlock’s lips, thinking at first that it must be blood. But it was dirt. There was more in the corners of his eyes, the rims of his nostrils, the bowls of his ears. ‘Open your mouth for me,’ he said. Sherlock unclenched his jaw and complied, and when John shone the light inside and pulled the bottom lip down, he saw evidence of both mud and blood—scraped gums, gritty teeth, all the way back to his throat. ‘God, what did they do to you?’

The water in the bathroom turned off, and the kettle whistled.

‘I’m not enough, John.’ As ever, he was felt compelled to explain something, but he wasn’t thinking clearly enough to do it.

‘Sh-sh, let’s talk about it later, yeah?’ said John. ‘Sit tight.’

He rose swiftly and left for the kitchen, returning with a large glass of tepid water and a bowl. ‘Rinse and spit,’ he instructed, and when Sherlock did, the water came back murky. He did this several times before John was satisfied. Then John set both glass and bowl aside and resumed his place on the couch beside Sherlock and pulled him in close again. He would warm soon enough. If the hypothermia were any more severe, skin-to-skin contact would be best to bring his temperature up, but he was in a warm, dry place now, and though the shivering continued, it was only a sign of a body working to generate heat.

Moments later, Mrs Hudson returned with a mug of chocolate, and John helped him drink it. ‘As much as you can manage,’ he said, holding the back of Sherlock’s head and tipping the mug into his mouth, as Sherlock’s hands were locked inside the blanket. He swallowed well, Adam’s apple dipping with each large gulp. John let him sit with it a short while, knowing his body was already working to burn the calories away. This would help. One more time, he checked his body temperature with the thermometer: 33°. Almost out of danger.

John set aside the cup. ‘I’m going to check on the bath,’ he said.

He had Mrs Hudson sit with him while he tested the temperature of the water. Too warm, and the blood vessels in his legs and arms would dilate, causing the blood pressure in his major organs to drop, which might lead to cardiac arrest. Too cold, and the hypothermia would worsen, causing him to slip into unconsciousness. He checked it first with his own hand, then with the thermometer. Mrs Hudson had run it just about perfect.

Together, he and Mrs Hudson helped Sherlock to the bathroom where they unwound him from the blankets and towels, and John lowered him steadily into the water. It was then that he could really see the damage done to Sherlock’s body: the purple, black, and red markings made his skin look like a minefield. Small explosions had blossomed up and down his torso, front and back, arms and legs, hands and head. Some abrasions were slight, like smudged drops of dark paint, but too many resembled eruptions: large circles of black cracked open like a geode, and only the intense cold had kept them from bleeding more profusely. Sherlock groaned in pain as the feeling began to return to his body, and the wounds began to bleed.

‘Do you want more chocolate?’ John asked.

‘I’d rather tea,’ said Sherlock through a deep morn.

John nodded at Mrs Hudson. ‘Tea’s fine.’

Then John set about to clean the dirt away from the wounds, starting with his head. He treated the gashes with surgical spirit and stitched the skin as swiftly as he could. Sherlock, still in a state of half-dazed compliance, bore it well. Then he cleared away the mud, which he found everywhere, from clinging to Sherlock’s eyelashes to coating the lining of his ears, one of which was already recently scarred. John worked silently, filled with questions but suppressing them in a tight, little pit somewhere deep inside, alongside his anger.
When he touched a particularly dark bruise along the left rib, Sherlock made a noise like a stepped-on pup and flinched, splashing John with water. ‘That one might be fractured or broken,’ John said, wiping his face with a sleeve. ‘I’ll get you some paracetamol with your tea.’ He looked into Sherlock’s face, concerned. ‘What was it?’

Sherlock sighed—as his body temperature rose, his mental faculties cleared. ‘That one, I think, was a boot. The rest were rocks.’

‘Rocks?’

‘On the banks of the Thames. They threw rocks at me.’

‘Your homeless network?’

‘Yes.’

John felt the suppressed rage flare up again; he stamped it down. ‘Why?’

‘Because I’m killing them.’

‘What?’

‘And they were angry.’ He flexed his fingers under the water, his face screwed up in pain. ‘And scared.’

In pieces, he told John what had happened, beginning with the girl waiting for him on the street with the message, how they had waylaid him, argued with him, and then fallen upon him, stolen his property, and pelted him with stones before flinging him into the river and running away.

‘I told them,’ he said in the end, ‘that killing me wouldn’t stop the Slash Man. But that’s not true, is it?’

‘Sherlock—’

‘If this is all happening because of me, if I’m the reason, then take me out of the picture, and—’

‘Sherlock, stop. It’s not that simple.’

In little more than a whisper, Sherlock said, ‘Maybe it is.’

John froze in his ministrations. He stared at Sherlock, but Sherlock wouldn’t look back.

‘So what are you saying? That we should turn ourselves over to Moran? Is that what you mean?’

Sherlock looked up in surprise, a light of horror in his eyes.

John’s own flashed angrily. ‘Say the word, and we’ll do it.’

‘Here we are, love,’ said Mrs Hudson, returning with tea, but seeing that Sherlock was now more lucid and not especially decent, she excused herself to go tidy up the kitchen. John stepped to the cabinet for the painkillers, but as he reached for the paracetamol, he changed his mind and pulled down the bottle containing his own prescribed pain medication instead and handed Sherlock two, as well as a Benzodiazepine tablet. Sherlock took the pills, drank the tea, and when the cup was empty again, John took his temperature one last time: 36.4°. The danger had passed.

He pulled the plug on the drain, knowing he shouldn’t leave Sherlock in a bath that would only lose heat as the minutes passed. Then he helped him out of the bath and dried him off. Weary, unable to stay upright for long, Sherlock sat heavily on the toilet seat, a towel wrapped around his middle, to brush his teeth while John dressed his remaining wounds.

At last, John pushed open the door to Sherlock’s bedroom, helped him into warm clothing, and laid him softly to his bed. As he pulled the covers up to Sherlock’s shoulders, Sherlock proffered only a token verbal complaint. ‘I have things to do, John. There’s so much to do.’

‘First, sleep. Everything else can wait for morning.’

As he brought more blankets from the cupboard and lay them across the bed, John made a mental note to crank the heat in the flat a little higher tonight. He turned off the lamps and moved toward the door. But when he opened his mouth to ask whether Sherlock was comfortable or cold, he saw in the light coming from the hallway that, surrounded in warmth, Sherlock had burrowed his head into a pillow, eyes already closing in sleep.

John watched him a while longer, unmoving, from where he stood by the door. In the quiet of the room, the stillness, the reality of what had happened, what might have happened, began to descend on him. He felt something well up inside of him, something unnamed and frightening, and his eyes began to burn. He couldn’t leave, not just yet. Softly, he crossed the floor and sat on the edge of the mattress.

For untold minutes, he watched Sherlock sleep by the light of the hall as if, by looking away, he might make him disappear. So he watched. His battered face, though smoothed in sleep, was not untroubled, though John couldn’t say why he thought this, exactly. There was something youthful about him in sleep, and yet at the same time so terribly aged. Like a man dead before his time, one who was never meant to come back, but did anyway. John lay the backs of his fingers against his brow, his cheek, feeling for temperature, but also, feeling that he was real. It was as if he could never be too certain.

His skin was cool, his breath steady. So John had to check just one more thing: the beat of his heart. A pulse would do. Gently, mindful not to disturb, he pulled back the covers just enough to expose one of Sherlock’s hands, which he drew out from beneath the blankets. In the dark, John pressed two fingers to Sherlock’s wrist and felt for the beat of his heart. It answered with steady throbs, like an incoming tide pushing to shore. He held the hand and counted the beats until, with
an accidental brush of his fingers against the back of Sherlock’s hand, he felt something else: a thin, hard ridge, like a seam, running across the surface.

Something he had missed? Trusting Sherlock would remain asleep, John leaned forward and turned on the bedside lamp, careful to angle the light away from his face so that it fell just so on the backside of his hand. And there, John saw long red streaks, some scabbed, some scarred, the skin inflamed. Rocks hadn’t done that.

He returned to the bathroom and from the cabinet extracted the antibacterial cream he had used on his own wounds, the tube nearly empty. It would be enough. Back in Sherlock’s room and sitting again on the edge of the mattress, he squeezed a few drops onto his fingers and rubbed the cool cream into the reddened skin. Sherlock didn’t stir.

When he was finished, he set the cream aside, but he didn’t drop Sherlock’s hand. Instead, he held it in both of his own.

‘We’ve really done a number on each other, haven’t we?’ he said in a low voice.

Then the light coming through the doorway dimmed. He looked up to see Mrs Hudson standing anxiously, wringing her hands as she looked in.

‘Will he be all right?’ she asked softly.

John nodded. ‘He just needs rest.’ He let go of Sherlock’s hand and tucked it back inside the covers. He took one last look before following Mrs Hudson into the hallway and closing the door behind him. Together, they returned to the sitting room.

‘A bit of a scary sight,’ John said, ‘but he wasn’t in any real danger.’ He smiled briefly to put her at ease, but she didn’t seem to be buying it.

‘What happened out there?’

He sighed and shook his head sorrowfully. ‘He was attacked,’ he said. Then he cleared his throat to rid himself of the sudden lump that had appeared there.

‘Who did it?’

‘Strangers. He didn’t know them. But he got away. That’s the important thing.’

She nodded, still looking unconvinced, and touched his arm briefly before dropping her hand to her side.

‘We’ve proven to be a bit more than you bargained for, haven’t we,’ he said. Her head came up. He tried to infuse a touch of lightness to his tone and explained, ‘Most landladies don’t have to worry about tenants who shoot at walls or get shot at through windows.’ He sighed. ‘You shouldn’t have had to deal with this tonight.’

‘He’s family,’ she said defensively, then added, ‘of a kind. You both are.’

He smiled sadly. ‘Yes, but—’

‘John Watson,’ she said, and he was taken aback by the sharpness of her tone. ‘I have my boys back. Both of them. Don’t think that I regret that for even a second.’

***

When Lestrade’s phone went off at midnight that evening, he stared at the screen a little dumbfounded, for though John W had been programmed into his address book for three-and-a-half months now, he’d never received an actual call from that number, just a couple of texts. He quickly overcame his shock, unwound his arm from around Molly’s shoulders where they sat together on the sofa watching telly, and hastened to answer.

‘John?’

He received no greeting in return. Instead, he heard the voice of John Watson, speaking very heatedly: ‘The entire city is calling for his blood, and you don’t insist on sending him home with a police escort? You don’t call me? What the hell is wrong with you?’

Lestrade blinked and rose swiftly to his feet. Molly watched his face nervously. ‘John, what happened?’ he asked. His mind raced. Last he’d been told, Sherlock would be spending a third night in a jail cell, a point Lestrade had hotly contested—and on legal grounds—but which he had no power to influence directly. He’d not been told of any change, though he had specifically demanded to be informed if and when the judge mandated bail.

‘He was beaten up, that’s what. They jumped him and stoned him like it was the bloody Middle Ages!’

‘What? Oh my g— I’m sorry. John, I swear I didn’t know he’d been released. Is he there now? Have you taken him to A&E? I’m coming over.’

‘Don’t bother. He doesn’t want police involvement anymore—you people have done enough.’

‘John, you have to report this—’

‘But just so you know, Lestrade, if they had killed him, his death would have been on you.’

And the line went dead.
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2015

‘Go,’ Molly said, and so he went.

Now he stood on the stoop outside 221, hoping to be let inside. He breathed hot air onto his hands—in his haste, he had forgotten to grab a pair of gloves on his way out the door, and damn, it was cold tonight—and rubbed them rapidly against one another for warmth. He would get in tonight, even if that meant he had to ring Mrs Hudson, no matter the late hour. It wouldn’t be too much of a bother, he was sure: He had it on good authority that she was fond of him.

But it didn’t come to that. The door buzzed opened without his having to force his way inside. He practically ran up the stairs and into the upper flat where he found John waiting for him, standing in the centre of the room, sleeves rolled and arms folded, and wearing an expression that could cut stone.

‘I told you we didn’t need police,’ he said with a raise of his chin.

Lestrade instinctively steeled himself against that glower and let the door close softly behind him. ‘I’m not here as a policeman,’ he said.

‘Then why are you here?’

Something was happening behind the hard expression, a small flash of light set deep in John’s eyes. Something prowled, ferocious, lethal, something that had been stamped down time and time again, threatening to break free, and already would have done but for the guardian standing watch, the soldier keeping it in check. And that’s who faced Lestrade tonight: the soldier.

Lestrade didn’t have to look around to know that the man in question was nowhere near; Sherlock had such presence that his absence had just as much force. ‘Because one of my friends got hurt,’ he answered. ‘I’m here as a friend.’

John regarded him coldly, clearly not intending to respond to that.

‘Will you tell me what happened?’

‘I believe I already did.’

‘Fine.’ This was not a satisfactory answer. He had questions, like where, when, who, how, and why, but he conceded that it might be the best he would get tonight. He settled on just one more: ‘Will you at least tell me how he is?’

John’s eyes flashed again and his lips pinched white. ‘They ambushed him. Forced him to eat dirt, stoned him, and threw him in the river. How do you think he is?’

Lestrade sighed and shook his head. ‘Bloody awful.’

‘Bloody awful’s right.’ John turned away. He set his hands on the back of a chair and let it support his weight. ‘He’s sleeping. It’s what he needs right now.’

‘Are you sure he shouldn’t be taken to hospital?’

John looked at him sharply over his shoulder. ‘Back into the public eye, you mean? And give Kitty Riley more ammunition? Sure. Let’s do that. Let’s give her more wool to spin a tale of lies. Let’s give her readers even more cause to hate him and yet laud the vigilantes of this city who would have him done in.’ He huffed, shook his head. ‘He’ll be all right. Here. Not out there.’

‘Is that what this was? Vigilantism?’

‘Something like that.’ John swung around and marched into the kitchen, barking the order, ‘Sit down, I’m making tea.’

For a moment, Lestrade stood flummoxed. The words were an invitation to stay, though the tone might have been used to tell him to get the hell out. He wavered between the door and the chair, then between the sofa and the chairs by the hearth, and finally, a little bashfully, he sat in Sherlock’s, half expecting John to shout at him to move. But he didn’t.

Several minutes passed in silence while Lestrade fought the urge to go check on Sherlock and instead just sat there while John banged about in the kitchen, dallying, watching the water boil, and avoiding him. Lestrade tried not to stare at him, but he hardly knew where else to look. He was concerned about John, as concerned as he’d ever been. It was clear that he was not taking very good care of himself. He was still underweight, barely touched by the sun (what little sun peeked through the winter clouds), and bearing an air of depression. Sherlock’s arrest certainly hadn’t helped any. Lestrade could see that he hadn’t shaved in the last few days, and the redness under his glassy eyes made him wonder if he’d been sleeping very well at all. Had he been taking regular meals? Bathing? And then, to deal with tonight and the aftermath of whatever had happened out there . . . How far could the man’s mental faculties be tested?

John didn’t ask how he took his but returned with two mugs of strong, black tea. Evidently, he wasn’t planning on sleeping tonight, and apparently, Lestrade wouldn’t be either.

‘You say you’re his friend.’ John repeated, almost a query. He sat himself carefully in his chair and sank back, hands curling around the mug.

And yours, Lestrade thought. But somehow, the words caught in his throat just then, and all he could do was nod, hold his steaming mug, and wait for it to cool.
‘Then what the hell are you doing working with his brother behind his back?’

If he had been in motion, he would have frozen. As it was, he was already perfectly still, and it was only his heart that stopped. ‘Come again?’

‘You heard me. Sherlock knows you and Mycroft are up to something. You forget who the idiot is in this scenario, in any scenario where he’s concerned. Who do you think you’re dealing with?’

Lestrade overlooked the insult. ‘What does he suspect?’

But John didn’t seem to hear the question, or, if he did, he ignored it. ‘It’s bad enough that Mycroft keeps him so far at bay, but you?’ John’s eyes stabbed him with their accusation. ‘I don’t think he was expecting that. That you would ally yourself with an enemy, that is.’

‘Enemy? You know that isn’t true. John. Mycroft is doing everything in his power to . . . protect him.’ The words fell pathetically from his lips because, when it came straight to it, he didn’t know what the hell Mycroft was doing. So he said the only thing that he did know for sure. ‘He cares about Sherlock.’

John huffed in derision and set aside his tea, barely sipped. His jaw was so tight Lestrade could see a vein pulsing in his forehead.

‘He does.’

‘Right. Is this the same brother who shrugged off seeing him in jail? Who calls him toxic. Who has had barely a thing to do with him since he came back? The same brother who didn’t lift a finger to save him the first time around or bother to carve out an hour in his busy government schedule to come to his bloody funeral?’

‘I don’t claim to understand either of the Holmes boys perfectly, let alone their relationship with each other. But I’ll never get it out of my head, seeing them come face to face for the first time after three long years. If you had seen it, John. They may have a difficult past, and they may never talk about it, but I’ve heard Mycroft say things, when he thought Sherlock was dead and . . . Well. I’ve never doubted that Mycroft has some tenderness of feeling.’

‘He’s got a funny way of showing it,’ John said, unpersuaded. ‘If it were my sister who suddenly came back to life, no matter our difficulties before . . .’ His voice raised in pitched, and he cut himself off, hands balling on the armrests. Lestrade felt his eyes begin to burn in sympathy, and they cast their gazes away from each other.

Lestrade took a slow sip of scalding tea, giving him a moment. Then he said, softly. ‘I’m sorry about Harry. I didn’t know until . . .’ Until Mary told me. ‘Too late,’ he finished.

And oh god, how he wanted to say he was sorry about Mary, too. It was for that that he wanted John to scream at him, to declare that it was his fault she died. He wanted to feel the fullness of the rage he knew was locked up inside John, let it pierce him, shatter him. But he feared it, too. He feared to be on the receiving end of that hatred, however warranted. And so, craven man that he was, he said nothing.

When he looked back, John’s face was half covered by his hand, his eyes shielded. For the first time since the hospital, he realised, he could see the scars on John’s wrists, the pink loops, and the white dashes of scars up to the elbows. John’s breaths came in deep and unnatural rhythms and he had the unmistakable pallor of exhaustion about him.

‘John, when’s the last time you slept?’ asked Lestrade carefully.

John’s hand came away from his face and he cleared his throat. ‘Kitty Riley’s source is Irene Adler,’ he said. His head hung wearily to the side, and his eyes were locked on the rug at his feet.

The midnight hour seemed to slow down. Lestrade stared, dumbfounded. He repeated John’s words over in his mind, again and again, as though waiting for a different translation. None slid into place. ‘What did you say?’

‘Has to be. It has to be her.’

‘Why?’ Lestrade leant forward anxiously. ‘Did Sherlock say? How does he know?’

‘I know. You should know it, too. You read the article, I assume.’

‘Kitty’s latest? Yes, I read it . . .’

‘Molly.’

Lestrade blanched. ‘What about Molly?’

‘Kitty Riley wrote that it was Molly who helped Sherlock fake his death.’

‘Yes . . .’ He wasn’t following John’s train of thought.

‘That was supposed to be kept a secret. Only you, me, Sherlock, and Molly knew it, right? So how did Kitty Riley know?’

Lestrade’s heart was like a racket in his ears. ‘She’s an investigative journalist,’ he said numbly.

‘And a poor one.’

‘I don’t argue that, but she’s been sniffing up the right trees for weeks now. She came to Molly, asking questions, and told her she knew that Molly had signed the coroner report verifying Sherlock’s death. Coroner reports are not sealed; they’re of public record. It can be tricky getting access, but . . . but she must have done. She must have inferred the truth.’
'When was this? When did she speak to Molly?'

'Early January.'

'If she figured out that Molly was Sherlock’s saviour a month ago, then why did she wait so long to print it?'

'I don’t know.'

'Unless someone told her to wait.'

Lestrade shook his head, not following. ‘What are you driving at?’

'Think about it, Lestrade.’ In that moment, Lestrade thought he heard Sherlock’s voice instead, but the moment passed and it was John again. 'If Kitty Riley had it all figured out in January, she would have printed it. She has no restraint. But weeks go by, and nothing. Then suddenly, someone—Irene Adler—breaks into Molly’s flat to leave messages, not for her, but for Sherlock, including a note with a hidden message implicating an understanding of an important history between Sherlock and Molly. She knows what Molly did for him. Overlooked back then, Molly’s now being shepherded into the ring of Sherlock’s friends, and so the threat against her had to be made clear, as it was for you, me, and Mrs Hudson. It was Adler’s way of saying to Sherlock, “I’m in this one, too.” And then, not two days later, the story comes out. But it had been in the works all along. Kitty’d been holding it back. Adler’s not only her source of information: she’s her puppet master.’ John sighed and licked his lips, parched, perhaps. ‘That’s my theory, anyway.’

It was then that Lestrade looked around the flat and finally noticed the strewn newspapers, the unfolded maps, the notecards tacked to the wall above the sofa, the empty mugs of tea and coffee littering the tables. Sherlock Holmes had been in police custody for nearly three full days, and John Watson had been busy.

'Somehow, this is all part of the sick, twisted game she’s playing’ John continued. ‘She’s using her, whether Kitty knows it or not. Playing to her vanity, feeding her love for drama, flattering her ego. And Kitty’s libel is doing exactly what Irene wants it to do: turn the city against Sherlock. Tonight, it almost killed him. And the police aren’t doing a damn thing about her.’

'We confiscated Ms Riley’s property,’ said Lestrade. ‘Her personal computer, Blackberry, everything. We found evidence of a long correspondence with a ghost account, a stack of deleted emails, of which we could recover only a handful. But we couldn’t trace it back to an originating IP address. They’re using unsurpassable firewalls, complicated blocking software, stuff my guys have never seen before. They’ve been calling the technology military. Look, what we found wasn’t enough to arrest her, and her wide-arse lawyers saw to it that we didn’t interrogate her further. But if this is true, if we can use this to prove that she’s been consulting with Adler and Moran—!’

‘Just Adler. Someone your lot doesn’t actually believe exists.’

‘There’s evidence now, John. We got DNA off the lipstick on the glasses.’

'Did you match it?'

He sighed. ‘No.’

‘That’s because DNA tests are only as good as the records you keep,’ he said. Then, with a few more drops of bitterness in his tone: ‘And Adler knows how to play the records keepers. There will be nothing linking her to her past. You don’t have anything. Not really.’

‘Every scrap of truth is important. It will help.’

John’s silence on that point indicated his doubt. Instead, he said, pushing himself to his feet, ‘I’ll tell him you were here.’ Then he wandered over to his wall of cards, staring at his work.

‘But . . .’ There was nothing for it. This was a dismissal, and he would go. ‘He really is okay?’

‘He will be.’

‘I’m going to report this, John. You know I have to. I need to find out why he was released without my knowing, and at such an hour. Besides. The people who attacked him—they shouldn’t get away with it.’

‘Can you do it without making it public?’ John asked without turning back to face him.

‘Yes. I can. Of course, I can.’

‘Thank you. You’re . . .’ From behind, Lestrade saw his head bow a little, a slow nod. ‘You’re one of the good ones, Greg. And Sherlock—he’s known that a long time.’

Lestrade smiled sadly, but facing away, John didn’t see. ‘He is rather drawn to the sort,’ he said.

John gave no indication that he heard this. ‘You need to get back to Molly,’ he said tiredly. ‘You shouldn’t have left her alone.’ With his back turned, Lestrade couldn’t see his expression, but he felt the heaviness of his words. ‘Never leave her alone, Greg. Not for a minute.’

Lestrade stood, setting his tea, barely sipped, on the table. Slowly, he buttoned his coat and made his way to the door, all the while trying to think of something more to say, something worth saying. As if words could make any of this right. Already on the cusp of overstaying his tenuous welcome, he knew that one more word might shatter it completely. So he left, feeling like a blade hung precariously above them all. He would return to Molly, his beautiful Molly, a wrecked but resolved man, determined to let not another hour pass without confessing himself to her. He would lay out all his faults and weaknesses, his love and his need for her, not yet knowing what strength
he would find in her arms. He would touch her at last, a kiss that would be more than a kiss, and she, warm and trusting, would open herself to be touched. They would come together, fall together, one filling and fulfilling the other, soft and fierce and wonderful, promising and accepting, until their consecration resolved itself in dreamless sleep, bodies still touching, hands still joined, untroubled till morning.

As Lestrade exited the flat and started down the stairs, he cast one more look behind him and saw that John Watson, the stalwart and steadfast soldier, was crying.

***

The first thing he noticed was the cold—like a cave. Not bitter, but ever-present, unchanging cold that sank slowly past skin, tissue, bone, until it hardened the marrow into an icicle, ready to shatter.

He walked in circles, downward spiralling from black into a soft, grey light. In his hand he held a length of leather, a strap or a cord, which he gripped with spidery fingers. His thumbs rubbed it, had been rubbing it for hours already, days, years, and the leather had softened with the imprint of a thumb. But it was strong. As he descended, he tested it, jerking the length of the leather hard and feeling it snap taut, unbreakable.

Then, into the stretching corridor with its white tiled floor and peeling white walls. He couldn’t see the end to this bright tunnel, didn’t even know if there was an end, but he kept on, unhurried and unconcerned, his black shoes clicking with each step, until he saw a figure standing in the distance. As he drew nearer, he recognised Mycroft’s tailored suit and mirror-shined shoes, and nearer still, the thinning hair and prominent nose. At his approach, Mycroft turned and extended a hand. That’ll do, he said, and Sherlock placed the length of leather in his hand.

It was then, only then, that Sherlock saw that the strap was long; he had been dragging it behind him as he came. And attached to the end of it was John, who had been following after him all along.

Mycroft tugged the lead, continuing on where Sherlock stopped, and John was compelled to part from him and follow.

Paralysed with horror, Sherlock could do nothing but watch as his friend moved away from him, an unresisting slave. His ankles were shackled, his hands bound with wire, and he was naked but for the coating of blood dripping from the IOUs carved into his back, the ones Sherlock himself had put there. He had no memory of it, no clear recollection of placing the knife, but he was sure it had been him, he was sure.

Mycroft pulled John further down the bright hall, and when Sherlock made to follow, he found his shoes stuck to the tiles. He pulled his legs, twisted his body, but his feet wouldn’t budge. Panic rose in his throat like bile. He bent over to reach his laces, yanking the ends, fingernails digging into and tugging the knots, but every time he loosened their hold, of their own accord, they tightened again. Looking up, he saw that Mycroft was handing the leather lead over to a group of ten men—mere shadows, from this distance—and they surrounded John, obscuring him from view.

He shouted behind closed teeth, gave another jerk of the laces, and finally stepped out of the shoes. He stumbled forward, found his footing, and hurried after them, slipping sometimes on the slick tiles. Mycroft! he shouted in rage, then in feat, John!

But the faster he ran, the longer the corridor stretched. He couldn’t reach the far-off shadows; he couldn’t break up their dark ring. Mycroft stood by, watchful but unconcerned, his black shoes clicking with each step, until he saw a figure standing in the distance. As he drew nearer, he recognised Mycroft’s tailored suit and mirror-shined shoes, and nearer still, the thinning hair and prominent nose. At his approach, Mycroft turned and extended a hand. That’ll do, he said, and Sherlock placed the length of leather in his hand.

A body suddenly arose before him, conjured as though from nothingness, blocking his way. He tried to halt himself, but his socks slipped out from under him, and he fell backward, landing on hands and elbows. He tried to scramble backwards but could find no purchase on the slick tiles. The man advanced on him, and Sherlock saw—it was him. Moriarty. Dark eyes alight with glee, mouth twisted in a perversion of a smile. He said nothing, not a word, but lifted his hand and snapped a finger.

From far away within that dark ring, Sherlock heard a scream. Fuelled with rage, he rose to his feet, but Moriarty seized him, wrapped two hands around the back of his neck, and pulled. With terrible force, their two heads collided.

***

Sherlock flung himself out of bed, hitting the ground with a slap. Pain flashed throughout his body, in limbs and joints and muscles, but it was unimportant, inconsequential. Even when he found his feet and felt a sharp pain splitting the skin at his heels, he still rushed out of the room, down the hallway, through the kitchen, and—

‘Sherlock!’ John, having heard his fall, was on his feet at the desk by the boarded windows, laptop aglow.

He was panting, he realised, sweating, and clutching his side, which was aflame with pain. He couldn’t remember why. His head swam, and for a moment, he thought he was about to fall over, and he reached for the edge of the sliding glass door they never closed. But he had to prop himself up for only a second before John was at his side to act as a crutch. Limping in unison, John pulled him into the sitting room and set him on the sofa.

‘Jesus, Sherlock,’ he said. He touched Sherlock’s face with the backs of his fingers, but Sherlock felt only the light graze of physical contact. He stretched his mouth and felt the dull pull of swollen skin around his lips and cheeks. Gradually, he became aware of the aching bruises, first in his face, then everywhere else. And he meant everywhere. Oh god, it was bad, wasn’t it? ‘You’re overheated,’ said John. ‘Sit there, cool down. I’m getting you something to drink.’
John disappeared to the kitchen, and Sherlock rubbed the daze from his eyes, wincing when he accidentally pressed raw, throbbing skin. John was right: he did feel overly warm, like he’d been standing under a hot sun wearing his winter coat. As he slowly came to full alertness, the reality of what had happened to him sharpened in his memory, and though the dream was slowly draining away, the dregs of it stuck in the forefront of his mind. He’d handed John over. God, he’d actually delivered John into the hands of killers. *A dream,* he chided himself as he scratched, roughly and unrelentingly, at the back of his hand. *Just a dream.*

His eyes swept the room, a little blearily at first, but his head was clearing rapidly. He wondered vaguely how long he’d been sleeping as his brain registered stacks of newspapers and at least a dozen cups and mugs scattered throughout the room. He’d been in too grave a state to notice before. A notebook lay open on the coffee table, covered up and down the recto and verso sides of the page, and maybe other pages as well, in John’s untidy handwriting, but at the angle he sat he couldn’t read it. But when he reached for it to get a better look, his side flared up again. ‘Agh!’ he said, leaning back gingerly into the sofa.

‘Fractured rib,’ John reminded him, coming back into the room with a glass of water. Sherlock noticed it was a glass from the back of the cupboard, seldom used except for when they had nearly run out of clean ones. He drank it all down at once, earning him a satisfied nod from his doctor.

‘But not a dangerous one. Let me hear you cough.’

He coughed.

‘You’ll want to lie on that side for a while,’ John said. ‘You’ll breathe better.’

Then he reached for the medical kit that had been scooted under the coffee table, and Sherlock submitted to another examination, this one conducted in less haste. John worked silently, checking his temperature (normal), his pupils (contracting), his heart rate (slightly elevated), and his blood pressure (acceptable). Then he changed the bandaging on the worse of the wounds and treated the others. He paused when he noticed the back of Sherlock’s red-raw hand.

‘You want to talk about this?’ he asked under his breath, almost as though speaking to himself. Sherlock tried to pull away, but John’s grip tightened. He rotated the hand, now inspecting the red ring looping his wrist where the cuffs had worn away the skin. When he seized the other, he saw the same. ‘Damn them all to hell,’ he seethed.

‘You’ve been busy,’ said Sherlock by way of distraction.

‘You’ve gone.’ John eyed him quickly, then began applying soothing cream to his wrists. The tube was squeezed nearly to the tip. They would need to restock some of those items soon.

‘And you’ve not been sleeping,’ he next observed while he let John work. John’s eyes were bloodshot and his visage somnolent, but that wasn’t all. He smelt strongly of coffee, there was a certain weary delay in all of his motions (now that he was no longer fuelled by adrenalin), and Sherlock was certain that he’d been wearing that very shirt the last time he had seen him. There was a musky scent of three-day unwashed clothing about him, poorly masked by less successful attempts at bathing and layers of deodorant.

‘Too much to think about,’ John said a little evasively. ‘I thought you would know how that is.’ Finishing his ministrations for the second time that night, he capped the tube and snapped the kit shut. ‘You should go back to bed. You need rest. After what you’ve been through—’

‘Are you all right?’

‘Sherlock, I’m fine. You’re the one who’s in a right state.’ He stood, indicating that Sherlock should follow. ‘Come on, then, don’t make me drag you.’

‘I’ve been locked away for— Wait, what day is it?’

‘It’s Tuesday. It’s also gone three in the morning.’

‘Right. Well, I’ve been gone since Saturday, then, haven’t I, and clearly you’ve been’—he fluttered a hand at the room—‘up to things. You know I can’t sleep when I’m in a curious mood.’

‘I’ll tell you all about it once you’ve had a proper sleep,’ said John. Then he let out a long breath, looking somewhat discouraged. ‘I’m probably wrong anyway.’

‘About what?’

‘I don’t— It’s just— The thing is, I thought I was onto something before you turned up tonight, but . . . You’re right, I’ve not been sleeping. I’m sure it’s nothing.’

‘John, what?’

‘I think . . . I thought . . . that, maybe I’d, you know, cracked it.’

‘It?’

‘The riddle. The one left on Jack and Jill.’

‘The nursery rhyme . . . ?’

‘Not a nursery rhyme, Sherlock. A riddle. I mean, they’ve all been riddles, haven’t they? Puzzles to be solved. But this one . . . It’s like we’ve been holding the map all along, and now they’ve given us a compass.’

‘Now you’re talking in riddles.’
John looked at him from the corner of his eye, smiling very softly.

'Tell me.'

'It can wait—'

'Tell me. Please.'

'You’re incorrigible.' John sighed, but his annoyance was minimal, and Sherlock knew he was relenting as he dragged a chair nearer to face him and sat. 'Do you know the name Alice Liddell?'

Sherlock’s nose and the skin between his eyes wrinkled in thought, waiting for the name to spark a memory, open a box, but nothing came up in the search. 'Celebrity? Royalty? You know I’ve been gone for three years, and I hardly concerned myself before with such—'

'Neither.'

'Not a former client . . . ?'

'No. Alice Pleasance Liddell was the inspiration for Lewis Carroll’s children’s story: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.'

'All right . . .'

'You know that one, surely.'

'The preposterous and highly illogical tale of a little girl who falls down a rabbit hole? Yes, I’m afraid I do know it. Never much cared for it.'

'Well, that doesn’t matter, because Alice is the key you were looking for.'

Sherlock nodded eagerly to prompt John to explain more quickly, but his head hurt with the motion, so he stopped.

'Carroll denied that his stories were based on Alice Liddell, despite the books’ eponymous heroine sharing her name. But there were hints. The second book, Through the Looking-Glass, concludes with a poem. It’s called “Life Is But a Dream”, and its final stanza—he stretched an arm to the coffee table and rifled through some of his notes, extracting a single page from under an empty mug and passing it to Sherlock—‘goes like this.’

Sherlock’s eyes broke away from John’s intense stare and fell to the page. The whole poem had been written out by hand, and the final stanza circled. There, he read:

\[
\text{Ever drifting down the stream—}
\text{Linger in the golden gleam—}
\text{Life, what is it but a dream?}
\]

'So not Row Your Boat,' Sherlock murmured to himself.

'Not Row Your Boat,' John agreed. 'It’s more complicated than that. Carroll’s whole poem questions what is real, and what is just a dream. It suggests that the two can’t be distinguished from each other. Not really. The people we’ve known appear in our dreams; and the characters of our dreams haunt us when we’re awake. Happiness? Waking or sleeping, it’s just an illusion. Merrily, we row downstream, as it were.'

Sherlock frowned and glared at the poem. 'I never liked literary analysis.'

'Yeah, but . . . take a closer look. The poem itself. It’s an acrostic.' Mercifully, Sherlock was spared asking what that was, because John was pushing ahead of his own accord. His face was tight and focused and his eyes bright. Whatever energy that was left to him after three days of little and poor sleep was being exhausted, now, in this revelation. 'The first letter of every line, do you see it?' He gestured eagerly at the page. 'Read vertically, top to bottom. Do you see?'

Sherlock saw: The first letters of the twenty-one lines spelled out the name Alice Pleasance Liddell.

'That’s why people believe Carroll was really writing about Alice Liddell. Because her name was hidden in the poem, the last thing written at the end of all her adventures.'

'I see that. But John. What does this have to do with Jack and Jill?' A tinge of colour rose in John’s cheeks. 'I thought, maybe, they were playing the same game with us. You know. That there might be a message hidden in all the rhymes. Like in the acrostic.'

Now Sherlock’s gaze returned to the notebook, blackened with John’s repeated copying of the lines from nursery rhymes they had encountered. The cradle will fall was stacked atop A pocket full of posies and London Bridge is falling down, with TAL circled, then scratched out. The rhymes in their entirety were written out, too, the first letters ordered then scrambled then re-scrambled in dozens upon dozens of attempts to force reason into the madness. But all that had come of it was more madness: nonsense words slashed through with black ink, again, and again, and again.

Then John said, 'But it was simpler than that. A lot simpler. We just . . . didn’t see it.'

Sherlock lifted his head and found John staring at the wall above him. 'Look,' he said. Carefully turning his neck, Sherlock looked and saw that John had made a collage of notecards over the fleur de lys trellis pattern on the wall. He shifted to get a better look, and with John’s help, hands grasping forearms, they rose together. He stood now, despite his aching bones, shoulder to shoulder with John, the better to examine his work. Stacked top to bottom in a queue down the centre of the collage were the names of the five victims of the Slash Man, and branching
off of each, details of where, when, and how they died, and branching even further off, biographical information: where they had once lived, past professions, and other identifying characteristics, both unique and general. So this is how John’s mind organised itself: like a tree, or a web, one idea linking systematically to the next, which one must trace from a point of origin. Not like his. His was more like . . . rain.

‘It’s all of them together. Look at their names. The first letters of their names.’

And then he saw it: Sam, Holden, Ewan, Ralston, Lynette. He put out his hand and dragged it down through the air, using two fingers as a guide as he pointed to each letter: S H E R L

‘It’s your name, Sherlock. With his victims, he’s spelling out your name.’

Its simplicity astounded him. These hapless human targets, cherry-picked out of hundreds of poor homeless sods, based solely on their first initials? And yet, an impossible pattern to see in the first victim, the first two victims, maybe even three. But that couldn’t be right. It couldn’t! There must have been some greater suggestion, something he should have been able to see from the start.

Sherlock’s eyes skittered slightly to the right, to the victims’ surnames. And as the letters lifted off the flat surface and more carefully aligned with one another in their proper order, he said, in a voice soft with astonishment, ‘Not just my name. Yours, too.’

‘What?’ said John, startled.

‘Look.’ His arm shifted, and he pointed to the surnames, and John leant forward on his toes to see what he had missed.

‘But—’ His breath caught, because now he saw it too. Jefferies, O’Harris, Nichols, Winters, and Avery, their names working together, were beginning to spell out his own: J O’H N W A

‘God,’ he said, paling.

‘This is brilliant.’

‘Sherlock!’

‘No, don’t you see, John? This is precisely what I’ve been looking for! There had to be a pattern, a hidden message, I knew there had to be, and you’ve discovered it!’

‘These people unwittingly died in your name, and your name— No, our names, are in their deaths! This threat, the one that’s been there all along, it’s just a game to them.’

‘Yes, and now we can play the game properly, can’t we? We now know the rules. We know the next piece of the puzzle before it is given to us! Someone with the initials OT. Oh ho, this is brilliant!’

‘Not brilliant!’ shouted John, suddenly furious. ‘Sherlock, five people had to die for us to see it!’

‘I know, but—’

‘And this’—he stabbed a finger at the wall—’says there are three more. Three more people out there, already queued up, just waiting for their turn. Only, there are four more letters to go in my name.’

‘Not if he uses the O’Harris trick again.’

‘There you go again, calling it a trick, like this is some sort of clever magic show.’

‘That’s not how I see it. But don’t you see, John? With what we know now, we can stop these crimes! We can save those people.’

And what about the others? Those who already died?

Sherlock threw up his hands. ‘They’re dead! I can’t save the dead, John. I can catch the killer and make him pay, but that is all.’ He ran a hand through his hair, forgetting about the gashes, the sores, and as the pain flared up, so did his temper. ‘The past is the past. Nothing can be done to change it, nothing. Its only purpose anymore is to provide evidence. I use that evidence in moving forward, don’t you see? It all I can do. Beyond that, what does it matter now? It happened. It’s done.’

‘What does it matter?’ John was aghast. ‘It ruined my life! I had a good life, Sherlock. I was happy.’

Sherlock turned to face him, realising too late that they weren’t really talking about Sam Jefferies or Ewan Nichols anymore. This was about more than that. John was trembling,—in anger, from exhaustion, about to split: he had seen it before.

‘John,’ he said steadily, instantly contrite but wanting him to understand, ‘if I could give you that life back, if I could make it so she had never died, I would. Don’t you think I would? I would die a thousand times over if it had even the slightest chance of restoring to you that good life and make you happy again.’

John looked flabbergasted, eyes wide and glistening with shock. His lips moved, but no sound came out. Then, a shadow fell as he understood Sherlock’s words, but when he spoke, it was to prove only that Sherlock hadn’t understood his. ‘I was happy,’ he clarified, ‘with you. In that life. Before you fell. If you hadn’t . . .’

He staggered backward, creating space between them, and if he hadn’t grabbed the chair by the table he might have fallen down, but Sherlock knew better than to try to hold him up this time. John sat heavily. Putting a hand to his face, he turned his head away as if he could keep Sherlock from seeing him.
'Don’t look at me like that,’ he said. ‘Like you don’t understand.’

‘John . . .’

‘Like you don’t believe I was your friend, the way you were mine. It’s insulting. If I had been given the choice, I would have taken that bullet for you.’

Sherlock winced. In a small voice, he said, ‘Don’t say things like that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I can’t bear the thought . . .’

‘What makes you think I could bear the sight?’

Sherlock bowed his head, closed his eyes. John kept talking.

‘I didn’t, you know. Bear it, I mean. I watched you die. I watched you throw yourself off that roof with no explanation at all but for the claim you were a fake, which I knew wasn’t true. I knew it wasn’t true. Even when you doubted me—and I know you did—I never for a second believed those lies.’ Sherlock’s head came back up, his eyes troubled. ‘But suddenly, you were dead. And I couldn’t take it. I lost everything, after that. If you’d been there,’ John continued, his voice now quavering, ‘I wouldn’t have felt so lost when Harry died. I wouldn’t have stood alone at Mike’s funeral. If you had only been there . . . I still would have met Mary. But maybe I was never meant to have her. She came looking for you, you know. Not me.’

‘It wouldn’t have made any dif—’

‘You would have loved her, Sherlock. Even you.’

‘Because you did,’ said Sherlock. ‘It would have been reason enough.’

‘Oh God.’ John moaned into his hands, doubling over in the chair. ‘If only she’d been spared knowing me. I would go back and drive her away, if I could. I would turn her away the moment she said she needed a detective, yell at her, offend her, whatever it took. I should never have pretended to be something I wasn’t.’

‘You didn’t.’ Sherlock stepped closer, letting John hear his weight move across the floorboards, and watched for a recoil, but John made none. ‘You saw someone in need, and did all you could to help. That’s who you are. That’s who she fell in love with.’

Ignoring the bone-deep ache of battered muscles and broken skin, he crouched down in front of where John sat so that he could look up into his hanging face. John dropped a hand and returned the gaze, his own wet and wearisome. His emotions were run ragged—in the space of only a few short minutes, he had gone from dispassionately tending to Sherlock’s own bodily afflictions to raging against him and then ultimately to profoundest sorrow. Sherlock’s hand twitched, about to rest on John’s knee, or touch his arm, or pull him into an embrace, but he refrained: John had a look of near panic about him, and touch of any sort had set him off before. Sherlock wouldn’t risk it. Instead, he needed to get John to agree to doing what was best for his mind and body in that moment.

‘You’re exhausted,’ he said. ‘You need to lie down. Sleep.’

John’s eyes flicked over to the sofa. ‘I don’t want—’

‘In a proper bed. Tonight, at least.’

Now John’s eyes found the door to the landing, beyond which lay the stairs to his room. His eyes filled with dread and he began to shake his head, but Sherlock finished, ‘Take mine. For tonight. Besides, I’m awake now. I’m going to stay here and revise your work. We can compare notes in the morning.’

Rather than wait for a response—a refusal or a debate—he arose and indicated that John should follow. To his relief, he did. He walked forward with a shuffle, breathing haltingly through his nose, almost gasping. In the hallway, Sherlock stood aside to let John pass into his darkened bedroom and crawl into his bed to settle beneath the covers. He became still almost instantly, but Sherlock watched a few moments longer, just to make sure. He left the door open and the hall light on. As the night wore on and shifted to day, he would check on him, every hour or two, but John, who would sleep for twelve straight hours, wouldn’t move an inch.

Sherlock returned to the sitting room. His plan to keep working quickly evaporated. Tiredness overcame him, too. So he turned down the lamps and stretched himself out on the sofa, gingerly turning onto his side, per doctor’s orders, where he felt the pressure in his fractured rib but also relief in his breathing. He hoped for dreamless sleep, or, at the very least, sleep without the reminder of how he had betrayed his best friend, or the fear that someday he would do it again.
TO: john.h.watson@ukmail.co.uk
FROM: Samantha_Hillock@canada-11.com
DATE: 17/02/2015
SUBJECT: Re: Please respond

Dear John,

Forgive me for not answering your emails before now. I just couldn’t. I could barely bring myself to open them. I have spent many days now agonising over how I could possibly respond. It hardly needs saying, but these past months have been exceedingly difficult for me and my family. I know you’ll understand. You lost her, too. And you must believe me when I say that I appreciate how dearly you say you loved her and miss her. I really do. I know we are both hurting, and we both think about her every day. But being constantly reminded of Mary’s death is only making things worse. So I’m going to ask you to please stop writing.

I cannot in good conscience send you the photographs you have asked for. Please don’t ask me anymore. They were hers, not yours. I know that sounds harsh, but you knew her for only fifteen months, which you must agree is not very long at all. I know she meant a lot to you, but in the end, you were not her family. We were. It wouldn’t feel right, giving you those photos. I don’t think it would be good for you either, to be truthful. I think it would be best if you just moved on and let us grieve in our own way.

What you went through was so horrible, it’s beyond words, and I’m so sorry for that. But I have to do what is best for those of us who loved her most, and right now, maintaining any sort of connection to you will only bring us more pain. I can’t bear it anymore. Every time I see a new message from you, I’m reminded of who she was with when she died, and I don’t mean to be cruel, I really don’t, especially because I know you suffered, too; but Mary always said she loved me for my honesty, so I have to be honest now. I can’t help but feel that she got involved with the wrong person. If these men were after you, then maybe there was nothing you could have done. But it didn’t have to happen to her.

It hurts my family even more to hear that you are still associated with Sherlock Holmes. After what he did to Mary, it is appalling to me, not only that you would maintain an amicable relationship with the man, but worse, that you, according to the papers, would choose to live with him. As long as this continues to be the case, I cannot imagine how our association can ever be repaired. At this time, we do not desire it. All the same, we would urge you to sever your ties with Mr Holmes, for Mary’s sake. If you truly wished to honour the memory of my sister, you would not be shackled up with the one man who brought this upon her.

My only comfort is in my hope that my little sister is with God now, and that she is at peace. But again, I’ll be honest. Most days, that is of little comfort at all.

On behalf of my family, we wish you well, John. We hope you find healing. May the Good Lord grant us both a measure of peace.

Sincerely,
Samantha

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Sgt Donovan threw open the door to the lab where Molly sat alone on the opposite side of the room running PCR analyses sans enthusiasm. Without preamble, she came striding down the aisle between tables, her dark brown spirals flouncing on her shoulders. She looked like a cat about to pounce, and, unprepared, Molly stiffened and her eyes grew wide.

‘Hiya,’ said Donovan, suddenly smiling. Her eyebrows rose and her head cocked to one side.

‘Busy?’

Molly stared at her like a guppy.

‘I’m taking you to lunch.’ Then, without further explanation, she linked arms to pull Molly to her feet, forcing her to abandon her work, and frogmarched her out the door.

Lunch turned out to mean a tray from the cafeteria, and Molly, who wasn’t remotely hungry at only half ten in the morning, grabbed a cinnamon-and-raisin bagel with cream cheese and—just to give the appearance of a proper meal—an apple. She was embarrassed, then, to see the police sergeant waiting for her at the table with nothing but a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

What she was doing there Molly had yet to fathom. She had nothing against Sally Donovan, on a personal level, but she couldn’t quite say that she liked her either. Their interactions were few, and limited to strictly professional, often terse exchanges in the morgue. Molly knew Donovan to be a hard woman, stiff in manner, pithy in speech, and generally not very personable. Intimidating was the word that came to mind. Greg often used inflexible. Still, Greg Lestrade admired Sally Donovan for reasons that had nothing to do with her personality and had even called her the one person still working at the Yard who merited his full respect.

Something was slightly off about her today, though. Donovan was not the sort to flounce. She was barely the sort to say hiya. And she certainly was not a woman who went on lunch dates with her girlfriends.

Molly wondered if she even had any girlfriends.
'I think, Molly,' said Donovan familiarly, grinning unnaturally at her from across the table, ‘we ought to have a little chat about your boyfriend.'

Molly eeped a little in her throat. Her eyes went wide as saucers and she felt the heat rise in her cheeks, but a paw. Granted . . . had Greg said something to Donovan? A boast? A complaint? The details? Oh god! He didn’t seem the sort! She recalled, in vivid detail, in whose bed she had spent the night, and how. And that morning had been so lovely, waking up in his arms, not because of any alarm or a cat walking over her face but because his fingertips were lightly stroking her bare shoulder. She had kept perfectly still, not wishing to break the spell of utter contentment she could not recall ever having woken with before. When at last she did move, she rose up to kiss him, a kiss so warm and welcomed and natural she wondered why she had ever been so shy to think he might discourage her. She could still see him smiling at her, their two heads sharing one pillow as they faced one another. It cracked his face as though he hadn’t smiled in months. Not truly, anyway. It was a smile free of doubt and full of joy, as it was for her. She touched his face, kissed him again—she simply couldn’t stop herself. He made no protest.

And he’d been a perfect gentleman, letting her shower first while he made them a breakfast of eggs, tomatoes, and bacon. He hadn’t been an overscored cad or anything of the sort, even though it had been, by his own admission, something of a long time since he had . . . well, not since Angela, he said. (Molly had shyly responded by alluding to her own limited, erm, experience.) So maybe he couldn’t stop himself from bragging a little, let the fact of it slip into a morning debriefing or while standing around the water cooler. He was a man, after all. Maybe he just couldn’t help himself.

Molly wanted to melt into a puddle, or drown herself in her coffee. Her face was surely as bright as her apple. But why would any of this be of any concern to Donovan?

Molly hung her head a little, picking a raisin from the bagel. ‘Why? Has he . . . said something?'

Donovan narrowed her eyes a little, her artificially open expression closing off somewhat. ‘Who?'

‘Greg.’

‘Gee— Oh god no, not Lestrade!’

‘But you said . . .’

‘I don’t care two figs about that. Sorry, let me try again. Let’s chat about ex-boyfriends, yeah? Here. I’ll start: complete wankers, am I right? The lot of them.’

‘I swear, there was never anything between Sherlock and me. That Kitty woman made it all up, twisted everything I said. I didn’t even want to talk to her—’

Donovan laughed shortly, humourlessly. ‘I’m not talking about Sherlock. I know you two never dated. No girl in her right mind would give that munter half a chance. But come on, Molly, let’s dish, you and me. Exes, bad dates, the lot. Did you know Anderson has a foot fetish? Revolting.’

Molly blinked, but relief flooded through her. She wanted to laugh, but she contained herself to a small twitch of the mouth. ‘You don’t do a lot of girl talk, do you?’

‘Never.’

‘Right. Then let’s skip the female bonding, and just ask what you’ve come here to ask.’

She was a little shocked by her own forthrightness, but Donovan looked nothing short of relieved. ‘Thank god,’ she murmured. She moved her Styrofoam cup aside and leant into the table on her elbows. ‘I need information on Jim Moriarty.’

Molly felt her appetite disappear entirely. Even that morning’s warm memories felt suddenly cool and illusory, like they hadn’t really happened. ‘I barely knew him,’ she said.

‘I’m not interested in anything intimate. I wouldn’t trust anything he told you anyway. If he had anything in common with Richard Brook, it was acting.’

‘Then what do you need?’

She was rather disinclined to be talking about Jim at all. She regarded the whole episode as one of shame: a mousy and often overlooked girl, eager for attention, affection, she had been so easily duped into believing the smooth flattery of a virtual stranger. But she’d been using him a little, too. She recognised but did not appreciate the irony, now, that they had each been using the other in an effort to get closer to one Sherlock Holmes (so humiliating! she thought), but her purposes had been far less nefarious. When he was done with her, he hadn’t given her a second thought. In hindsight, she knew that his experience. (So maybe he couldn’t stop himself from bragging a little, let the fact of it slip into a morning debriefing or while standing around the water cooler. He was a man, after all. Maybe he just couldn’t help himself.)

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Richard Brook was at that time. So I have to cast back further, to other actual sightings of Moriarty. Holmes and Watson claim to have encountered him in a swimming pool in Stratford, but there was no CCTV evidence for this, nothing that proves he was there. And Sherlock’s word isn’t worth much these days. But you. You dated him. You must have some kind of evidence that places him in London at that time.’

‘Like what?’

‘Dunno. Maybe receipts? Did he take you out to restaurants or the cinema? Maybe you have ticket stubs?’

‘From five years ago?’

Donovan shrugged. ‘Some women are sentimental like that.’

‘Well, I’m not. Not with him, at least. And no, he never took me out. We had a night in, watched telly. That was all.’

‘Did you ever get your photo taken together, perhaps?’

‘No. Honestly. Sgt Donovan, we went out on three dates, and they were hardly worthy of being called dates at all. He asked me out online for coffee, couldn’t even be arsed to come talk to me in person, and, knowing now, it was all about Sherlock, after all—’

‘Online?’

‘What?’

‘You said he asked you out online.’

‘Yes . . .’

‘Through email?’

‘No, in the’—she laughed shortly and rolled her eyes at her own foolishness at being so easily won over—‘comments of my old blog.’

Donovan pulled out a small notepad and pen, which she clicked open eagerly. ‘What’s the address?’

‘Of what?’

‘The blog!’

‘Oh! God, I haven’t touched that thing in ages. It’s simple, it’s Molly Hooper dot co dot UK.’

She scribbled it quickly. ‘The comments, they’re all time-stamped? The date and hour?’

‘I think so, yes.’

‘And you’ve not deleted anything?’

‘No.’

‘Cracking.’

And the lunch date was over.

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Donovan strode out of the hospital cafeteria eager to get to a computer. This might work out perfectly. She was getting superbly annoyed by the dead man who had left almost no trace of himself: IT had no record of ever having employed a Jim at that time, and none of the staff remembered seeing him; though she didn’t doubt the swimming pool incident had occurred, it had happened so long ago that any CCTV footage that might have captured his image was long gone; and all the other crimes of those few short days never once placed Moriarty at the scene. Molly was her only hope of verifying his presence in London to the Brooks and the Sussex police.

Her phone sounded in her pocket, and she answered it on the second ring.

‘Donovan,’ she said as she exited St Bart’s into the frigid London air. Snowflakes whipped through the air but didn’t land.

‘You need to compile a list,’ said the voice on the other end, ‘of all homeless men and women you can find with the initials OT.’

She stopped in her tracks, pulled the phone back, and checked the caller ID, not because she didn’t know who it was—she knew exactly who it was—but because she was slow to comprehend it. He’d never called her before. Never. The number was unfamiliar, but the voice was not.

‘Holmes?’

‘O as in orange, T as in tea. Should I text it?’

‘What the hell are you doing calling me?’

‘You have resources.’

‘I’m busy.’

‘Too busy to stop a murder?’
'Okay, first of all,' she snapped, 'you’re not on this case. Any case! Was that not made clear to you?'

'Start with missing persons archives,' he said, ignoring her objection, ‘and shelter registries. You might also think of putting the word out into the network, though I would caution against it. It wouldn’t do to let them know we’re onto them.’

‘I’m hanging up. I swear to god, Holmes, I’m hanging up right—’

‘The pattern has so far been consistent that the bodies are discovered on a Friday, so get me the list before the day is out so we can start looking for them. We have only a few days, and sometimes these people can be hard to track.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Dear God, are you even listening to me? The Slash Man will strike again, and he’ll go after some homeless creature with the initials OT. Do you plan to sit back and wait for that to happen?’

To vent her anger, she threw a hand into the air as if the falling snow were personally offending her, though he couldn’t see her physical manifestations of annoyance. ‘How do you know this?’ she demanded.

‘You’ll have to arrest both me and John if you intend for our investigation to stop, and even then you’d be unlikely to do it. You need intelligence; we have it.’

She didn’t miss the most certainly intended double meaning, and she riled, a dozen scathing retorts rising in her head and pushing their way to her tongue. But she quashed them with a quick snap of her teeth, saying instead, ‘Why are you telling me? Don’t you usually take your boasting to Lestrade?’

‘He’s testifying in an inquest right about now, so I understand. But I still needed an audience. Thought you’d do nicely.’

That’s right, she remembered now. And she was due to do the same next morning.

‘I’m not your errand girl.’

He ignored that, too. ‘I would also caution against spreading the word too widely at the Yard. Gregson may be lauding transparency, but let’s not forget the seating chart during our game of London Bridge.’

‘You mean for me to play subterfuge? Are you trying to get me sacked?’

‘Text me the names, if they are few. If not, drop the list off at the flat with any pertinent information that may help me find them.’

‘You’re not serious.’

‘Before day’s end, Sally. Spit spot.’

And he was gone. She grit her teeth and squeezed the phone hard, nostrils flaring in irritation, not just because he had called, not because he had ordered her about like a superior officer, but because she, Sally Josephine Donovan, against all her good judgement and despite her intense personal feeling, had every intention of complying. She wanted to scream.

A moment later, he texted:

Ring the bell if you want to be let in: •••

Memorise and delete this text.

SH

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‘Please state your name and rank for the record.’

Lestrade inclined toward the microphone on the table. ‘Gregory Lestrade, detective inspector.’

‘How long have you been with the Metropolitan Police, detective inspector?’

‘Twenty-three years.’

‘And for how many of those years were you acquainted with Mr Scott Anderson?’

‘Fifteen.’

‘Would you say you know him well?’

‘I would, yes.’

‘Professionally as well as personally?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what has been your opinion of him in that time?’

‘Professionally?’

‘Professionally.’
'I have found him to be competent, methodical, very textbook. Effective in his approach, if lacking innovation. Until recently, I have had little reason not to want him on my team.'

'And what little reasons might you have had?'

'Like I said, he was very by the book, as it were. Some crime scenes do not yield up their secrets when working on a checklist. And Anderson has little creativity beyond that checklist. But he knows the list well. His expertise in criminal forensics is hardly to be questioned. He would not have made Head of Forensics otherwise. But that’s not what this inquest is about, is it?'

'What is your opinion of him personally?'

'And what little reasons might you have had?'

'Shall I speak of my opinion now or before Saturday? Or before October?'

'Perhaps you can speak to its evolution.'

'When I first met him, I knew we would never be best mates, but I had nothing against him. Sure, he could get under my skin on a long, stressful night, but we all wore each other’s nerves raw one time or another. But it was fine. He did his job, I did mine, and we solved murders. Ours was a professional relationship more than anything. We never, say, went for a pint or chatted about our home lives. We got on well enough that way. In the beginning.'

'When did that change?'

Lestrade had no desire to recount their entire rocky history, as their difficulties really only began once they had become jointly acquainted with one Sherlock Holmes, who had pulled them into orbit and made them into satellites swinging around a planet with an incredible, inescapable gravitational pull. Sherlock’s grand entrance into their lives and work was really where their differences of opinion, to put it mildly, originated. But Lestrade had already determined that he would make this inquest as little about Sherlock as was possible. ‘Gradually, over the course of years,’ he said vaguely, ‘my patience for his sarcasm and pithy aspersions grew thinner and thinner.’ Now to pull it into the present. ‘Then, last October, he gave an unsanctioned interview to the press, an action that directly violated orders.’

'Whose orders?'

'Mine. Under the direction, or should I say, with the approval of, then-Chief Superintendent Pitts. I have the memo here. If I may?'

'Please.'

He read from the printed memorandum: ‘No unauthorised officers are permitted to speak to any member of the press regarding these crimes. Specifically, all officers and Yard personnel are prohibited from offering details of either fact or opinion regarding the abduction of John Watson, the murder of Mary Morstan, the hunt for Sebastian Moran, or the return of Sherlock Holmes. The only officer authorised to represent this institution is Sergeant Sally Donovan. Any violation of this edict will result in a professional demerit.’

He looked up from the page. ‘Anderson did give interview, regarding his opinion on Holmes’ involvement in the whole affair, fully aware that doing so was in violation of the edict. I believe it was the beginning of his collusion with Kitty Riley.’

‘How was his reprimand handled?’

‘In a timely fashion. I interrogated him on the matter the very day the paper came out and submitted the paperwork to add the violation to his permanent record.’

‘Did he offer any defence?’

‘Only ignorance. I don’t know what I was thinking, were his words, as I recall. He said he was upset and flustered. God knows he’s never had a favourable opinion of Holmes. But worse, he made unfounded conjectures about the extent of Holmes’ involvement.’

‘Do you have any further evidence, besides this interview, that Anderson has been working with Kitty Riley of The Sun?’

He knew that the board was currently conducting its own investigation into what might turn up on Anderson’s mobile or computer, and they had not been forthcoming with their findings. ‘No hard evidence,’ he admitted. ‘Just suspicious behaviour that should not be lightly dismissed.’

He began to detail it: the verbal attacks on John Watson stood at the forefront, of course, as signals that he had interest in upsetting Sherlock when direct digs at Sherlock’s own character and past had not provoked a response. But there was also the shiftiness in his behaviour, the way he turned up late to meetings and left before anyone could stop him, rather than hang around to chat, as he had always done before; the way his mobile sounded, and he distanced himself to check the screen, warily, before answering, and visibly relaxing when the caller proved to be innocuous; the way he never joined in on conversations about Kitty Riley’s articles but participated enthusiastically when any other paper was mentioned; the way he glared at Lestrade from across a room but never approached of his own volition.

‘These are all very subtle markers, detective inspector.’

‘I’ve an entire career in reading people at a glance. It’s even easier to note when a well-known colleague begins to act funny.’

‘Do you have a personal vendetta against Mr Anderson?’

‘A vendetta?’ He grinned wryly. ‘No. I don’t need one.’

‘Why is that?’
“Simple. I trust that you will not find him an innocent man. I trust that this board will see justice done.”

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On her way to Southwater in Sussex, Donovan, turning the phone call over and over again in her mind like a pig on a spit, was analysing every facet of tone and vocabulary when she received another, this one from Officer Dryers.

‘Are you there yet?’

‘Nearly. What have you got?’

‘Ms Hooper mentions watching Glee with Moriarty on March 29, right?’

‘Right.’

‘Well, that same night, Richard Brook appeared in a small production of Adventures in Wonderland at the Watermill Theatre in Berkshire. I found the billing, which lists him in the role of the White Rabbit. It ran for three weeks.’

‘What were the dates?’

‘Uh, let’s see . . . March 19th through April 4th. I rang the director, but she wasn’t very forthcoming on the phone. Probably didn’t trust I was who I said I was. But the Mad Hatter would hardly shut up—Henry Wainwright’s his name—and he confirmed that the whole cast was there for every showing, all three weeks.’

‘Excellent. And did you verify that Glee aired on the 29th?’

‘Yes, and it did.’

‘Brilliant. That may be enough. If not for the Brooks, then at least for the Sussex Police. But I’ll talk to the family first, try to get them on our side. They’re our biggest hurdle.’

‘Anything else you need from me?’

She was on the cusp of saying no, but her tongue froze to the roof of her mouth. Her jaw hung open and her mouth began to dry.

‘Donovan? I lose you?’

‘Actually,’ she said slowly, ‘there’s one more thing.’

‘Yeah?’

She grimaced. ‘I need you to look for any homeless men with the initials OT. Or women.’

‘OT?’

‘O as in orange, T as in’—her fingernails sank into the steering wheel like talons—‘tea. Anonymous tip.’

There was a pause, as though waiting for further instruction or explanation, but she wasn’t giving one. ‘Sure, I’ll get right on that.’

‘Great. And Dryers.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Let’s . . . not mention it, all right? For now.’

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Mrs JoAnna Brook was a severe woman steeped in a tradition of cool British courtesy. Her mouth pinched tight when Donovan flashed her credentials, but she invited her inside an overly warm house all the same. Nevertheless, she refused to have a proper chat until tea was set. She led Donovan through the front room and to the parlour and left her with instructions to make herself comfortable. Then she disappeared to the kitchen.

The air was so warm it was almost suffocating. Donovan started peeling layers at once, regretting that morning’s choice of heavy grey jumper. She tossed her coat over the armrest of an ugly, brown tweed sofa, straight out of the 1970s. In fact, the whole room had a distinctly seventies’ design, replete with avocado curtains, lettuce-green lampshades, and white shag carpet. It had been decorated once and never again, apparently. On the faux-wood walls hung dozens of framed pictures of the family, which she stepped closer to examine. There was Richard as a little boy, dressed as a shepherd in a local nativity; and another when he was a bit older, maybe twelve, wearing plus fours and a Norfolk jacket with a red flat cap, leaning on a golf club; and another with Richard a little older still, maybe eighteen or twenty, standing in front of the Queen’s Theatre in London, smiling broadly, arms spread, as though claiming the place as his own.

The resemblance—Richard Brook to James Moriarty—was almost supernatural. Donovan, who had seen Moriarty in person only briefly, had studied photos from the trial very closely, but even she had trouble spotting the differences. Brook’s eyebrows were a little thicker, she thought, and his eyes a little wider set. The nose was a slightly different shape, broader at the base, and a mole near his left temple—or was that a scar?—had not graced the face of James Moriarty. But they were so alike in every other way, in physique and facial structures and skin tone and hair style, that in death, and to the eyes of two distraught parents, she could see how easily they were fooled.

‘My Richard,’ said Mrs Brook, coming into the room bearing a tea tray, ‘always wanted to
perform in that theatre. Ever since he was just five years old and we took him to see *My Fair Lady*. He was going to be a star.’

Donovan put on her game face. ‘I’ve seen his clips from that kids’ show he did,’ said Donovan, joining her at the coffee table. ‘He was good.’

‘Such a lovely presence. That’s what they call it in the industry, see. A presence. He stole any scene he was in. So Ms Donovan. Or is it Mrs?’

*Sergeant*, she thought. ‘Ms.’

‘Ms Donovan, then.’ Her tone was a sign of disapproval. She poured the tea and handed Donovan a cup. ‘Which are you?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Are you a condemner or defender of Sherlock Holmes? That’s what it comes down to, isn’t it? You can be only one or the other. I do hope you are here on behalf of the London police to offer an apology for ignoring what he has done. I have been waiting, ever since I heard that he’d been arrested, to hear those words, and to hear that he’d been charged, at last, with the murder of my son. I guess that’s what happens when he goes after one of your own, isn’t it? You finally see him for what he really is.’

This was going to be trickier than she thought.

‘Mrs Brook,’ she said, ‘you and I want exactly the same thing: justice for Richard.’

Mrs Brook nodded stiffly. She brought the teacup to her lips. ‘Why do I get the feeling, then, that I’m about to hear something I don’t want to, Ms Donovan?’

Donovan set her cup in the saucer on the coffee table. ‘Did you see all of Richard’s performances? All the theatre work he did?’

‘Of course. He was brilliant. Made us so proud, Roger and me.’

‘Do you remember seeing *Adventures in Wonderland* at the Watermill Theatre? Back in 2010, this would have been.’

She smiled sadly. ‘He should have been cast as the Mad Hatter. The other lad was rubbish.’

‘That play ran for three weeks, and Richard was there for every show, wasn’t he?’

‘He was very dedicated. He once broke a toe onstage during a production of *Millie Miner*. It happened during the first act, but he didn’t say a word, just kept right on going. Nothing would stop him from making curtain call.’ She laughed a little to herself.

Donovan pulled a blue folder out of her bag. Inside were several loose pages printed off from the computer a little over an hour before. She handed them to Mrs Brook. ‘These are communications between a London woman and a man named Jim, as you can see in the comments section of her blog. If you’ll note the date, you’ll see that these exchanges took place at the same time your son was in Berkshire.’ She gave Mrs Brook a chance to glance through the short notes to get a sense of them.

‘Jim,’ Mrs Brook read.

Donovan nodded. ‘This woman had a date with Jim on one of the nights Richard was performing at the Watermill. She’s an eye witness. She can confirm that Jim Moriarty and Richard Brook are two different people. And if that’s true—’

‘Stop. Stop.’ She dropped the pages to the coffee table and took up her tea again with trembling hands.

‘If that’s true, Mrs Brook, then that means that your son didn’t die on that rooftop.’

‘How dare—’

‘It means that Richard’s fate is still unknown. Don’t you want to know what really happened to your boy?’

‘I know what happened! I’ve known for three-and-a-half years! You think knowing makes it any easier to lose a son?’

‘You want justice for Richard.’

‘I thought there was justice for him, back when I thought his killer lay dead himself. But he was a liar, just a liar! And you! You let that man go free months ago! How dare you!’

‘Sherlock Holmes and your son are victims of the same man. You want proof? I can prove it to you. But I need your permission. Let me exhume the body of Jim Moriarty.’

Mrs Brook set her teacup in its saucer with a loud clink and put it on the table. She stood and walked briskly out of the room. Donovan, momentarily stunned, stared after her. Then she gathered the pages and shoved them back into her bag, snatchiing up her coat as she followed Mrs Brook back to the front room where the livid woman stood with the open door. Donovan did not pass through.

‘This can all be over in a matter of days,’ Donovan said, ever the practical one. ‘If a DNA test confirms the body really is Richard, I’ll arrest Sherlock Holmes myself. But if it is not—’

‘I know he’s my son! I’ll not disrupt his grave! Richard will have a peace my husband and I cannot.’
Donovan let out a long breath, fighting the urge to throttle the woman.

‘Now, Ms Donovan, you are no longer welcome in my house.’ She gave a sharp gesture of her head toward the door.

‘I’ll go,’ she conceded. As an officer of the law, she could not refuse. Not without a warrant or other legal justification. ‘But please. Think about what peace really means for Richard. And when you change your mind, call me.’

She pulled her card out of a pocket of her bag and held it out to Mrs Brook, but the woman only glared at her, making no motion to accept the small card. Donovan’s arm dropped to her side. ‘I’ll leave it for you then, shall I?’ she said, and she turned back to the room and walked over to the mantle perched over the hearth. She set the card there, and as she did, her eye caught sight of the pictures hanging there, too. Old photographs, black and white, and sepia-toned. Ancestors, and many of them in full military regalia. And in one, on the far side from where she stood, a soldier from what she was sure was the Second Anglo-Afghan War, given his uniform. She’d lately spent a bit of time researching the period, with a particular focus on firearms.

And on the mantelpiece was a glass case, empty.

‘Ms Donovan, if you please.’

She took her hand away from the mantel and backed away. Buttoning her coat, she gave a clipped good day to Mrs Brook and returned to winter.
Please take heed of the archive warnings. This chapter depicts intense situations and disturbing imagery. Discretion is advised.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2015–FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2015

She suspected it might be Morse. As a girl, she had memorised the Morse alphabet and practised signalling the night sky with a torch, half believing an alien child might see her message and come to play. Once, at midnight, she had even tried flashing the beam through the window of the boy next door, hoping he might be inspired to play spy with her. But all that had come of that was his mum yelling at her mum, who had then dragged Sally to the neighbour’s front door in her nightie and slippers where she forced her to deliver an insincere apology to the little sneak. Once she left primary school, she stopped playing altogether, alone or otherwise. It wasn’t long before her skill at Morse slipped away almost entirely, but for a foggy familiarity. But when she saw the code Sherlock had given her, that memory was stirred. She looked it up, and the pattern spelled out SD. That didn’t mean anything to her, other than her own initials, which she highly doubted Sherlock had intended. Nevertheless, it stirred the memory.

Whatever it meant, when she punched the memorised code into the bell, they buzzed her up. How many times she had mounted those stairs were anyone’s guess, but she’d never done so happily. In that respect, this time was no different. The difference was that she was going alone. Lestrade didn’t even know she was going at all. And that was, simply put, weird.

On the drive over, she had designed to be in and out in under sixty seconds and didn’t imagine that such a goal would be hard to accomplish. Walk in, deliver what she’d promised, and leave. But her plan was thrown off course almost the moment she crossed the threshold of the open door and laid eyes on the man himself.

‘Christ, what happened to you?’ she blurted out, forgetting to make even a half-arsed attempt at pleasantries. Sherlock was seated in his usual chair, and though it was mid-afternoon, he looked like he had only recently woken and was still wearing his pyjamas, dressing gown, and slippers as if they amounted to a suit and shined shoes. That’s not what startled her though. She had seen that before, and less. No, what shocked her was the state of his face.

‘You have a list, I presume,’ he said, snubbing her inquiry as he rose to meet her.

She barely heard him, distracted as she was by the state of him. His face was black and blue and spattered with little red scabs across his otherwise ghost-white skin; his wrists were bandaged, as were his feet, or what she could see of them; and the way that he had arisen from the chair—stiff and mindful, rather than his usual speedy and lithe—suggested that his face wasn’t the only thing wrong with him. She stared open-mouthed.

‘Sally,’ he prompted. ‘The list.’

But she wasn’t to be so easily dissuaded from her stunned curiosity. ‘Did our boys do this to you?’ she asked. She tried to imagine who it had been! Wilson had been running his mouth lately, swearing vengeance on Anderson’s behalf as if they were sworn brothers, and Bailey had always had a violent temper about him. It was remarkable, seeing hitherto unknown but passionate allegiances rise up out of nothing, not so much in defence of a comrade but rather in objection to a common enemy.

Sherlock sighed and rolled his eyes, which looked painful, given the swollenness around the one on the left. ‘Allow me to put your mind at ease concerning your boys. They did nothing.’

‘Did nothing is exactly right,’ muttered John from behind a newspaper. Donovan almost hadn’t noticed him: He fitted so naturally in that space that he might as well have been furniture.

‘Then who—?’

‘Funny where your mind went, though,’ Sherlock said. ‘Now. The list.’

‘Jesus,’ she said behind gritted teeth as she dug into her attaché. She found the single sheet and passed it over. It took him less than half a second to scan.

‘Four?’ he said, incredulous. ‘Only four? In all of London?’

She flinched. That’s what she had said to Dryers. Word for word, in fact. Smoothing out her chagrin, she said, ‘O’s not such a popular letter for a first name, it would seem. Then whittle those down to surnames beginning with T and restrict that to presumed homeless persons, and you have your list of four.’

He turned away, stalking back to the table (though with notable gingerliness, as if his feet were hurting him) where he laid the page flat beside his laptop. ‘Or you’ve not done your job properly,’
‘He means thank you,’ said John, doing what John did best in making Sherlock seem like slightly less of an arse.

‘Do I?’ said Sherlock acerbically.

‘She’s done you a favour. Yes, you do.’ He folded the paper and set it in his lap.

‘Look,’ said Donovan, who didn’t like the word *favour* in this particular context, ‘those were the names that were either in the system, on missing persons lists, or within shelter registries. If there are others out there, we don’t know about them, and we couldn’t find them.’

‘We?’ Sherlock straightened and looked at her inquiringly, if not a little suspiciously. Behind the bruising, the expression was almost pitiable. ‘You and Lestrade?’

She was not about to be cowed by that look and answered, unpentant. ‘Me and Dryers. Thomas Dryers. He did the legwork, most of it. He doesn’t know why he did it, other than following orders, and before you go off on who’s trustworthy and who’s not, just remember that you know who I work for, and you know, too, that I never trusted you from the start, so maybe calling on me and expecting fawning discretion wasn’t the cleverest idea you’ve had lately.’

To her terrible surprise, Sherlock smirked, the unbruised side of his mouth quirking upward. ‘Nonsense, Sally. You’ve trusted me from the start. You just never wanted to. And the one time you didn’t trust me was the only time you’ve ever been so wrong. We are learning, now aren’t we?’

Donovan opened her mouth in retort—was that a camouflaged insult or a backhanded compliment?—and found herself in want of defence.

‘What was I to do? I didn’t make you run that night. If you had just come to the station, we could have had it all sorted. You should have trusted Lestrade, at least, to do just that. I was working with what I knew. How quickly you solved it, finding those kids, and the little girl screaming . . . What was I supposed to think?’

‘Perfectly reasonable suspicions,’ he returned. ‘You did exactly as you were meant to. We both did. Now shall we get on with it and stop playing into their hands?’

He whirled away from her and jumped tracks to a different line of thought. ‘Four names! Oliver Tesla, Orrin Tippet, Osmond Tracy, and Olive Teggart.’ He rattled them off from memory, having left the page on the table. ‘We don’t know whose head is on the chopping block, so to speak, so we’ll have to prioritise all four. And we have less than three days. Two days, really, we’re already in dangerous territory. Better make it one. Now to go about finding them. What do you reckon, John? How do we find people with no place of residence when the network is down?’

‘Can’t go asking about them on the streets,’ John said.

‘No, not anymore. The network won’t answer kindly to police, never have, and I’m not especially welcome among them myself at the moment, no matter the bribe.’

‘Send an anonymous message?’ John suggested. ‘They seem keen on protecting their own. Maybe word will spread.’

‘Simply alerting them doesn’t place the mysterious OT under police protection, though, does it? And it runs the risk of exposing what we know to the Slash Man, or whoever may be running the show. He’s in their midst.’

If snorts could be curt, Donovan’s was exactly that. ‘Looks like you’ll be needing police involvement after all,’ she said.

Sherlock revolved slowly away from John to face her. The look on his ugly face was unfathomable in its regard of her, and she braced herself for what was coming: a tirade against the Met, a snide insistence that she keep her hare-brained suggestions to herself, or one of his casually insulting looks of feigned surprise that she was still in the room. What came next, however, was more disarming than any of those.

‘What are you proposing, Sally?’ he asked. ‘An alliance?’

‘What?’

‘You. With us. Lestrade, too, naturally, but he’s always been on our side, even when he said he wasn’t. You want in, is that it?’

‘I said nothing of the sort.’

‘I could do with an extra pair of feet on the ground.’

‘I said, I said nothing of the sort! I am not your patsy! You do remember that you were recently arrested, don’t you? For something you did do, this time. Shall I repeat the terms of your bail?’

Her temperature was rising, her tongue flying. She felt out of control, swirling. Where she would land and what she would hit on the way there, she didn’t know—all she could do was shout the only thing that had any hope of grounding her: rules. ‘You are to have no part in investigations, you are to handle no evidence, and no one, not Lestrade, not me, not anyone, is to discuss any aspect of an ongoing investigation with you or your b—’

He laughed—outright laughed!—and lifted the page from the table, if only to wave it in her face. ‘You’ve already helped me violate three for three, all within the space of about seven hours. Well done, Sally, and welcome aboard. Now, shall we get down to some real work? There, take a look.’ He pointed to the wall behind her and, helpless to do anything but follow the path of his finger, she turned and looked. ‘Spend a moment familiarising yourself with John’s work. It’s fairly
neat, small words, easy to comprehend. He even highlighted the most important bits. Off you go.’

The hell am I doing? she thought to herself as she took a stupefied step closer to the card collage on the wall. This is complete bollocks. He’s an absolute knobhead, a bullying nutter. What the bloody hell am I—?’ The internal row came to a sudden halt as the copper in the back of her mind screamed at her to shut up and process the central cards tacked to the wall. Those were the names of the victims, stacked top to bottom in the order of their murders, the letters of their initials underlined, and in their names were revealed . . .

‘Oh,’ she breathed, at last understanding the significance of OT.

‘Now, you can take that information back to the Yard,’ Sherlock said. She turned sharply and saw that he was suddenly relaxed again in his chair across from John, one leg crossed over and fingertips lightly pressed together. He would have looked perfectly normal—Sherlock’s version of normal, that was—if it were not for the battered face. She almost felt bad for him. Almost. ‘Let Gregson get his team of three dozen officers swarming down the back alleys and through the multi storeys and under the bridges in search of our man. Let the word spread wildly and let the villain know we’ve cracked it. Contaminate the knowledge pool and spoil our first advantage since the dawn of the new year. Or—’

She groaned inwardly and wore little circles into her temples with her fingertips. He had stopped talking (miracle that it was) and seemed to be waiting for a reply.

‘You’re insane.’

‘Not remotely.’

‘Then I am.’

‘Debatable.’

‘I’m going to lose my job,’ she muttered.

‘Codswallop. If Lestrade has not, after all the things he has done . . .’

Her sigh was now the loudest yet. ‘Go on, then. What do you need from me?’

‘Information. Names aren’t enough. I need histories. School records, arrest records, anything, whether you find it pertinent or n—’

But she had already reached into her attaché once again, producing a short stack of pages in a manila envelope, which she thrust in his direction, refusing to cross the room to hand deliver them.

His mouth fell open a little. When he realised this, he closed it again to re-establish an air of superiority. ‘Sally Donovan,’ he chided. ‘You were holding out on me.’

‘I told you I didn’t trust you.’

‘Then why bring it at all?’ Again, the smirk. Bastard. She couldn’t take this anymore.

‘Right then,’ she said, slapping the pages down on the nearest table. ‘You have what you need. And I’ll work to do.’ Before she had finished speaking, she was striding to the door.

‘You’ll be hearing from me,’ he called after her.

‘Whatever.’

She stepped through the open door and would have run down the stairs if her dignity and heels had permitted. As she reached the first landing, she heard, coming from the flat upstairs:

‘How’d I do, John?’

‘Excellent, Sherlock. Really excellent. That was damn near civil.’

***

They ruled out Olive Teggart before the day was out, as a little extra digging revealed that her family had recently found her and sent her to a rehab centre in Glasgow around the turn of the year. It couldn’t be her. It was, after all, a woman. Based on an accumulation of the disparate facts, hypotheses were formulated:

Supposition one: The Slash Man was targeting males. He preferred them. Lynette Avery had been an aberration from the pattern, used merely in service to the underlying threat delivered through nursery rhyme. Though Darren Hirsch had attacked both males and females indiscriminately prior to October 2014, recent evidence suggested that his predilections had since shifted, and the corpse of Ms Avery even supported this: though brutally abused, the sexual violation had been minimal compared to that which had been enacted against Ralston Winters. He never said it aloud, but Sherlock had his theories about what had caused this shift, and he suspected that John knew it, too. It matched the theory down at the Yard.

‘He’s a sexual fantasist,’ said Barney Hinckley, one of the Yard’s prime criminal psychoanalysts specialising in violent sex crimes. He had recently finished compiling an extensive profile for a man no one but John Watson had ever seen since his dishonourable discharge from the Royal Marines, a discharge cloaked in euphemisms like unsavoury conduct and behaviour unbefitting a soldier in Her Majesty’s Armed Forces. Hinckley’s report was disseminated to all heads of subteams but delivered to Lestrade personally.

‘Formisano and Yang, in their hunt for Hirsch, have uncovered a long history of hypersexual activity, even before serving in the armed forces, though one must read between the lines to see it: online pornography, a long string of short-lived relationships with women, blowing thousands of
pounds on strip clubs and prostitutes and phone sex. He was never arrested for anything, and he never received professional counselling. And all this before he turned twenty-one, when he enlisted thirteen years ago, shortly after September 11. Something must have happened in Afghanistan to trigger a sort of psychological break. Those records are sealed, but based on his criminal actions after his discharge, it is likely that it was while in the service that Hirsch acted out his first rape, or his first rape of a man, at the very least. Against a fellow soldier, a prisoner, a civilian, it’s all conjecture, we don’t know. But it was likely during that time that he developed a taste for it.’

‘He liked it,’ said Lestrade, barely hiding his disgust. ‘Not just the sex, but the act of rape itself.’

Hinckley nodded. ‘He would have found it exciting. All of it. The sexual stimulation, yes, but also the adrenaline rush that comes from doing something so dangerous and transgressive. Combine the two in someone already psychologically volatile, and well . . . you get Hirsch.’

‘If it was the reason for his discharge, why was it not reported? Why was he not locked up?’

‘Not a question I can answer,’ said Hinckley. ‘When it comes to the military, you know how it can be. Sometimes things can get hushed up. Maybe it was tricky convincing him, or even charging him, if consent was thrown into question. Maybe it was something that would have embarrassed a superior officer, or something that involved a powerful family—he didn’t come from one himself. All plausible, but doubtful. If you want my personal theory . . .’

‘I do.’

‘I think he went after a prisoner of war.’ At Lestrade’s raised eyebrows, he continued, ‘I have a couple of reasons for thinking it. Firstly, and unfortunately, there is more, shall we say, leniency, more turning-a-blind-eye when it comes to criminal behaviour, sexual or otherwise, against enemy prisoners, isn’t there? Because of internal obfuscation, the numbers are not solid, but most experts agree that, statistically, in a military environment, it is more likely that rapes occur guard to prisoner than soldier to soldier. And given his stature, I shouldn’t be surprised if he was used as a guard. Don’t take that as gospel. I’m only speculating. But where I am more confident is in the theory that, if his discharge was for committing an act of rape, it was his first.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the profile of serial rapists suggests that, many times, the perpetrator becomes a repeat offender in an effort to recreate that first rape, much the way a serial killer is in constant pursuit of the high derived from that first kill. Hirsch, as the Slash Man, violated all of his victims in much the same way—not only did he perform anal rapes exclusively, but the cold is something of an unusual and so noteworthy factor. I would hypothesise that his first victim was quite cold when he raped him, possibly wet, maybe from water torture, and this played a factor in the heightened thrill for Hirsch. But none of his victims—homeless Londoners, that is—quite fulfilled the fantasy. He couldn’t recreate that first time to his satisfaction. That’s where Watson comes in.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, Watson not only fulfilled the fantasy of his first rape, he replaced it.’

‘Hang on, how did John fulfil it to begin with?’

‘He met the criteria. He was a prisoner, wasn’t he? Unlike the others, he was a prisoner, and had been for more than a week before Hirsch was allowed to touch him. And, unlike the others, Watson was also a soldier. A former soldier, yes, but the history may very well have been significant for Hirsch. Watson would have had training in tactics to withstand torture, like other POWs but unlike Hirsch’s homeless victims, and seeing those tactics put into practice may have excited him. Here was Captain John Watson, a captive in a cold prison. It was the closest he’d come to reliving that first time. But there was also Moran, right? He was the man in charge, the superior officer, and he made Hirsch wait . . .’

He made him wait, John had said.

‘. . . which must have frustrated him . . .’

He said it was hard on him.

‘. . . so when he was finally given permission . . .’

Just so he’d be . . . overenthusiastic.

‘. . . it was . . . a release. Sweeter, more thrilling, more gratifying. And it wasn’t just the once. He got to have Watson again and again.’

‘I think I’m going to be sick,’ said Lestrade.

‘But that’s just the trouble, Lestrade,’ said Hinckley. ‘Watson has become his new fantasy. The newest victims share qualities with him now, don’t they? All their hands have been bound, same as Watson. Granted, Hirsch has used shoelace and not wire, but the positioning has been the same. Their hands are never bound behind them, for instance. And the victims have all been strangled in one way or another, same as Watson. But furthermore, and more frightening, the men Hirsch has raped since Watson, he has also killed. In trying to achieve the same level of excitement, he has had to intensify the violence. That, or perhaps he becomes enraged at not being able to duplicate the thrill to a satisfactory level. Maybe these substitutes just aren’t . . . you know.’

‘What? Aren’t what, Hinckley?’

‘They aren’t enough. Sooner or later, he’s going to try to get hold of the real thing.’

Supposition two: The Slash Man was not acting alone. This was not as obvious a conclusion as it seemed. While it was assumed that the murders were arranged, even crafted, by Moran or Adler,
neither were suspected in the actual deeds themselves. Moran, it was still believed, was not even in the country, and there was nothing about the crimes that suggested he was doing anything greater than orchestrating them. And though she was most certainly in England, Adler, too, to those who understood her connection, was believed to be playing the part of chess master, not slayer.

But these were crimes Darren Hirsch could not have perpetrated completely on his own. Two, at minimum two, had been needed to hoist Sam Jeffries into the tree. It was unlikely that Hirsch had created a cable noose and thrown Ewan Nichols over the bridge alone. And it was also doubtful that he had abducted both Ralston Winters and Lynette Avery all on his own without any witnesses noticing a large, powerfully built man dragging two bodies from the attack site and eventually to the skip where they had been found. So there were others, there had to be others. Perhaps many.

Again, the fear of a larger conspiracy loomed. How many of Moriarty’s network were involved? Were there still double agents in the Yard? Everett Stubbins had spoken of a host of Moran’s people. *Legion*, he had said, but he had offered no further details. A prisoner of the state now, he had no reason to divulge more information, as loyal behind bars as he had been outside of them. *Loyal*, or afraid? That was a point of debate. But his words rang in Lestrade’s ears: *We want them both, Sherlock Holmes, and John Watson.*

*And supposition three:* It was a taunt. All of it—the nursery rhymes, the name games, the veiled threats—was, at its root, simply a way to taunt Sherlock, to terrify his friends, and to point to his ultimate demise.

‘It’s why he left the notes on Jack and Jill,’ Sherlock explained to Lestrade as they stood in front of John’s collage, one pondering, the other pontificating. ‘I wasn’t seeing the pattern, so he pointed it out to me. Look!’ he’s saying. See how clever I’ve been!’

‘Not so clever,’ countered Lestrade, ‘when we use it against him to stop him.’

Sherlock glowered. ‘If he feared that, he would never have given us the clues to start with. It’s a dangling carrot. An illusory pot of gold he’s confident we’ll never reach.’

‘So we prove him wrong.’

‘We prove him wrong,’ Sherlock agreed, but Lestrade saw something in his unfocused gaze that should never colour the eyes of Sherlock Holmes: doubt. What he didn’t show to Donovan, what he tried to hide from John, were his own misgivings. He didn’t speak them aloud, but he allowed Lestrade to see. ‘We save OT. And then . . .’

‘What?’

‘There are two more to go, aren’t there. OT, then two more.’

‘Yes. We’ll find them, too.’

‘No, what I mean is, it’s a countdown.’

‘Countdown?’

‘What happens, Lestrade, once John’s name and mine have been spelt out in the bodies of eight hapless victims? What happens then?’

***

On day two of the unspoken search, Donovan and Dryers found Osmond Tracy. He was, according to their research, a regular patron—though *patron* wasn’t quite the word—of the St Margaret Refuge and Refectory in Islington. It was there that the two officers, wearing plain clothes and earpieces to communicate with one another, planted themselves at opposing entrances and waited. Each carried a photocopy of Tracy’s most recent mugshot, now three years out of date, with the hope of spotting him, and recognising him when they did.

It was Dryers, stationed at the south entrance, who picked a man of like enough resemblance out of a steady stream of passers-by whose faces were all beginning to blur into one; and, after double checking the photograph and mentally adding three years and about four more inches of grisly ginger beard, determined that this was their man. ‘Donovan, I’ve got eyes on a possible match,’ he said into his collar where the mic was positioned.

‘Standing by for positive ID,’ Donovan replied.

Dryers pushed himself off the brick wall of St Margaret’s and started toward the prematurely aged homeless man who was munching on the second half of a gyro wrapped in brown paper. ‘Osmond!’ he said familiarly as he approached, spreading his arms and shaking his head in disbelief, as if this were an old friend he’d not seen in ages. ‘Ozzie, mate! How the hell are ya?’

The man froze in the act of chewing and stared at him in bemusement. He swallowed. ‘I know you?’

‘Make the ID and let’s get on with it,’ Donovan hissed impatiently in his ear.

‘Sorry, mate, Kent was a long time ago,’ said the man. ‘And nobody ever called me Ozz in all my life. It’s Osmond, long and full, thank you.’

Dryers shook his head lamentably and put an arm around the man’s shoulders. ‘Pity, that,’ he said. ‘Ozz suits you.’ Then, before Osmond Tracy could pull away from the stranger’s too-familiar arm, Dryers flipped open his officer’s badge. Tracy stiffened at the sight of it. ‘How’s about you and
me go for a little stroll. You can finish up that there Greek food, and my partner and I will explain everything, yeah?"

‘I’m not your partner, constable,’ Sergeant Donovan said tetchily.

‘She’s a doll. You’ll like her.’

It was in this way that Osmond Tracy was saved.

***

Oliver Tesla and Orrin Tippet were more evasive. Neither had a criminal record or particular habits or haunts that were likely to show up in school reports or hospital records. Both men were of an age, one with the other, thirty-nine and forty-one, respectively, and so of an age with John, too. Both were white. Neither had a military background, drug addiction, or family. All they knew was that Tesla had once worked in a warehouse before injuring his back, and Tippet had been a window-washer at the Gherkin, sacked for making lewd gestures through the glass when he knew women were watching (that is, he made a habit of grabbing his crotch at inopportune moments) and for deliberately dropping Scotch eggs from thirty storeys up to the pavement below on a dare. He was also—according to the five-year-old photo still on file in the Gherkin’s employment records—bald, and rather portly. Tesla was smaller, a stature more comparable to John’s. For this reason, he became Lestrade’s primary focus.

It was Thursday, and Lestrade was getting desperate. He assigned Donovan and Dyers to get back onto the street, to play the part of two sorry down-and-outs and search discreetly among the homeless for their quarry.

‘Any leads, you let me know immediately,’ he said.

The trouble, though, was that the homeless rarely knew anyone’s full name and often referred to each other by monikers or descriptors. There was McFriendly, the Irish bloke who made sport of trying to kiss women off their guard; and his companion, Yankee Doodle, the illegal American who got off on exposing himself to unsuspecting female tourists. There was Smallss (who was not small) and Red (who was black) and Pippa and the Gaffer and Jack and Jill and the Slash Man. No one they encountered knew anyone by the name of ‘Orrin’, and the only ‘Oliver’ they had heard of was the nickname for a bloke whose real name was Daniel but who had a reputation for begging for more of anything he got: pence, pitty, food, and flat-handed slaps across the face (‘Please, sir,’ he was known to say, ‘can I have some more?’).

The homeless refuges and churches where their names had been found to begin with hadn’t seen either man in months and could offer neither descriptions nor details about them, despite an evident willingness to help. The police, believing themselves to be working off an anonymous tip, were quickly exhausting all resources and increasing their own scepticism of the lead. And Sherlock had no evidence to work from, no contacts to consult. He thought regretfully of Ewan Nichols.

Then, Friday morning, Sherlock and John stepped out onto the street on their way to John’s physical therapy session. John hadn’t been for weeks, had in fact missed out on his last two sessions with Ella, and knew he needed to return; and Sherlock, recovering, restless, and dissatisfied with being relegated to the role of code cracker, needed to get out of the flat.

That’s when they found the note tacked to the knocker.

‘He walks the rails at dusk,’ Sherlock read aloud, frowning.

And set on the edge of the step was a half-empty beer bottle.

John cancelled his appointment.

***

Railroads. There were miles and miles of tracks in London and roundabout, and Lestrade couldn’t hope to choose the right line, let alone the right stretch of line. He gathered his full team, announced that there had been an anonymous tip, and set them about searching the train yards and tunnels, establishing lookouts and posting keep-away signs as the day drew on. But they couldn’t close down every station in this city or mark every possible entry point; they didn’t even know who they were looking for. Sherlock believed it was all futile anyway.

‘It’s another puzzle,’ he said, pacing the flat, gesticulating his frustrations. He had already made the mistake of pulling at his hair, which had torn John’s stitches and caused a minor amount of bleeding again. John scolded him without ire before patching him up again. ‘Damn it all.’

‘He wants us to find him,’ said John. His vagueness needed no translation.

‘He wants us to find him,’ Sherlock agreed. ‘Not the police. The note, the bottle, left on our doorstep.’

‘Or maybe it’s not him. The homeless know we’re looking for an Orrin or an Oliver,’ John said. ‘They know you’re looking, they must. It could have been them. It could have been a genuine tip.’

‘I might think so,’ said Sherlock, ‘if it were not for the bottle.’

‘The homeless drink,’ John reasoned.

‘They drink beer.’

‘Okay . . .’

‘That’s more than beer.’ He pointed to the luminescent green bottle that now sat beneath the light
hanging above the centre of the kitchen table. The silver label around the neck read Carlsberg Elephant Beer, which John knew to be a strong pilsner and which Sherlock knew to be out of Copenhagen.

‘Is it?’

‘Smell it.’

John reached for the bottle—they were not concerned about fingerprints; identifying them would tell them nothing, and there was no time anyhow—and took a whiff. ‘You’re right,’ he agreed. ‘Definitely alcohol, but something’s off.’

‘I need to find out what. Exactly what.’

He called Molly, but for the first time in their entire history, she refused him access to the lab at Bart’s. She assured him (repeatedly) that it was nothing personal—it was midday and the lab was in use—but he supposed she was concerned that his presence at the hospital would fare poorly, not only for him but for her as well.

He did not have the time or full equipment to set up a proper lab in the kitchen and discover the drink’s properties. And the clock was ticking quickly toward dusk.

‘I’m going to drink it.’

‘Like hell you are,’ said John.

‘Just a taste.’

‘No.’

‘It’s not poisoned.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘I do. Think about it, John. What would he have to gain by killing me at this stage in the game? Remember, he wants me to solve the puzzle. This is a piece of it.’

Staring him down, John said, ‘If you’re so confident, let me taste it first.’

He reached for the bottle, but Sherlock lifted it first and held his arm out of his reach; his face briefly betrayed a flicker of doubt, but he covered this swiftly by saying, with an air of unflappable confidence, ‘Not to disparage you in any way, John, but you have a rather unhappy history with alcohol, given your father’s and sister’s abuses, which meant you only ever imbibed socially; whereas I, aside from having a rather sensitive and superior palette, spent the better portion of my time at university refining those sensitivities in becoming familiar with a vast array of alcoholic beverages. Experimentally.’

‘I thought you spent your time shooting up,’ said John with wry humour.

‘That was after,’ said Sherlock equivocally, and he lifted the bottle to his lips, felt the air change as John held his breath, and tipped the bitter liquid into his mouth. One gulp, and it burned as it slid down his throat, though not badly. It was flat, weak, the diluted form of something heady, and . . . a little fruity.

He smacked his tongue a couple of times, capturing the last fumes of alcohol and swallowing them. John removed the bottle from his hand and set it back on the table to preclude him from taking even one more sip.

‘Well, Monsieur Connoisseur?’ he said.

‘Nutty,’ said Sherlock. He ran a tongue against the roof of his mouth. ‘Though mild. Sweet.’

‘Pale lager?’

‘Brown ale. But it’s fruity, too. Mixed? I’d say with . . . wine.’ He smacked a couple of more times. ‘No, brandy. It has a warm, distilled smack to it.’

‘So what does it mean?’

Ale and brandy. What did it mean? Was there something in the drink he hadn’t noticed? (He licked his lips, walking back into the sitting room.) Ale and brandy. The two notes together played a familiar harmony in his memory, something he had read recently. But where? What was the context? (He sank slowly into his chair, fingertips coming together. John stayed in the kitchen, letting him think in quiet.) He’d been researching a wide variety of subjects of late: nursery rhymes (not a likely candidate), PTSD (it was a possibility), property law (doubtful). No, no, and no. Irene Adler, though, had left a bottle of claret in Molly’s refrigerator. Half drunk, like this one. He had taken it for a twisted romantic gesture, much like the rose and the brassiere, but maybe it was something more, something he’d not consid—

No! Back up! Nothing to do with the claret, no connection to property law, to stress disorders, not in this case. It was another rhyme!

He leapt up from the chair and nearly as quickly collapsed into it again, having forgotten about the bloody rib.

‘Easy there,’ John said, stepping out of the kitchen. ‘What do you need?’

‘Says the hobbled man,’ Sherlock said, wincing and holding his side.

‘I’m more able-bodied than you at the moment.’
‘Aren’t we a sad pair.’

‘Tell me what you need.’


John did, and set it at the table by the boarded windows.

‘Look up *humpty dumpty*.’

John looked astonished, uncertain, but quickly flipped to the back of the tome, searching, his fingers dragging down the pages. ‘Got it,’ he said.

‘And the first entry?’

‘Humty-dumty: A drink made with ale.’ John read, ‘boiled with brandy. Circa 1700.’ He looked up. ‘How the hell did you know that?’

‘I told you: Once I started recognising the rhymes, I researched them.’

‘And thoroughly, by God.’

‘How else does one go about it?’ But he recognised the tone of admiration, and appreciated it. He stood—more carefully this time—and came to stand behind John’s chair. He leant in close, pointing to the page. ‘And the second entry?’ he prompted.

‘A short, dumpy, hump-shouldered person,’ said John, dragging his forefinger below the tiny print. He leant back and looked up at Sherlock. ‘Orrin Tippet. The portly fellow. Lestrade’s looking hard for the wrong man.’

Sherlock clapped a hand on John’s shoulder, though he withdrew it quickly when John contained a small flinch. ‘That’s it! It’s the nursery rhyme, it has to be. It’s all falling into place! Tippet, an egg-shaped man working in an egg-shaped building, grabbing the most egg-shaped part of his anatomy to scandalise women, and dropping eggs on unsuspecting passers-by. He’s our egg-man, our humpty-dumpty!’

‘And he’s about to have a great fall,’ said John.

‘But from where?’

‘If the rhyme is any indication’—their eyes locked—‘from a wall.’

‘I’ll get the maps.’

They spread them across the tables and onto the floors, every map of London in the flat and one on each computer screen. John traced railroads with his forefinger, looking for intersections with London’s walls or what might be construed as a wall; Sherlock scanned for words, little printed *Ws* rising off the page like champagne bubbles, which, when they proved fruitless, he mentally popped to clear the space. They were silent for five minutes, the sun quickly sinking toward the horizon, when Sherlock suddenly exclaimed, ‘Walworth!’

John’s head snapped up.

‘The A215, also called *Walworth Road*.’

‘But that’s a road, not a—’

‘Your thinking is too literal.’ He brought the map closer to John and stabbed his finger triumphantly at a point in Southwark. Walworth Road crossed right under the tracks that ran parallel to—nearly hugging—Elephant Road.

‘Hang on,’ said John. ‘That’s just south of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre.’ He looked back at the bottle of Carlsberg Elephant Beer sitting in the kitchen. ‘Bummer me.’

‘Less than thirty minutes of daylight left, John!’ Sherlock cried, striding for his coat, or, rather, the unfortunate substitute, an old, dark brown leather blouson he’d dug out of the wardrobe, hardly suitable for winter conditions, but he’d yet to replace his favourite coat.

‘Wait, wait, shouldn’t we tell Lestrade? He’s out there right now—’

‘I’ll call him from the cab.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said John, pulling his own coat off the back of the chair.

‘You’re coming?’

John zipped his coat to the chin. ‘The last time you went wandering about on your own, you came home with a cracked skull.’

‘You do exaggerate.’

John said nothing, but Sherlock saw him pat the small of his back. He was wishing it too, in that moment: that he’d not given away his gun.

***

Neither man, not John, not even Sherlock, could have predicted how quickly that evening’s events would unfold.

Only the last hues of orange still hung in the sky. The ignorant cabbie sped them away from Baker
Street on the promise of double fare if they reached their destination in ten minutes, not the
estimated twenty; so, as the cabbie zipped through yellow lights, pushed ahead of slower cars, and
honked insistently at sluggish pedestrians, Sherlock, using John’s phone, contacted Lestrade, who
was searching the lines near Wormwood Scrubs Park, and Donovan, who was with Dryers at
Stonebridge. Neither was positioned to reach Walworth Road before them. Lestrade said he
would dispatch closer units and make a phone call to stop all trains on the Thameslink line but
pleaded with him not to go all the same, and Donovan called him a stubborn arse. Nevertheless,
both, without knowing in even a vague sense how Sherlock had pinpointed the site, were en route
to Southwark by the time Sherlock and John crossed the Thames and merged onto Kennington
Lane.

They were dropped off at the Elephant and Castle Station where they bolted inside as fast as their
damaged bodies would permit, charging past the Friday evening commuters to buy two tickets.
Then, on the platform, they looked down the line to see whether a train was incoming. When it
seemed that the way was clear, they jumped onto the tracks.

‘Oi!’ someone shouted.

‘The hell they doing!’

‘Someone call security!’

‘Jesus Christ, but isn’t that Sherlock Holmes?’

No one could answer—Sherlock and John were already jogging down the track and out into the
open night, torches alight.

The tracks were dark, quiet, and the traffic below sounded miles away.

‘Wait wait,’ said John, slowing, and Sherlock with him. He pointed his way down the track, then
back in the direction they had come. ‘Should we be going north or south?’

‘Walworth runs south,’ Sherlock answered, and they started jogging again, Sherlock clutching his
side and John with an uneven gait. The air was so cold they could feel the tears from their stung
eyes harden in their lashes, and the harsh wind pushed against them, trying to force them
backwards and rob them of their warmth.

Though the strip of concrete dividing the double tracks was narrow, they jogged side by side, and
on unspoken understanding, each directed his own beam of light at his own half of the pass,
searching. Then Sherlock’s fell against a dark mound farther up the track.

‘There!’ he called, and they picked up their feet, bolting ahead.

The sight before them did what the wind had not, and chilled them to their bones. The figure of a
large man lay across the westernmost rails, his bare belly protruding toward the blackening sky.
As Sherlock and John hurried nearer, breaths rising and disappearing in fervent huffs, they saw in
Sherlock’s unsteady light that the man’s trousers and underwear had been shimmied down to his
knees, his shirt and coat rustled up toward his armpits. But even as Sherlock’s dread began to rise
and John’s fear spiked, the rails began to tremble. Sherlock put a hand out, grabbed John’s arm,
and haltered him. They looked behind them into blackness—nothing. Then, ahead. At some
distance yet, but fast approaching, the light of a train was beginning to round the bend.

‘Shit! Oh shit!’ John cried, and he broke into a run again, straight toward the barrelling train,
Sherlock hot on his heels. The man on the tracks didn’t stir with the rumbling of the rails. When
they reached him, John dropped his torch and skidded down to his knees beside the prone man.
He yanked his fingers out of his gloves and placed them at the man’s neck, feeling for a pulse.

‘He’s alive!’

‘John, we have to move!’

John lifted his head toward the blinding light of fifty tonnes of speeding steel, but in the
surrounding darkness, and with the rapidly shortening distance, it was visually impossible to tell
which rails the train rode.

‘Left or right, Sherlock? Left or right!’

Sherlock’s brain fired at speeds to match that of the train, reasoning through it but unable to reach
any certain conclusion. Had there been more people on the western platform, or the eastern?
Could he recall which side of the track the northbound trains usually rode on this line? No! They
were neither of them regular Thameslink riders. Left or right? The wrong choice would kill them.

‘Put him in the centre!’ Sherlock hollered, his voice almost lost to the wind and howl of steel on
steel.

‘There’s not enough room!’

But they both jumped into action. Sherlock seized the man at the shoulders, and John took the
feet, and they rolled him to the narrow strip between the parallel tracks, northbound and
southbound, until he lay in the exact centre. The blast of the train’s horn rocked them.

‘Sherlock!’ John cried in alarm, his voice drowned by the scream of the oncoming train and lost to
the night. He froze in terror, watching the light grow brighter and press against the limits of his
vision.

Sherlock pulled him down, flat on the ground between the rails, and threw an arm around his
shoulders, the other around his head, and held on tightly, just as the force of the monster train tore
across the iron rails to their right where the man had been lying just seconds before. Mere inches
from their prone bodies, the sound of it was like the earth wrenching itself apart, and the ground
beneath John’s skull and against his breast quaked and groaned and rolled into Sherlock’s bones.
With panting hearts, they lay still, marvelling in the knowledge that death had just rushed against them and they had survived. It was then, in the quiet of a wind taking a breath, that they heard a pain-filled moan. Sherlock lifted his head off of John’s. Just ahead, they saw their half-living quarry, who trembled from pain if not from cold. Sherlock unwound himself from around John, and John, pushing himself to hands and knees, shaky with the flood of adrenaline, crawled closer to Orrin Tippet.

John’s torch was gone, destroyed on the rails, but Sherlock found his own still alight on the tracks that lay on their left. He retrieved it and pointed the beam down at the body of the round man, whose wrists were bound with the shoelace from one of his own shoes and whose exposed thighs bled in stripes. His face, too, was a mess of blood, and a wide, dark patch of red soaked his rustled shirt. John pushed the man’s shirt further up his torso and saw something protruding from the ribcage. It shone with blood, a thick metal disc on the end of a rod, buried deep.

‘It’s a lag bolt,’ said Sherlock, out of breath. ‘Like a large nail. Used to secure railway trestles and sleepers.’

‘He’s bleeding out,’ John said. He gingerly touched the head of the bolt, and the half-conscious man paled at the pain. ‘But it’s not too late. We need paramedics, right now.’

Sherlock still had John’s phone on him, but as he shoved a hand into his pocket, they both heard, from behind, a whistling. John twisted and Sherlock pulled up, spun on his heel, and threw his beam at a bare brick wall standing on the edge of the track, a barrier of sorts between the trains, the drop-off to the street, and the buildings below. The whistling came again, this time slightly further south, down the track. Sherlock’s beam jumped to capture the source.

And there stood a man, hooded and faceless, and dressed fully in black, his legs spread wide in a challenging stance. For a moment, no one moved. Then the man lifted an arm, pointed it at Sherlock, and spun around to bolt further down the track.

He didn’t even think: Sherlock took off after him.

‘Sherlock!’ John cried.

The cry almost carried him back, but in the end he couldn’t stop himself from flying. That was him! It was him! The height, the hulk of him, the shadow he carried in his wake! After all he had done, after all the lives he had ruined, Sherlock could not allow him to escape! John would take care of Mr Tippet, but he had to stop Darren Hirsch.

His feet pounded the darkness between the tracks that obscured steel bars and errant stones, but he wasn’t watching his feet. His full attention was fixed like a tractor beam on the figure darting ahead of him, at a speed he couldn’t match, not with a searing side and sharp, laboured breath. He had no plan beyond the wild need to reach him, lay him flat against the concrete, and pummel the life out of him. He saw himself beating Hirsh’s head bloody against the iron rails, not considering for even a second that such a creature would fight back, tooth and nail, not even considering that such a man, a rapist and a murderer, might get the better of him. The synapses in his brain were firing noisily, but there was no logic to the electrical storm raging in his head, not until the man, twenty paces ahead of him, passed beneath a steel crossing that stood some five metres high and spanned the width of the elevated tracks. Sherlock raised his torch higher. Hanging from the crossing was a man, his neck in a noose.

Sherlock’s feet skidded on the loose gravel. The man dressed all in black kept running, but Sherlock almost didn’t notice. His eyes, and then the beam from his torch, were riveted instead on the lynched dead man in a black hood, wearing nothing at all but a black Belstaff coat, his coat. A steel pole was drawn through the sleeves to hold his arms out like a scarecrow’s, like birds’ wings. The unbuttoned coat flapped in the unforgiving wind. The man’s bare ankles were bound with shoelace. Across his exposed chest, revealed with every flap of the wide lapels, dripped the freshly cut letters I O U.

And then, despite the wind, he heard the soft ringing of a mobile phone. Not the one he still held in his hand. No, not John’s. He knew the ring—it was his ring. And it was coming from the pocket of his old stolen coat.

Wary, afraid, he slipped John’s phone inside his own pocket and slowly drew nearer the swinging corpse. The wind howling in his ears almost drowned the sound of the phone, but he heard it as clearly as if it were calling his name. He reached up, put his hand inside the pocket of the Belstaff, and withdrew his mobile.

Unknown Caller.

His heart pounded as his thumb moved to answer, as he lifted the phone to his ear.

Silence. Then:

‘Jack be nimble.’

The howling grew louder, and Sherlock’s heart raced with the speed of a war drum.

‘Jack be quick.’

There was a soft click. The line went dead.

Then the body burst into light, and began to burn.

***

‘Sherlock!’ John cried, and he watched in horror as the mad detective rush into the fallen night. He wanted to race after him, pull him back, keep him still and close at hand, but those hands were
filling with blood, Mr Tippet’s blood, and he couldn’t staunch it, not properly, not with that spike driven into his side; but nor could he pull it out, not when he could barely see at all, not when doing so would risk greater damage and more blood loss. His primary goal had to be simply to keep the man alive.

‘Stay with me, Tippet, help is coming,’ he said. He pulled away for a moment, shooked his coat, and draped it across the man’s bare hips and groin, restoring to him a modicum of dignity. Then he divested himself of his jumper, balled it tightly, and pressed it into the wound in man’s side. He began shivering at once in the deeply bitter cold. The man moaned and wept and trembled, his head rolling on the gravel beneath him. Then it stilled, and in the dark, John could barely make out that his eyes were in fact open and watching him. His lips moved, but John couldn’t hear him. He bent closer.

‘Orrin Tippet?’ he said.

The man nodded frightfully.

‘My name is John Watson. I’m a doctor. You’re going to be okay. I’m here to help. Do you understand?’

‘That’s right, Mr Tippet. The police are on their way. I know it hurts, but don’t be scared—’

With the force of a rushing train, John felt himself wrenched away. Large hands seized the back of his shirt and jerked him up, dragged him backwards. His feet, hurried along, lost purchase, and he landed, hard, across the easternmost rails. Before he could think beyond the pain of impact, those same hands grabbed two fistfuls of the front of his shirt and lifted him bodily off the ground, only to shove him backward and slam him into the solid brick wall, the only barrier between the track and plummeting to the pavement far below.

The air left his body, and as his head struck the wall, his vision, already filled with darkness, clouded and blocked out all city lights entirely. But he remained conscious, and next second, his head was jerked up by the hair. A large hand held his skull against the wall, ground it into the brick like a pestle into a mortar, and a large body pressed in on his. When he lifted his eyes, he made out the silhouette of a giant of a man, two heads taller, seven stones heavier, a face in shadow, a man with a kink in his right ear—a silhouette he knew.

His chest constricted in fear, and his heart stopped beating. A terrifying paralysis overtook him. He couldn’t move an arm, lift a leg, turn his head. Every muscle refused to obey, so while his brain shouted at him to fight, to struggle, to wrench himself away at the cost of pain or worse, his body remained frozen and unresponsive. Like it wasn’t even his own.

There was a long moment of stillness, when time was suspended, and nothing penetrated his senses, not the deepening cold, not the howling wind, not the distant lights. They stared at one another until, slowly, the man lifted a large hand, dragged it up John’s chest, and curled his fingers around John’s throat. Still, John could not move, and in his mounting fear, even his mind was darkening in its need to escape. He could barely think at all. He was captured, like he always knew he would be, like he had never been free to start with. He was back, back in the kitchen, the freezer, cold and naked and shivering and about to be devoured.

Then the man’s mouth collided with his, and John came to life. He jerked and twisted and thrashed, desperate to get away from that awful touch and the body that had made itself his prison. But the fist in his hair cracked his skull a second time against the brick, and the other tightened around his throat. Teeth sank down into his bottom lip, his cheek, and his neck—he felt he was being eaten alive. When he tried to push away, weakly, ineffectually, the monster hands trapped his wrists against the wall so fiercely he thought the bones might snap. He hollered in pain. Then suddenly, with a growl, the man flipped him around, pressing his chest so mercilessly into the rough bricks he couldn’t draw breath. One arm pinned him down at the neck, laying across it like a crossbeam; hot breath scalded his cold cheek; and a groping hand travelled down, down, until it grabbed him below the waist.

He cried and quailed and fought, trying to lash out with his feet at the very least, but the man kicked his legs wide and pressed him flatter. Panic choked him, a caged and silent scream resounded deep inside him, so when, of a sudden, he was released and fell boneless to the ground, he didn’t know that his captivity had lifted, not until he saw, through swimming vision, the thick legs and large boots retreating from him, advancing on the other prone man.

There was a gun in the shadow’s hand.

The large figure loomed over Orrin Tippet, who trembled where he lay, a look of pleading and fear in his eyes. The Slash Man shot him in the head.

Somewhere down the track, a column of fire erupted into the sky.
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2015

'This job is aging me,' said the chief superintendent, rubbing beneath his nose where his new reading glasses had perched too long that day. Lestrade couldn’t help but feel sorry for the man; it was easier than feeling sorry for himself, at any rate. Pityingly, he observed the man now who occupied the chair he had once imagined himself assuming, once upon a time. Now, he wouldn’t take that job if they begged him. Gregson hadn’t begged for it himself, even though it came with a substantial pay rise. Rather, he had come into it only because of the abrupt and violent removal of its last occupant. And since that day, he had been putting out fires left and right, ignited by, for, and in the name of Sherlock Holmes.

The glasses settled again on their perch as the man steeled himself. He picked up a ballpoint pen to take notes. ‘All right, let me hear it. What do we know?’

Seated side by side, Lestrade and Donovan exchanged a glance. Lestrade nodded, and Donovan began.

‘CCTV shows Orrin Tippet boarding the rear carriage of a train by himself at approximately 17.00 hours. He never got off at a station. We believe that he was forced out of the back of the train as it was slowing down and coming into Elephant and Castle, about hundred and fifty metres down the track from the station. The injuries his body sustained are consistent with a fall at the speed he was travelling.’

‘No witnesses can confirm that he was pushed?’ Gregson asked.

‘On-board surveillance had been disabled in the rear carriage, and no witnesses have come forward. It’s possible that the carriage had been emptied of all but Moran’s operatives.’

‘At that time of day?’

‘We agree it is unlikely, and we’re still scanning footage from the platform, trying to identify Moran’s people. All we know for sure, though, right now, is that the emergency exit door was found to be open at the rear when it pulled into the station.’

Lestrade continued: ‘CCTV hasn’t captured Hirsch, or anyone of his stature, for that matter, boarding the train. That means the Slash Man was already in position, waiting for the drop. He raped Tippet quickly, right there, on the tracks.’

‘It’s like the son of a bitch couldn’t help himself,’ said Donovan icily. ‘Another train might have been along at any second. He could have just beaten the poor sod into submission and left it at that, yeah? But he buggered him anyway.’

‘Well, it’s his MO, isn’t it?’ said Lestrade. ‘There’s a pattern, and he’ll follow it, by god.’

‘What else?’ said Gregson.

Lestrade said, ‘He was stabbed through the ribs with a lag bolt twenty-five centimetres long, flat on the end. It would have taken significant force to ram it into his body that way. He also suffered from fractured ribs, broken clavicle, head trauma—mostly likely from the fall—and significant bruising and internal bleeding.’

‘Why was he stabbed? With all else that he’d suffered, what was the point of such a weapon being used against him?’

‘Our theory,’ said Lestrade with a weary sigh, ‘is that it was to occupy Dr Watson. Leave him alive, but critical, beyond saving. It was a diversion, to get him alone, while Holmes pursued one of the assailants a further eighty metres down the line to discover the second victim.’

‘And do we have ID on that victim?’

‘The body was burnt pretty badly. A sort of remote detonation triggered sparks planted on the body, which had been doused in ethanol, mixed with sodium hypochlorite.’

I didn’t smell it, Sherlock had stated, over and over again. The body was downdwind from me. I didn’t smell it.

‘Ethanol is highly flammable by itself,’ Donovan put in, ‘but sodium hypochlorite is an oxidiser, making it react explosively. The body burned at high heat for fifteen minutes before firefighters could arrive to put it out.’

‘Not much left,’ said Lestrade. ‘But fortunately, dental records have proven viable. His name was Colin Simpkins.’ CS. Again, Lestrade and Donovan exchanged glances. Simpkins fitted the name pattern. They just weren’t expecting him. Not last night. They had been too short-sighted, and had been outwitted again. ‘Like the others, he was homeless. All we know about him right now is that he has been cited for public disturbances in the past, nothing criminal. We’re looking for his family.’

Gregson nodded slowly. ‘So the fire spread, and that’s why Holmes had to jump off the tracks?’

‘The ethanol solution had been poured in a ring around the hanging body, and when it went up in flames, Sherlock was caught in the middle of it. He was forced to jump where the flames were lowest—to the edge of the tracks. But when he leapt over the ring and onto the roof below the tracks, he caught fire. His right arm had inadvertently come in contact with the ethanol when he
reached for the phone. Frankly, he’s lucky the damage wasn’t any worse than it was. He’s lucky to be alive at all.’

Pointing his pen at them both in a chastising manner, Gregson said, ‘Those boys should never have been on that track to start with. You know this, don’t you? I better not find out that you sent them on ahead—’

‘These people knew just how to play them, sir,’ said Donovan. ‘They gave Holmes and Watson just the right information at just the right time to ensure that it was them, not us, on that track. If they hadn’t gone, Orrin Tippet would have been smashed to pulp by the train that nearly killed them all.’

‘Tippet died anyway.’

‘Holmes and Watson weren’t given those clues with the chance that Tippet might be saved. These people . . . they’re in better control than we had feared.’

‘So it was the Slash Man, was it? On that track. We’re sure about that?’

‘We don’t know conclusively, sir,’ said Lestrade, a little uncomfortably. ‘Sherlock believed he was pursuing Hirsch. He was sure of it. But John also says that it was Darren Hirsch who attacked him at the exact same time. He couldn’t have been in two places at once.’

‘Yes, but Watson’s been known to suffer hallucinations,’ said Donovan. ‘Intrusive images, isn’t that what you’ve been calling them? He sometimes sees things differently to how they really are. It’s possible that, in his panic, he only imagined that he saw Darren Hirsh in the man that attacked him.’

‘And our reason for doubting this?’ asked Gregson.

Lestrade shifted in his seat. ‘I don’t like to doubt him.’

Donovan countered, ‘But it was very dark, and he was scared and disoriented and in a state of panic. And furthermore, Hinckley believes that the Slash Man has a heightened interest in reclaiming Watson, as it were. Why would he attack him the way he did, only to leave him otherwise untouched?’

‘Timing,’ said Lestrade. ‘They’d had this debate already, but it looked like they were about to again. The police were on their way, so he didn’t have time to violate John again. Besides, he’d just raped Tippet, only minutes before. It’s doubtful he had the—’—Lestrade coughed a little and Gregson, who had been fiddling with a pen, set it aside—‘stamina.’

‘He’s a sex maniac,’ said Donovan, unfazed. ‘I’d be surprised if he didn’t.’

Gregson cut in. ‘So you’re telling me that there’s no way to verify who he was?’

Donovan sighed out loudly through her nose and looked at her hands in her lap, and Lestrade said, ‘Whoever he was, he bit John. A few times. We meant to take samples, maybe pick up a bit of saliva, but before we could, John found a bathroom and locked himself in. He scrubbed himself so raw he would have taken off layers of skin if I hadn’t found him and stopped him hurting himself.’ He shook his head, remembering standing outside the single-occupant loo and listening to the water run, and run, and run, before finally forcing his way in. ‘The best we could do was photograph the bite marks. Not that we have anything to compare them to. It’s an anticipatory move at best, which is a rather pessimistic outlook.’

‘Whoever he was, this man, why did he want Watson alone if not to seriously harm him?’ asked Gregson.

‘He needed to deliver a message,’ said Lestrade, and he reached into an inside pocket of his suit coat a pulled out a plastic bag. He tossed it across the table.

Gregson picked it up to examine. Inside was a single slip of paper, crinkled, a little torn, but spread flat. It read: *The summer’s gone, and all the roses falling.*

‘He shoved that note into John’s back pocket,’ said Lestrade, ‘while he had him pressed up against the wall.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘It’s a variation on a line from *O Danny Boy.*’

‘Yes, I recognise the lyrics.’

‘John told us that while he was being held in that kitchen, Daz, that is, Darren Hirsch, would sometimes whistle that tune. Alexander Slough renamed it *O Johnny Boy* and began to put lyrics to it, nasty things, violent and sexual things. John never said what, exactly, but Sherlock himself heard one of the lines, when he was down there.’

‘So it’s a reminder?’

‘Like all of it, a taunt. A threat. Plus, the paper had been treated with peppermint oil.’

Gregson looked puzzled.

‘It’s a scent meant to put him in mind of Moran. A trademark of sorts, like a signature, meant to frighten him. And I think that it’s working. John was practically catatonic when we found him.’

‘Is someone seeing to him? A shrink, I mean.’

‘His therapist was contacted right away.’
‘Good. That’s good. And what about Holmes?’

‘Other than the burn, he insists he’s fine . . .’

‘Anyone looking at him could tell otherwise,’ Donovan put in.

‘. . . but he won’t talk about anything other than the stone-cold facts of what happened. I’ve called his brother, but so far . . . I haven’t been able to get through.’ He controlled a scowl from shading his expression, but he just didn’t understand it: Sherlock attacks Anderson, and Mycroft swoops in to rebuke him like a child; but when Sherlock is threatened, attacked, and injured, he’s nowhere to be found.

‘Tell me straight, DI. Is Holmes dangerous?’

‘To who, sir?’

Gregson frowned. ‘I don’t like that answer.’

Lestrade was unapologetic. ‘He is not homicidal. He is not mad. But he will do whatever it takes to protect his friends.’

‘You mean John Watson.’

‘To start with. That’s how this all began.’

Donovan’s phone rang. She checked the caller ID and excused herself to take it in the hallway. When the door was closed again, Lestrade said, ‘K-O-N.’

‘What’s that?’

‘There is one more victim to go, one more we can still save, and his initials are K-O-N. Already, we’ve got eyes and ears on it. But sir, we can’t do it without Sherlock Holmes.’

‘The man attacked one of our own,’ Gregson said, shaking his head. ‘He’s yet to stand trial, but that doesn’t stop us from laying sanctions against him. I have done, and I can’t undo it.’

‘Unless you lock him up, you can’t stop him investigating. You can’t. They’re sending clues to him, after all. Not to us. And he’s the one solving them. He’s the only one quick enough. They’ve been two steps, ten steps, ahead of us the whole way, and we don’t have a prayer in catching up without Sherlock’s help. We never did.’

Gregson’s eyes flicked to the glass door, and his face grew very serious. Then, in a low voice, lips hardly moving, he said, ‘Use him.’

Lestrade said nothing, let him finish.

‘You’ve no choice, Greg. We’ve no choice. But officially, officially, I’m not sanctioning this. Understand? This conversation is not taking place right now. You go rogue, you do what you have to do, and I don’t know a thing about it.’

‘I understand.’

‘Only one snag.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Donovan. You’ll have to tell her, she’s too close to all of this. No way around it. And you know she’ll put up a fight.’

Clearly, Gregson had no idea that Donovan was already on the inside of it. Managing to keep a straight face, Lestrade said, ‘I’ll reason with her.’

‘Good luck with that. Now get out. Tell the boys I said no. And mind that you look like you’re spitting tacks about it, too.’

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She wound her way down the hall speedily, trying to find a place of privacy, even as she answered. ‘Sgt Donovan,’ she announced into the phone, expectantly. It was a Sussex number, which meant this could be only the Sussex Police or—

‘Ms Donovan, this is JoAnna Brook.’

She rounded a corner and found herself alone. There, she steeped herself. ‘How are you today, Mrs Brook?’ she asked. This was a woman who insisted on formalities.

But there was no exchange of pleasantries. Instead, her question was followed by a long pause. When the woman spoke again, her voice quivered. ‘I have spoken with my husband,’ she said. ‘And we have agreed . . .’ She took a long, shuddering breath, struggling for composure. ‘We have agreed to let you exhume Richard.’ Then her voice suddenly became stronger: ‘On one condition.’

‘What condition is that?’

‘No matter the results from your tests, Ms Donovan, no matter what you learn, my husband and I wish to be left alone.’

‘You do not want to know the results?’ she asked, astounded.
'I know the results. That’s my Richard. No, what I’m saying is this: we want the police to withdraw all interest from us. After this is all settled, we don’t want to see them ever again on our doorstep. We don’t want them to call. We don’t want to answer any more questions. We want it all over. Do you understand me?’

She did. She knew exactly what Mrs Brook was asking. Conflicted and unable to give answer, at least not in that moment, she stood with the phone hovering by her ear, lips parted but silent.

‘I asked, Ms Donovan, whether you understood my terms. Under no other condition will I permit the exhumation. The Sussex police are on my side in this.’

‘Mrs Brook, I understand you perfectly. Will you permit me to discuss your terms with my superiors?’

Another pause. ‘That would be acceptable.’

She promised to call back, returned to the chief superintendent’s office to wait for Lestrade, and then walked with him back to his own office, where she closed the door, let him sit, and cut straight to the heart of things.

‘It was Roger Brook. Brook tried to shoot Holmes through the window back in January,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t Moran or any of his men or a random civilian vigilante—it was Richard Brook’s father.’

Lestrade regarded her with wide-eyed astonishment. ‘How do you know this?’

‘I know. Mrs Brook is at this very moment proffering me a deal to keep that information buried. She will give her permission to exhume her son—that is, Moriarty—only if I promise never to bring to light her husband’s crime.’

‘A bargaining chip. I see.’ Lestrade leant back in his chair and brought his knee up to rest on the edge of the desk. ‘But if you expose them, they would have no more say in the matter. So what are you going to do?’

She blinked, expecting that he would tell her what to do. ‘We need that exhumation,’ she said, which wasn’t quite an answer. ‘If Holmes’ name is ever going to be cleared of the accusation the media is feeding to the public, we need to prove that Moriarty was real. Otherwise, those doubts will only fester and continue to prove dangerous to him. There’s no surer way to convince anybody of that than with DNA evidence.’

Lestrade nodded noncommittally.

‘Look, we don’t just turn a blind eye to attempted murder. I know that. We don’t just let would-be killers off the hook. But if I accuse Roger Brook, what good will come of it? We’ve no evidence to convict him. They’ll never give a real confession, and that gun will be long gone by now. Without it, I can’t prove anything. Look. Brook isn’t a threat to Sherlock. Not anymore. He was a desperate, angry man thinking his son’s killer would walk free. More than anything, he acted out of a broken heart.’

‘So you excuse what he did? I never thought you to make a case for anyone based on compassion,’ he said.

‘Practically. If he had succeeded in killing Holmes, or even wounding him, I would entertain no leniency. But when you cut straight to it, no one was hurt. And Brook wouldn’t be so foolish as to attempt it again, especially not once he learns that Sherlock is innocent, which I will prove. The real threat is the public that continues to believe he murdered an innocent man. If we really mean to protect Sherlock, we’ll accept the Brooks’ terms.’

‘And that’s justice, is it?’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Make the call, Sally. I’ll put in the order for exhumation.’

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They spent the night in hospital. Spreading from fingertip to elbow, the burn on Sherlock’s arm had been auspiciously hampered by his selection of the leather blouson, which was slower to burn than most materials. Though he suffered some black patches of third-degree burns, the greater portion were not so severe. But they hurt like hell. He’d been treated, had his arm wrapped in gauze, and been left with a prescription for antimicrobial cream and a set of instructions for daily care. When Lestrade arrived, he gave a detailed account of what had happened, culminating with his entrapment in a circle of fire, his exigent need to leap, and the propitiousness of his clearing the gap between the elevated tracks and the lower, adjacent, slanted rooftop, which had been enough to break his fall, sprain his ankle, and assist him in rolling off and landing, hobbled, on the pavement below. A less graceful fall than his first, to be sure.

What had been less propitious was his arm catching fire. Once grounded, he hastened to shuck the coat, which became his primary tool in smothering the flames of his right arm. Above him, the hanging body still burnt brightly, though the flames crawling up the rope that held it would soon eat through, and by the time the police and firefighters arrived, it would be lying on the tracks, still cooking. His old Belstaff, or what was left of it, would be collected as evidence, along with his keys to the flat and an empty wallet, still in the pockets but scorched clean through. Cradling the tortured arm against a searing side and leaving his blouson coat behind (after retrieving John’s keys to the flat and an empty wallet, still in the pockets but scorched clean through. Cradling the tortured arm against a searing side and leaving his blouson coat behind), he left the back road onto which he had fallen and made his way back to Elephant and Castle Station, his sprain, being a mild one, hindering his speed, but only just. He needed to get back to John. On his way, he phoned Lestrade.

For his part, John had been found lying on the tracks, divested of coat and jumper, battered and unresponsive. They thought, the police did, upon discovering that he was not gravely injured, that
he was in a state of shock brought about from witnessing a man shot through the head at close range. As if it were the first time he’d ever seen such a thing. It wasn’t until the ambulance that they discovered the bites, and not until he arrived at a busy A&E, after Sherlock had been taken away to be treated for his burn and John was waiting to be seen, that he finally turned to Lestrade and announced that he needed to find a loo. Lestrade should not have let him go on his own. They called Ella Thompson.

They would have released Sherlock after an hour, but John was in what his therapist called a heightened state of mental distress, for which he needed to be sedated and monitored. Sherlock was not allowed to stay in the room with him, not this time, but he didn’t leave the hospital until John was discharged the next morning.

They travelled back to Baker Street in a taxi, silent, and bearing a pall of failure. They’d solved the puzzle, just as they had been meant to, but it didn’t matter. It had served his ends, not theirs. And now, two more men were dead.

They thought they could feel no more miserable. Then they stepped out of the cab and found someone waiting for them in front of 221.

‘Mr Holmes, is it?’

Two men dressed in suits and long, dark coats stood shoulder to shoulder as sentinels before their door. They swept Sherlock and John with their eyes, then, seeing the state of them and deciding that they were not a physical threat, they came forward. John subtly planted himself a few inches ahead of Sherlock, his fists balling inside his coat pockets.

‘And you are . . .?’ asked Sherlock. He’d never seen either of the men before in his life.

‘We represent Robert and Gillian Woodhouse.’

‘Who?’

‘The new owners of number 221.’

John took an aggrieved step forward. ‘What?’

One of the men reached into an inside pocket of his coat and produced a white envelope. ‘This is an eviction notice,’ he said. With his undamaged hand, Sherlock tore the envelope from the man’s hands and ripped the seal, but the man kept on placidly. ‘It gives you thirty days from today to vacate the premises.’

‘Where is Mrs Hudson?’ John demanded. He pushed past them and stepped up to the door. ‘Mrs Hudson!’ he shouted, pounding. He shoved a hand in a pocket for his key.

‘She’s not here, Mr Watson,’ said the man. ‘She’s been taken into the care of her niece.’

‘Into custody, more like,’ Sherlock seethed. ‘Tell me. How did you manage to wrest her property away from her? Hm?’

‘There was no wresting involved. She signed the papers. That’s good and legal, Mr Holmes.’

‘I don’t believe you. She would never sell. Never.’

‘Believe what you’d like. It’s done.’

‘I want to talk to her. John, give me your phone.’

‘Any harassment, Mr Holmes, and we’ll slap you with a non-molestation order so severe you won’t be able to think the name Hudson without winding up back in a jail cell where you belong.’

‘She would never—!’

‘You’ve already got one order against you. How hard to do you think it would be to convince a judge to issue another?’

The two men, having made their threats, now turned and walked swiftly up the street, leaving Sherlock and John staring dumbfounded after them, their eviction notice hanging loosely in Sherlock’s hands.

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The Curious Case of the Most Despised Detective in London

An opinion report, by Michaela Warner

Isn’t it odd? When I first approached my editor about writing a story about Sherlock Holmes’ return, I was told that it was a story the public didn’t care to hear, or at best, ‘soft news’. ‘He’s an attention-seeking git,’ I was told (your words, Larry!), ‘and we’re not here to feed that ego.’

Some of us are forever determined to remain unimpressed by even the most remarkable of things. Like resurrection.

What I was really being told was that the story wasn’t marketable. Just goes to show that even the most seasoned of editors lacks the gift of foresight. The Sherlock Holmes story is huge, like it was back in 2011 (you may remember becoming sick of hearing about it; we journalists couldn’t seem to be able to let it die—ironic, looking back); it’s been huge again ever since October; and, as far down the road as this junior reporter can see, it will continue to be huge for a while yet. Everyone wants a piece of it, everyone wants new and titillating information about this man’s brilliance and villainy. It’s as if the identity of Jack the Ripper were finally revealed. We all want to know!

So here’s my problem. Why is it that every time there’s something new to be had, it comes from
the pen of Kitty Riley, senior reporter for a tabloid: ‘The Sun. Am I the only person who finds this . . . curious?’

And another thing. Why has nobody pointed out the contradictions in her stories, like the way she paints John Watson as a victim in one story, a co-conspirator in the next? Why is no one asking more questions about her anonymous sources and nameless insiders? Why does no one expect—nay, demand—that Ms Riley substantiate her claims with something a little more concrete that childish name calling, sensational adjectives, and extraordinary speculations? Is she engaging in journalism, or histrionics?

What am I talking about? I’ll give you (Larry) an example.

Not two weeks ago, The Sun ran a story on the charge of assault against Mr Sherlock Holmes for his attack against Mr Scott Anderson of the Yard. (You will note, dear reader, that I refrain from inserting words like ‘brutal’ and ‘ruthless’ and ‘erratic’, words Ms Riley uses with abandon to colour [read: fictionalise] her stories. Most of us [read: real reporters] are trained to avoid using such judgemental language in the interest of maintaining at least some level of disinterest.) If you read that story, then you were probably under the impression that Holmes had held hostage his former girlfriend and terrorised her with the corpses of mutilated animals. For some reason.

Well yes, you say, I was indeed under such an impression. And why is that? Because Ms Riley told you so. Did you know, however, that said girlfriend, Ms Molly Hooper (who, by the way, has given me permission to use her name—a courtesy Ms Riley never sought) and Mr Holmes are not, nor have they ever been, lovers? Did you further know that Ms Hooper was quoted as having said, ‘I’m just scared. I want this all to go away’, which Kitty Riley attributed to her feelings about Holmes but which, in reality, were in reference to a break-in, in which Holmes had no part whatsoever?

And that claim about Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade being Holmes’ ‘long-time professional rival’? Utter twaddle.

‘I can name no man I respect more,’ says Lestrade.

And I promise you, that was a direct reference to Sherlock Holmes.

So if she lied about all that, what other lies has she committed to print?

Who is Sherlock Holmes, really?

Why does Ms Riley insist that James Moriarty was not real when the Yard reports that he was?

Where does her information come from? Or has she simply married journalism with fiction?

And why does The Sun continue to support such shoddy journalism? Have they given up completely on presenting even a half-credible paper? If the likes of Kitty Riley are allowed to continue pushing out questionable articles, the rest of the paper will go the way of The News of the World.

The Sun is not the lone offender here. You’ll notice, of course, that this article is appearing and being treated, not as journalism, but as tabloid (with all its editorial tone in tact), as an ‘opinion’ that isn’t worthy of being called ‘newsworthy’. But there’s something rotten in the city of London, and maybe it’s not Sherlock Holmes. Maybe it’s time a certain editor gave his most determined junior reporter a little more allowance to investigate news stories that matter.

(I’ll name no names, but it starts with L and ends with –arry Heinrich.)

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Kitty Riley was unhappy. Quite.

In just three days, Michaela Warner’s belligerent and ill-conceived opinion article had received more comments, likes, and shares than Kitty’s last professional article. Granted, an overwhelming majority of comments had lambasted Ms Warner (and rightly so!), not only for her juvenile take on expert reporting, but, more importantly, on her imprudent defence of Sherlock Holmes. It was laughable! Deplorable! How dare she try to smear Kitty’s name! To throw into question her credibility, her honour as a journalist, her tireless labours to bring the truth to the people!

Kitty was halfway through drafting a scathing rebuttal when her editor stopped her, told her to ignore the junior journalist’s sad attempts at counterpoint, and go find—in Ms Warner’s very own words—a real news story that mattered. ‘Prove to the world that you are the authority on this Holmes character,’ he told her. ‘Ms Warner can dig until her fingernails tear off, but she’ll never be able to unearth a tenth of the gold you’ve uncovered on the man.’

He was right. She needed something new. Something fresh.

She needed something the public was hungry for, something they’d been denied for far too long. Something damning.

What she needed, really, was the story of John Watson.

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She had been tracking him. Not stalking. That was illegal. Just paying attention in public spaces.

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays—not without fail, but with a certain degree of regularity—John Watson took a cab from Baker Street to Ashbourne Road in Kilburn for what appeared to be a two o’clock appointment. Whenever he did, Sherlock—unfailingly—accompanied him. Once they arrived on Ashbourne, however, they parted ways. Then, from her place on a park bench, under a hat and behind sunglasses, she would observe how John, cane still in hand, mounted the
steps to what looked to be an unassuming flat. Sherlock, after seeing him inside, would continue on down the street to do godknowswhat for an hour before they reconvened, not in front of the flat but just slightly further up the street, in a quaint corner bistro, one waiting patiently for the other, which, given what appeared to be an established three o’clock rendezvous, meant that neither ever waited for the other very long. Sherlock’s controlling behaviour was, in this regard, frightful.

After a bit of digging, she had learnt that this was the residence and office of Dr Ella Thompson, a psychiatrist noted for her work in adult trauma therapy. Interesting. Kitty would have to learn a little more about her. Where had she studied? Was she any good? Had she treated anyone else of interest or significance? Most importantly, was she open to . . . incentives? It was surprising to learn how many professionals sworn to protect the privacy of their clientele only needed a little grease to get the wheels of divulgence turning. Not a few ‘anonymous sources’ had been utilised in this way. Ella Thompson wouldn’t have to say much, just a few tidbits here and there. Kitty could make do. She was good at filling in holes.

But she’d save a meeting with the therapist for another day. Today, her quarry was John Watson.

She had a plan: arrive early, intercept him between the therapist’s and the bistro, and deliver her carefully crafted one-liner that she was positive would get him to stop and listen, if not go with her right then and there. Before the hour was out, John would spill. If all went to plan, he would give her the perfect ammunition to use against Sherlock Holmes.

So she arrived early, seated herself clandestinely on the bench across the way (under the hat, behind the sunglasses, behind a book), and watched them arrive, two minutes before two o’clock. Punctual as ever. She watched them stand together on the pavement in front of the flat, Sherlock talking, John nodding soberly while leaning on his cane and looking at his feet. After a moment, John turned and climbed the steps to ring the bell, and once the door was closed, Sherlock walked away. But he moved a little slower today, though for no reason she could discern at her distance.

So far, so good. She lifted her sunglasses (the world was really too dark today), set aside her book, hugged herself for warmth, and pulled out her Blackberry to read her competitors' news articles and to stay apprised of any breaking stories while she passed the time.

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He was there because Ella had insisted, at the hospital. What little she knew about what had happened on the railroad tracks had come from the police, not John himself, and she had learnt from their previous sessions that the police were not entirely reliable as sources of information. But it was clear John had been attacked, and he was showing every sign of a setback. A setback, she had told him, Not regression. She couldn’t allow him to think that all the work he had done, all the progress he had made, was for naught.

He wanted to rest, to stay away. Only for a short while, he said, but she wouldn’t hear it. On Monday following Friday night’s events, she made him come back. He did, and then sat an hour in silence, leaving her to do the talking. He came Wednesday, too, as promised, but made little effort to engage. He was depressed, she knew. Ashamed and discouraged and trying to withdraw inside himself again. Today, she would be less gentle. She needed him to talk.

‘Why were you on that railroad track?’ she asked. She’d already set him up with a large bottle of water, which now he drank from.

When she wouldn’t let the question die, he answered. ‘We were trying to save a life.’

‘No,’ she said, ‘why were you on that track?’

He swallowed hard, stared at his knees, breathed. ‘I needed to save a life.’

‘Whose?’

‘Orrin Tippet’s.’ His fingers worried the plastic of the bottle, denting its circumference near the lid. They shook a little. ‘And Sherlock’s, if I could. But . . .’

When the silence hung too long, she pressed him. ‘Go on, John.’

‘It was a mistake. I wasn’t strong enough,’ he said without breath. His voice pitched a little.

‘But you were strong enough. You’re here now, and that wouldn’t be possible if—’

‘I froze, Ella. I froze!’

‘John—’

‘He had me up against a wall, and I couldn’t fight it. I couldn’t fight him. It was him, and he had me, he had me!, because I let him. I did nothing, nothing, to stop him.’

‘Let’s step back, just a moment . . .’

‘Sherlock, he didn’t freeze. He was frightened too, or so he claims, but he ran after one of them. Me? I didn’t move a muscle. I was too bloody scared. Too damned scared. I’ve been waiting for this for weeks, and when it finally happens, I’m frozen like a corpse, just the way he likes us—’

He cut himself off, shook his head, covered his eyes. ‘He could have done it. He could have. I don’t know why he didn’t, but he could have.’

‘Done what, John?’

He glared at her from behind slotted fingers. She waited.

‘You know what.’
‘You need to say it.’

‘No. I don’t.’

‘You do. Because you’ve never said it.’

‘Of course I have. I’ve told you what he . . . I told you. You understand what I’ve said?’

Ella nodded, sensitive but unrelenting all at once. ‘I do understand. But that’s not the point. We’ve spoken in euphemisms and generalities, never the specifics. The point is, you have never said the word. I think it’s time you do.’

‘Why? What bloody good will it do?’

‘It’s a confrontation with reality. The reality is, something happened to you. You didn’t make it happen or let it happen, but it did, and you need to be able to accept that.’

He was shaking his head. ‘You can’t even say it.’

Dr Thompson set aside her notebook and leant forward. ‘John.’ She waited for his eyes to raise and meet hers. ‘You were raped.’

His hand was now covering his mouth, and he was holding his breath.

‘Breathe in and count to five,’ she directed. ‘Just listen to me for a moment. I’m going to tell you again what you already know. Language is a very real thing. It affects human cognition and emotion. But we have control over it, if we use it. The memories that are difficult for you to bear will continue to be difficult until you put them into language. They will continue to manifest in cognitive distortion (fear and hallucinations) and maladaptive belief (shame and self blame) until you take away their power to do so. It’s not easy. I know it’s not. But the most effective way to truly surmount these things is to write the narrative of your rape in detail. And then do it again. And again. And read it aloud. The more you do, the more you reduce your fear of the memory, and the more you will feel in control. And not . . . freeze.’

She was watching his stomach move with his deep breaths; he was regaining his calm.

‘Today, let’s start small. Just three words, John. I need to hear you say them.’

His lips parted. He licked his lips, and his jaw dropped a little further. Silently, she willed him to say it, those three words, an admission that would give him the power he so desperately craved. But for fear of further hurt, he could not.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I can’t. I can’t.’

‘You’re not a failure, John. This is hard work. And sometimes, it hurts. But it has to, if you are to heal. When a broken bone doesn’t set right, you know what you do? You break it again.’

To her surprise and compunction, he stood. ‘I can’t break that bone. Not today.’

‘Please. Sit back down.’

He started for the door. ‘Not today.’

She almost didn’t see him leave the office, engrossed as she was in the ever-growing thread of comments in Michaela Warner’s re-reblogged article, which was now getting attention in places like the United States, Canada, Iceland, and Denmark. Some of the comments made her laugh (‘This is obviously a sad woman’s desperate cry for a real job. Hey Larry Heinrich! I think you found your next humourist!’ and ‘Watch out, Sherlock Holmes! The Guardian has its very own Miss Marple. She’s the real detective here!’), while others rankled her even further (‘I think Michaela is bringing up some very interesting points. I’ve been suspicious of that Kitty Riley for weeks already . . . and It’s about time someone started asking these questions! I’m pretty sure those photos of the copper’s face were doctored up a bit. I took a class at uni where we learnt Photoshop, and I think I recognise the technique. That’s reporting the facts, is it?’).

It was only half two, but suddenly, there he was, on the street, half an hour early and heading straight for the corner bistro, his limp as pronounced as ever.

There was no time to consider why he might have finished early. She scrambled to gather her things (phone, check; manila folder, check; digital recorder, check) and hurried after him. Had Sherlock arrived early too? Had he passed her by without her notice? Approaching the bistro, her head swivelled around on her neck like an owl’s, checking to and fro, in front and behind, then through the window of the bistro where John had sat himself, alone, in a back corner, peeling off his gloves, scarf, and hat and setting them on the empty seat beside him. His phone he set on the edge of the table.

She checked herself in the glass of the window, then turned her back, lest he see her there before she was ready. First, she brushed fingers through her fringe so that it lay just right against her forehead. She applied a new layer of gloss to her lips. Then she put her phone in one pocket for easy retrieval. Finally, she turned on the digital recorder, pressed the button, and slipped it into the other. After one last look-around for Sherlock, she swung her bag onto her shoulder, practised her smile, and pulled open the bistro door.

The bell dinged pleasantly, attracting the notice of one of the wait staff, but she smiled, waved her away, and nodded to the corner to indicate that she was already taken care of. John, who was by this time already sitting with a cuppa, didn’t look up but stared blankly into the cup.

Oh, it would have made for a great photograph. He had chosen the most distant of tables. A low, orange lamp hung nearby, but he had managed to select the chair most in shadow. He still wore
his coat, unzipped, but even with it on she could tell that he was a slight man. At least, slighter than when she had first met him. As she stepped closer, examining him, descriptors sprang to mind: a desolate corner, she thought, then a forlorn man. She could already see her words in print: I meet him in a desolate corner of a quiet bistro in Kilburn. It has been more than three years since he and I have spoken, and I am unprepared for what I see. The weeks spent in Sherlock Holmes’ oppressive care have worn him ragged and thin, like a fern starved of both water and light. A forlorn man, he finds relief in even a short respite from the man who has brought him so low. It is not easy for him to speak, but like a flower finally set in the sun, he agrees to talk to me. Yes, it had a certain macabre brilliance to it.

Distracted by her own internal prose, she forgot her brilliantly crafted opener by the time she found herself standing at the table. Despite that, her lips parted, and she spoke anyway.

‘Why, if it isn’t John Watson,’ she said.

He started almost imperceptibly, and when he raised his eyes, she watched them go wide with astonishment at the sight of her. Before he could say a word—though it didn’t appear that he was about to—she slipped into the chair across from him. Smiling coyly and tilting her head to the side in what she believed was an affectionate, trustworthy gesture, she continued, infusing her voice with a teasing, flirting sort of friendliness. ‘Aren’t I the lucky girl. The way people are eager to catch even a glimpse of you, one would think you’re London’s most eligible bachelor.’

His jaw hardened and his eyes flashed. Without a word, he pushed back from the table, grabbed his cane, and started at once for the door.

If pressed, she would admit that she had not been expecting such a cold reaction. Edit: It is not easy for him to speak. The confines of the bistro put him too much in mind of past prisons of both body and mind. We remove ourselves to the open air where the softest flakes have just begun to fall. There, he can breathe again. She followed after him, ignoring the shout of ‘Oi! You’ve not paid!’ that John was no longer within earshot of. He was moving quickly, so quickly, in fact, that she wondered at the fact that he did not fall over—that leg seemed to be poor support.

‘Dr Watson?’ she shouted after him, rapidly tiptoeing her way closer, as she was in less-forgiving heels, which made them more or less evenly matched for speed. ‘The people want to hear your voice!’

Not breaking stride, he turned his head and shouted over his shoulder, ‘Piss off!’

_The anger he has so long kindled against Sherlock now bursts forth in unpredictable eruptions. I know not to take offence—he means nothing personal._

She kept on, and those who passed them on the street gave them hardly a glance, for though a man fiercely pursuing a distraught woman would have given many cause to interfere, the reverse did not hold the same social imperative.

‘John, you need to tell your story,’ she said. ‘I can help.’

He took the first street corner he came to, but she refused to be shaken off. She needed this story, his story, like a fish needed water: it was what would keep her alive, swimming, and she would do what she had to, to get it.

‘You don’t like what I’ve written, is that it? About you? About Sherlock? All right, then. Tell me straight. What did I get wrong? What should the people know? If the true story of Sherlock Holmes is still unknown, who better to tell it than you?’

He stepped out into the street, not to hail a cab but to cross to the other side where there were more pedestrians to lose her in. Dammit, this wasn’t going at all as well as she’d hoped, as she’d planned. Now that he knew that she was in active pursuit of him, next time, his guard would be up even higher. She needed to shatter it.

‘You’ve lost so much, Dr Watson,’ she said, killing her feet in her desperation to close the distance between them, ‘and all because of Sherlock. Why are you still with him? Have you forgiven him for his lies? His abandonment?’ The questions she had wanted to ask him, one by one, so as to reveal in each fully explicated answer, were now spilling out of her like bile with the hope that one, just one, would stop his feet. ‘Do you not blame him for your kidnapping? The torture you suffered? The deaths of your girlfriend and unborn child?’

John stopped dead in the street. Kitty, suddenly and inexplicably wary, finally kept her distance, not knowing which fuse she had just laid a match to.

A car horn blasted as the driver slammed on his brakes, but John, frozen in place, seemed oblivious. The driver rolled down his window, cursed them both out, and edged his car around the statue that was John Watson.

‘Dr Watson?’ she said.

At last, he turned. ‘What did you say to me?’

‘Did you not . . . know? Did Sherlock not tell you?’ she asked, one part excited, two parts terrified. Then she urged, ‘Let’s move out of the street, we can talk about it there—’, and touched his arm.

He wrested himself away from her. ‘What did you say to me?’

She jumped, and before she fully realised it, her hand was in her bag and she produced the manila folder, inside which she kept a single sheet of paper: a photocopy of an autopsy report for Mary S Morstan, signed by Molly Hooper. She handed it over.

His eyes fell down the page. The cane fell from his hand, and the hand covered his mouth.
She forgot about her story and was no longer crafting lines of poetry in her head. She forgot about Michaela Warner, her editor, and even Sherlock Holmes. Her moment of triumph was tainted by a strong and undeniable regret: She wished only that she had never given him that page.

Eyes glistening with unspilt tears, John, still staring at the report, staggered backward. Another speeding car blared its horn and cut through the narrow gap between them, rushing over the aluminium bar. It rose into the air behind and landed with a cacophony of clangs as it rolled away. Someone grabbed Kitty’s arm and pulled her back. ‘You can’t just stand in the road like that, miss!’ But she barely heard the reprimand. She was looking for John Watson, but he had gone.
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2015

At five to three, the bell tinkled and Sherlock Holmes stepped inside the bistro, shaking the flakes from his hair. It was coming down in earnest now, the kind of snow that was sure to turn the city white before London fought back with its grime and gunk. Whatever was white today would be grey by tomorrow.

He sat himself by the window to watch for John, who would be with Ella up to the hour, if she had her way about it. From here, squinting through swirling white, he could just make out her front door. Eyes fixed on it, he thoughtlessly picked at the bandaging around his hand and which extended up his arm. The burnt skin beneath was drying out and itched like mad; he would need John to help him administer more of the cream when they got home. In the meantime, he would try not to think about how sensitive his skin was to the touch. Each nerve felt like it was still red as an electric coil, and only the cream seemed to do anything to ease the burn. John knew just how to administer it, too, to cause him the least amount of pain. Instead, he would think about K O’N. Or, as he presumed, K O’N. That narrowed the field considerably to O’Neal and its few variations: O’Neill, O’Neal, O’Niall (or, less likely but not improbably, the Gaelic version: Ó Nualláin). Statistically speaking, though, the next victim was probably Irish.

Lestrade was handling it. And Donovan. Finding K O’N, that was. ‘Rest up, both of you,’ Lestrade had told him quietly in the kitchen, while John slept on the sofa. ‘We’ll need you soon, I’m sure. But until then . . . take care of yourselves.’

But there was only one victim to go, before the pattern was complete. They hadn’t stopped a single murder yet. What chance did they have of stopping the next? And even if they could, would it really stop anything? Moran would simply come at them from a new angle.

‘Something from the menu, love?’

He started a little from thought, which aggravated him; he was not one to startle so easily.

‘Just tea,’ he said. ‘Two cups. Bring the pot.’

It would be ready once John arrived out of the deepening cold, just in time to get something warm in him before heading back to the flat, which was too quiet these days, what with Mrs Hudson gone—a quiet that astounded Sherlock, given that she had never made any noise above a peep. Maybe he shouldn’t have made as much difference as it did, her absence from Baker Street. She didn’t live with them, after all, nor was she a permanent fixture on the wall they had to pass by to get to their flat. But in a way, she was Baker Street. She had been there long before either of them, and had remained after both had parted, as certain to be there as the street itself. And they had seen her there, every day since their joint return; they had taken evening meals with her, and tea times, and quieter times when no one spoke, just felt one another’s presence like the walls of the room: fixed, secure, reliable. But a wall had been taken away; the cold had pressed its way inside.

They’d learnt that Ginny Woodhouse was Mrs Hudson’s niece, a niece who had only very recently expressed much interest in her aunt’s welfare at all. Lestrade, being appalled regarding the situation of 221 and simultaneously unimpressed by the threat of a non-molestation order delivered by two probate solicitors, of all people, had looked into it himself and discovered the story: After Sherlock’s death and John’s departure from Baker Street, Mrs Hudson had gone into a depression severe enough that she had stopped caring for herself, or the property, a thing not noticed by anyone until the day she fell down the steps, broke her wrist, and exacerbated her already troublesome hip. Upon returning home, the current tenants of flat B found her at the foot of the stairs where she had been lying in agony for hours. They called for an ambulance, which took her to hospital, and there called the only family she had left: a niece in Norfolk.

It was agreed—between the doctors and the solicitors and the Woodhouses—that Mrs Hudson, though expected to make a more-or-less full recovery, was getting on in years; and that, should the time come when it appeared her mental faculties were waning, when her decisions became questionable and her wellbeing compromised, the Woodhouses would step in, exercise power of attorney, and take over the decision-making on her behalf. She resisted such actions, in the beginning; but the Woodhouses and the doctors and the solicitors persisted, and in time she was persuaded. There was no one else to look after her, after all. Those she would have thought to entrust herself and her property to were now gone, either dead, or haunted by the dead. She signed the papers.

Several months passed without incident. Then, Sherlock Holmes returned from the dead. Not long after, stories circulating around Mrs Hudson’s tenants began to emerge, and the Woodhouses, suddenly concerned, decided to act. They came for her one day, in the morning, before Sherlock and John were at the hospital. She had thought her family were coming only for a visit, to take her out to breakfast and maybe a ride in the country. She had gone willingly, happy to see the niece who so seldom visited, wishing they had brought the children. They left London and drove north, and it was only then that they told her they would send for her things, but they wouldn’t be turning back.

‘That’s kidnapping!’ Sherlock protested, at the conclusion of Lestrade’s report.

‘We’ll get this sorted, don’t worry, Sherlock,’ Lestrade said. ‘Mrs Hudson hasn’t even been seen by a doctor yet. They’ll need one to attest to her mental health before any of this can be legal, strictly speaking, and you know she’ll come out right as rain. But right now, there’s a lot of legal tape, and the Woodhouses are concerned she might try to contact you. So they’re restricting her from using the phone or internet. But we’ll get this sorted. Maybe, though . . .’
‘What? Maybe what?’

‘Maybe, until we get our end sorted, it would be best that Mrs Hudson stay somewhere . . . safe. For now.’

John said very little about the whole ordeal, but he was clearly fretting over it, especially when he learnt that Mrs Hudson had been so poorly at the time, had taken a bad fall, and he’d not even known. No wonder she had asked him for prescriptions for her pain meds, in the aftermath. He’d been under the impression that they were for arthritis, but he should have asked. He’d been so lost in his own haze of sorrow and anger that he hadn’t taken the time for her.

Maybe, thought Sherlock, they would actually talk about it, now. Over tea. Just the two of them. Or maybe John would want to talk about the session, though more likely not. John made very little mention of therapy outside acknowledging appointments, as if determined to pretend that whatever happened in Dr Thompson’s office had no bearing on his real life. Sherlock often wondered, after seeing him return from sessions haggard and depressed, time after time, whether it was ultimately doing him any good. For a few weeks, it seemed like it had, but lately . . . Well, it had been a bad week. Only a week.

The hour struck, then passed. At five after, Sherlock shifted in his chair a little restively, head against the window to look further down the street, but it wasn’t just the angle that was obstructing a clearer view; it was the swirling snow. He took his new mobile out of pocket and set it on the table in front of him, waiting for it to light up, wondering how long to wait before he texted.

At ten minutes past, he took the mobile in hand again and stood, leaving his coat (more of a jacket, really; he was running out of proper coats) behind while he stepped out of the bistro to scan the street from a better vantage point. They’d agreed on three o’clock, as always. Hadn’t they? He sent a quick text:

I’m at the bistro.
On your way?
SH

But another three minutes passed, and there was still no sign of him. His phone remained quiet.

So he called. And the phone rang, and rang, and rang.

He chided himself for his paranoia, but it was not unfounded, so there was no way he was going to stand even five more minutes pretending everything was all right. They had met at this very bistro after every session, and never more than two minutes past three o’clock. So he re-entered, returned to the table, and dropped three quid to cover the tea. While he was putting his arms through the sleeves of his jacket, a waitress approached.

‘Leaving so soon, are we?’ she asked. She was already collecting the coins off the table.

‘If my friend comes in looking for me,’ he said, ‘tell him I’ve—’

‘What, the little bloke with the cane? Been in here with you before, yeah?’

He paused with his thumb over John’s name in his phonebook, intending to try him again. ‘Yes.’

‘Already come and gone. Didn’t even pay for his tea. I s’pose you missed each other.’

‘Come and gone? Why? ‘When?’

‘Dunno. Twenty minutes. Thirty.’ At his scowl, she defended herself. ‘We don’t make customers clock in and out, you know.’

He thanked her curtly and strode to the door, but she called after him.

‘Ok, he’s a mate of yours, yeah?’

He nodded sharply, as if daring her to doubt it.

‘Like I says, he didn’t even pay.’

Sherlock rolled his eyes and thrust a fiver at her.

‘Cheers,’ she said, pocketing it.

Out on the street, he put the phone to his ear again and listened to it ring. After twenty rings (John still hadn’t set up his voicemail), he finally ended the call, huffing in frustration.

All right, think it through. What did he know? He’d definitely gone in to see Ella. He’d seen that himself. And left early, if the server was to be believed. Early enough to have gone to the bistro, order a cuppa, and leave before Sherlock, who was early himself, could cross paths with him.

Why? He must have been . . . upset? Afraid? Pursued? Oh god, what if . . . ?

He needed more information to eliminate or verify the most likely of possibilities. Leaving the bistro behind, he returned to the office of Dr Ella Thompson.

He had never stepped foot inside before, but the smell (a mixture of sandalwood and sterility) and the watercolours on the walls (meadows and seascapes) recalled him instantly to his childhood of psychoanalysis; of doctors poking at his rare mind with questions and quizzes; of the hushed exchanges between his therapists and his mother on the other side of the room while she cast sidelong glances at him, alternating between embarrassment and displeasure; of needles and pills and IQ tests and ‘behaviour nannies’ and therapy games that weren’t games at all but ways to control his outbursts and explain and counteract his antisocial tendencies. God, how he’d hated it. He hated this place. And he hated that John had to come here, three times a week, every week.
He walked straight past reception, ignored the girl trying to detain him with a ruffled, ‘Excuse me, sir. Excuse me!’, and pushed open the door to the office.

Ella Thompson was sitting with a patient, whose face was red and puffy, wads of smelly tissues in her lap. Both women stared at him in shock, aghast at the intrusion, and Dr Thompson started to her feet.

‘John left your office early today,’ he said, forestalling her protests. ‘Why?’

‘Mr Holmes,’ she said sternly, ‘I’m with a patient.’

Sherlock looked at the weepy woman. Fifty, maybe fifty-two, but still trying to pass as youthful given the state of her dress and heavy eye makeup, most of which was now smeared on the tissues. Recent pill addiction, given the pallor of her skin. And a current affair. The shoes told him so.

‘She needs a moment to pull herself together,’ Sherlock said, and he took Dr Thompson by the elbow and steered her out of the room where the receptionist, on her feet now and leaning over the desk to peer into the office, was gawking.

‘I’ll ring the police!’ she said, lifting the receiver.

‘Nonsense, Naomi,’ said Dr Thompson, removing her arm from Sherlock’s soft grip. ‘Mr Holmes and I just need to have a quick word.’

She directed him now to an adjacent room set aside as a parlour and closed the door. There, they faced one another squarely. ‘What’s the matter, Mr Holmes?’

He hated to repeat himself, but he knew that his first inclination to snap at her was mostly due to a building sense of panic, and he didn’t want to acknowledge that sensation by displaying its signs. ‘Your session with John terminated early today,’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘You know I can’t talk about that.’

‘Did he terminate? What time did he leave? Was he upset?’

‘I protect the privacy of all my patients, Mr Holmes. John is no exception.’

‘He’s missing. We meet after these sessions at the corner bistro, always at three o’clock, but he wasn’t there when I showed; he’d left already, and now he’s not answering his phone. I don’t need the details. I just need to know three things: who terminated the session, what time, and was he distressed? You’ll violate no confidences with that.’

He watched her eyebrows pinch a little as she considered him carefully. ‘It’s not quite half three. Don’t you think it’s a little premature to declare him “missing”?’

‘I do not, in fact.’

Again, he let her think. Then she walked over to the phone sitting on a side table of the room. ‘Naomi, could you please get John Watson on the line?’

Sherlock suppressed a huff of annoyance. He turned to the window where the snow fell softly on black London streets, watching cars roll by and people hurry along. He vainly hoped that he’d see John among them, but of course he didn’t.

A few moments later, Dr Thompson said, ‘All right. Thank you.’ She hung up the receiver.

‘Not answering, is he?’ Sherlock said stiffly.

She took a long breath, debating whether to speak. Then, ‘John was upset, but not distraught. I would not have let him leave my office otherwise. Things did not go so well today, and he’s frustrated. He chose to leave early, at about twenty minutes into the session.’

‘About?’

She smiled kindly at him. ‘It might have been twenty-one.’

‘And you can’t tell me anything about the session? What might have brought it on, the general subject matter?’

She shook her head. ‘No. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help. All I might suggest is that he went home. He may have been seeking the comfort of a more familiar place.’

He nodded sharply and started for the door.

‘Mr Holmes,’ she said.

He turned back.

‘Trauma, the kind John is suffering, can feel dreadfully isolating. But it touches everyone who cares for him, and it can be hard on them, too.’

‘I’m fine. I don’t need—he waved a hand at the room—“any of this.”

‘That’s not what I am saying, exactly. Thing is, it’s one thing to be a support. But sometimes being strong means showing weakness. It might do to let him know that he’s not suffering alone.’
His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t reply. He had to get out of there, the sooner the better. As he left
the office, he rang John’s mobile again, feeling nauseous and afraid.

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He returned to Baker Street alone, thinking, hoping, that John had done the same. But no one
answered to his shouts as he pounded up the stairs, and the flat was empty, every corner. The
sitting room, the kitchen, the bathroom, either bedroom—empty.

Sherlock swore loudly and went for his phone, once again.

‘To what do I owe the pleasure this time?’

‘Mycroft, I need help. It’s John.’

There was a short pause on the other end. Then, ‘What’s wrong?’

‘He’s missing. It’s been nearly an hour now, and don’t tell me that’s hardly time enough for
something to have happened. Don’t tell me I’m getting worked up over nothing. We meet at three,
we always meet at three, after therapy, and I got there early, like always, but he’d already gone,
and he’s not answering his phone. I don’t know why, the waitress was useless. But he might have
been compelled. God, Mycroft, if they spotted him, if they cornered him, made him leave—’

‘Sherlock, slow down.’

‘They must have been watching. They knew our patterns. We should have met in a different place
each time, somewhere unpredictable. No, I should have met him at Ella’s, every time. Oh god—’

‘Sherlock. Stop moving.’

Sherlock realised he was pacing erratically around the sitting room, on the verge of kicking
something over or throwing something into the mirror. But Mycroft’s words halted him.

‘When did you last see John?’

‘Kilburn. On Ashbourne Road, just outside the office of Dr Ella Thompson.’

‘All right. I’m having my people track his phone. If it’s in one piece, we’ll find him.’

‘If it’s in one piece. He started pacing again.

‘Sherlock, sit down.’

He did, perched on the edge of a chair.

‘Well?’ he asked, after long pause. ‘Have you found him?’

‘It takes a moment,’ Mycroft said, not unsympathetically. ‘You know that. Stop counting the
seconds in your head.’ This Sherlock could not do. ‘Are you still scratching?’

‘Are you still sneaking brandy snaps?’

‘Sherlock.’

‘Is that a yes?’

‘Sherlock.’

He looked down at his unburnt hand, surprised to see it bleeding freely. He must have been
scratching on the cab ride over, fingertips and nails poking out of the gauze wrappings and tearing
through the skin of his opposite hand. Without his gloves (he’d not replaced the ones he’d lost),
there was no barrier anymore to stop the damage.

‘Have you phoned the police?’ Mycroft asked next. He must have known he wouldn’t get an
answer to the last question.

‘No. Not yet. I was hoping . . . I’d find him here. At home.’

‘We’ll find him. We will. And I’m sure he’ll be perfectly safe.’

‘They took him so fast, with the cabbie.’ He was shaking now, unable to stop. With the phone
pressed to his ear, he held his head with the hurting hand as he bent himself double and began to
rock. ‘They had it all planned out, every step, there was nothing he could have done. And then,
just the other night, they knew, they knew, how to get him on his own. If they’ve planned it out—’

‘Sherlock.’ Mycroft’s authoritative voice cut into Sherlock’s thoughts again, hushing them.

‘Breathe. Stop counting those damned seconds, you’re not a metronome.’

Sherlock shot to his feet. ‘You can’t pretend this is all right!’

‘I’m not. And I promise you, we’ll move heaven and hell to find him again. But you’re letting
your feelings cloud your thinking again. You cannot do that.’

‘My mind is perfectly clear!’

‘Then why haven’t you called Lestrade?’

It was the first time Lestrade had even crossed his mind.

‘He has resources,’ Mycroft said.

‘You have resources.’
‘And he’s good at his job. Don’t be so quick to discount him.’

‘I’m not—’

‘You’re not alone in the world, Sherlock. Not anymore. Neither you nor John.’

‘What? What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Mummy was wrong.’

Sherlock almost threw the phone. Instead, his grip on it tightened. ‘Don’t. Not right now.’

‘I was too. The evidence is clearly to the contrary, so you need to stop thinking like that.’

‘Evidence? The city hates me, Mycroft. Everyone wants me dead, and to be the one to do it.’

‘Not everyone. There are those who are on your side, who always have been. They are why you are alive today, and why John is, too. Do not forget them.’

‘I—’

‘Ah! We’ve found him.’

Sherlock almost cried. ‘Where?’

Mycroft read out the address on Ashbourne Road; immediately, Sherlock pulled up the map in his head.

‘That’s the bistro,’ he said. ‘He’s gone back.’

***

Finding a cab to take him back was a tricky affair, as most empty cabs now made a habit of avoiding his stretch of Baker Street, a thing the neighbours hadn’t failed to notice. But on the promise of double fare, he convinced one cabbie to hurry him back to Kilburn. By his estimation, John had not been seen by anyone in nearly two hours.

He was constructing the most likely of scenarios: John’s session had not gone well. Dr Thompson had said as much. So he had left, arrived early at the bistro, and ordered a cup of tea. But whatever had upset him, whatever had wormed itself into his mind, only aggravated him further while he sat at the solitary table—he needed to get up and move, cool off, calm down. So he had gone for a walk. Perhaps he had lost track of the hour; perhaps he was not yet ready to talk about it. His phone was on silent, in a pocket, so he had missed Sherlock’s calls. It’s why he wasn’t answering his calls now. But return he had. He knew the bistro was their rendezvous, and he would wait until Sherlock came.

Yes, in the end, it all made perfect sense, and Sherlock was perfectly willing to concede that he had overreacted.

He wrenched open the door, and the cold and snow swirled indoors alongside him. His eyes swept the tables.

But he didn’t see John.

The clenching fear once again began to encroach. He walked the floor, end to end, and checked the loo. Nothing. Yet again, he went for his phone and called John’s mobile.

A familiar ringing came from the rear of the bistro.

‘Oi, Dean, it’s that damn phone again. It just won’t shut up.’

‘It’s locked. I can’t figure out how to turn it to silent.’

‘We should just flush it, eh?’

The voices emanating from the back room broke out in hysterics. With the speed of a storm, Sherlock crossed the room to the swinging door and pushed past the sign reading Employees Only where he found the waitress from before and a young man in an apron, holding John’s phone. They were laughing together as the kid tapped futilely against the locked screen.

He tore it out of the kid’s hands.

‘Whoa, hey man. I didn’t know it was yours!’ The kid held up his hands in surrender.

‘Where did you get this?’ Sherlock demanded, shaking it in the kids’ face.

‘Ease off, mate,’ said the girl.

‘Found it on the table while I was doing the washing up,’ the kid said. ‘I wasn’t stealing it, I swear. Put it in lost and found, but it’s been ringing like a fire’s gone off somewhere. Can’t figure how to turn it off.’

Sherlock punched the password and unlocked the phone. Then he swiftly scrolled through all the missed calls. All but two had been his—the one from Dr Thompson’s office . . . and one from Mycroft. The reality hit him. This had been in the bistro all along. John had left it behind.

His heart stopped beating.

‘Come back for your gloves and stuff too?’

‘What?’
The kid turned to a box that was set by the door. ‘Found some other stuff left with the table,’ he said. He pulled out John’s scarf, hat, and gloves. Sherlock took them numbly.

‘And you didn’t see him leave,’ he asked, trying to keep his voice steady but hearing the ever-increasing number of seconds ticking by in his head.

The girl began to shake her head, but the kid answered, ‘What, the fellow with the cane?’

Sherlock nodded tightly.

‘Yeah, I seen him go. Seemed to be in a rush, you know? Didn’t pay, and didn’t look too happy. Left with a woman.’

Sherlock’s brain whited out for a moment, and all he heard was an internal protest, like the high-pitched scream of wrenched metal. ‘What woman?’

‘Never seen her before.’

‘What did she look like!’

Images of Irene Adler conjured suddenly in his mind: hair the colour and sheen of a raven, skin cold as alabaster, eyes sharp as steel. His heart squeezed and drained of blood.

‘Dunno, man, I wasn’t really looking,’ said the kid.

‘Weren’t looking?’ He couldn’t fathom such an answer. Idiot boy!

‘Hey, a bloke doesn’t always look, you know,’ he said. Then he straightened and said proudly, ‘I got a girlfriend.’

Sherlock scowled and spat bitterly. ‘You call your right hand your girlfriend, do you?’

He turned abruptly, leaving the boy standing dumbstruck and the waitress keeled over with laughter.

***

He called Mycroft, whose people were already tracking CCTVs.

He called Lestrade, who wasted no time putting out a description and dispatching units.

He wanted to call Molly, but could fashion no reason.

Not knowing where to turn or what he was looking for, he began a wandering, frantic, trackless search. The snow was already collecting in a thin blanket of white on the ground, driving pedestrians indoors or into cabs. So how he came upon it, he could not fathom. He had no reason to take a right out of the bistro other than inclination, no cause or clue to take the first corner, and no need to cross the street where he did. But looking down, in the gutter, he saw a twisted bar of aluminium, crushed almost beyond recognition but for the hard rubber grip, which remained intact with the imprint of John’s clutching fingers.

Oh god oh god, he thought.

John had left behind his phone, hat, gloves, and scarf—he’d been forced away, hurried away. By a woman. The woman. He had dropped his cane. Sherlock’s mind exploded with visions of John being wrested into the boot of a car or the back of a transit van, his cane falling into the street, being crushed by rushing tyres, and landing ultimately in this very gutter. How long ago? How long? An hour? More? Had Sherlock been sitting placidly in the bistro the whole while, stupidly ordering tea and watching the street in the wrong direction while an unmarked vehicle stole John away?

Don’t kill him, he thought desperately. Please. Oh god oh god, let me find him alive.

He waited for his phone to alight with a cryptic text, a horrific photo, a threatening call.

He felt like he had been waiting for it for weeks. Years. A lifetime’s worth of fear culminating in this moment.

His eyes burned as he stood there on the pavement, the snow whipping around him, and he began to tremble.

Then the phone lit up in his hand, and his heart jumped.

But it was Lestrade.

‘Sherlock, you there?’

He had forgotten to speak. ‘What do you have?’ he asked weakly for lack of breath.

‘Okay, listen, it’s not confirmed, but I got a possible sighting.’

‘Tell me.’

‘An emergency dispatcher received a call from a barman about thirty minutes ago. A man matching John’s description was jumped just outside his pub. Four men tried to mug him, but he hadn’t a penny, so they started to beat him up instead. A bunch of blokes from the pub put a stop to it. Officers arrived to get statements from witnesses and from the victim, who called himself John but gave no surname. He declined to go with the officers, and refused any kind of medical treatment. Afterwards, my boys heard the description of a missing person come over the radio, thought it was a match, and phoned it in. I can send them straight back, Sherlock.’
‘What’s the address?’ he asked. Blood rushed to his brain so quickly it was making him dizzy.

Lestrade gave it to him, and Sherlock mapped it out in his head. It wasn’t far. If he took a cab, he could be there in less than ten minutes.

‘Was he still at the pub when they left him?’

‘Yes. He was okay, they said. He was just fine.’

‘Don’t send the police,’ said Sherlock, ‘I’ll go. If he’s not there, or if I need you . . . I’ll call again.’

‘I won’t call off the search just yet.’

‘Thank you.’

Sherlock lifted his arm to hail a free cab, but it sped straight past him and into the white.

***

The Poor Sailor was a hole of a run-down pub tucked down a narrow byway in a shadier corner of the city. Half of its neon-lit sign had gone dark and its sills were crusted with grime, rather like its clientele. But Willy Myers hardly noticed these things anymore. It wasn’t his problem, he didn’t own the place. He just poured drinks and wiped tables and made sure the lads didn’t get so pissed they were in danger of alcohol poisoning. That, and he broke up fights, like the one that happened tonight. Only this time, it had taken place just outside, not inside, the pub.

Four against one were hardly good odds, but what was more, the punchbag was a sorry sod of a cripple without a pound to his name and smaller than his assailants, who were just some low-life needle dicks. Willy and the boys had come at them holking and broke it up fairly easily (they were cowards, really, when it came straight to it) and helped the man inside. It wasn’t easy, given that every time someone tried to touch him, even just an arm, he flinched or jerked away. So they kept a respectable distance—far enough away not to make him nervous, close enough to catch him if he fell. Despite the man’s monotone assurances that he would be fine, Willy called 999.

Even after the coppers had collected descriptions of the attackers and gone, the man who called himself simply John had given no indication of leaving. Instead, he had disappeared to the toilet for a good fifteen minutes and come back red-eyed and limping, bottom lip still split but no longer bleeding, and sat himself at the bar, saying nothing, even when Willy asked if he could get him a drink. ‘Guess I could call someone to come get him. Just a slow shake of the head. Willy couldn’t remember seeing anything sadder in his life, though he didn’t understand why he thought it.

More minutes passed, with Willy watching the man concernedly out of the corner of his eye while he served other customers and wiped down the bar. What would he do, come closing time, if the man was still here? Call the police back, he supposed. He didn’t feel right turning the man out into the cold with no money, no phone, maybe nowhere to go. He tried to imagine what had happened to the poor sod. He was dressed well enough, clean shaven, nice coat. Not a homeless bloke, not yet, at least. But maybe he’d been sacked. No, that couldn’t be it. The blokes who came in from redundancy were angry, not sad. Maybe he’d lost someone, then. A wife—but no, no ring. A lover, perhaps. A close friend. Willy knew that look, too, and he thought maybe this was nearer the mark.

Then the stranger had put up a finger to summon him, and Willy had to lean far across the bar to hear him properly: ‘Scotch malt,’ the man said, not meeting his eye. And though Willy didn’t want to pour it for him, not something so strong, he did, and set the glass at his elbow. ‘You sure there ain’t nobody you want me to call? Someone to come get you?’ he asked again.

‘Mary,’ the man said softly, a whisper.

‘You have a number, lad?’

The man’s eyes closed; a hand covered his face. ‘No. Never mind.’

Relief flooded through Willy like numbing alcohol when, after nearly an hour had gone by, someone did come for him.

Sherlock stepped into the pub, dampened, out of breath, and overheated from his unavoidable long run; but his eyes fell at once to John, as irresistibly drawn as though he were a candle in a cave, though flickering faintly. In the dim lighting, John’s hanging face was cut in profile, and he was unable to make out any sort of expression. But it was him. In that moment, all of Sherlock’s incapacitating fears evaporated, seeing his friend safe, and whole.

But he had to quell the impulse to rush over or cry out because his brain, an agitated, whirling mess of machine wheels and electric wires on the verge of breakdown or explosion, suddenly cranked and chunked into gear and began working properly again and he could see, from the doorway, that John had ordered a single malt scotch whiskey. His fingers were curled around the glass, which sat squarely on the bar. The glass line suggested that he hadn’t taken even a swallow, but the faint, smudged, repeated imprints of a lip along the rim meant he had tried. Even as Sherlock approached, John lifted the glass and tried again, but his hand shook too terribly that he couldn’t even bring it halfway to his split bottom lip before returning it to the bar, his head sagging in defeat.

What had happened since they last parted? What had Dr Thompson made him do or say or remember? What of the woman in the bistro? Why had he abandoned his cane? All these questions and others, he knew, would have to wait, because one thing was obvious above all of them: John stood once again on the brink.

Softly, but with enough sound to make his presence known, Sherlock slid onto the seat beside him. John stiffened, the only sign he gave to acknowledge him. Sherlock knew then that John was perfectly sober. But just as clear was that he didn’t want to be. And one more thing was bottled:
rage. He radiated it. Perhaps no one else in the pub could see it, sense it, but Sherlock knew
something delicate and volatile was storming inside of John. He just didn’t understand it.

Cautiously, Sherlock set John’s phone in front of him, but he didn’t even look at it; his eyes were
fixed on the mirror of the stagnant amber liquid.

He thought of ordering a drink, just to sit alongside John and nurse a glass in quiet solidarity. But,
he thought, perhaps it was wiser not to draw attention at all. Fortunately, the barman, seeming to
sense their need for privacy, kept his distance, though he couldn’t help but cast sidelong glances in
their direction.

A long minute passed while Sherlock contemplated what ought to be done, what he might say, or
how long he should sit there saying nothing. In the end, though, he didn’t need to decide. It was
John who broke the silence.

‘Did you know?’ he asked. His lips barely moved, and Sherlock might not have heard him had he
not so long been attuned to John’s frequency.

But hearing didn’t translate to understanding. ‘Did I know . . . ?’

John lowered the zip on his coat and reached inside. He pulled out a single sheet of white paper, a
little rumpled, folded twice. Carefully, treating it as if it were brittle, long-aged parchment, he
unfolded it and lay it flat on the bar. Then he slid it down along the bar for Sherlock to see.

He saw right away that it was a photocopy of a form, full of boxes, lines, tight template text, and
typed and handwritten responses; it took him less than half a second after that to recognise that it
was a coroner’s report, like the hundreds he had seen before. His eyes snapped to the line at the
topped marked Decedent and read the name Morstan, Mary Sadie.

He felt his stomach plummet and his throat go dry.

Eyes closing, John asked again. ‘Did you know?’

And then Sherlock knew what he was asking, exactly what he was asking, before his searching
eyes even found the pronunciation, below the boxes labelled External Injuries and Internal
Injuries and Determination of Cause of Death, to the list of pathological assessments, including
lab results. He remembered—sharply, the cutting of a razor—what Molly had found in the blood
work, and there it was, typed in bold ink, that which the autopsy had later revealed—1.6
centimetres long, a mere 1.13 grams in weight, an estimated eight weeks’ gestation.

His breath was hardened like a stone lodged in his chest as he shifted forward in his chair, leaning
close to John. For a moment, a hand hovered at John’s shoulder as he debated whether he should
touch him. He let it rest on the back of the chair instead.

‘When we found her,’ he said gently and in a tone so low he ensured that only John could hear
him, ‘Molly ran tests . . .’

With that, John abandoned his drink and was suddenly marching for the door. Startled, Sherlock
scrambled to collect both John’s phone and the coroner’s report he had left behind and followed
after him into the cold.

The leg was surely unforgiving in its pain. From behind, Sherlock saw how he hitched forward
asymmetrically, leaving in his wake a shoeprint and a dark line in the snow from where he could
barely lift his leg and had to drag it along instead. Without the aid of his cane, he nevertheless
moved at a precipitous speed on the slippery pavement on which he was sure to collapse at any
second.

‘John,’ said Sherlock, hastening to catch him up. ‘John, I’m so sorry. Please slow down. We can
talk. Or not talk. Whatever you need.’

‘Go away, Holmes.’

‘Not this time.’

‘You knew!’ John cried. His voice startled an alley cat out of hiding beneath a stoop, and it
streaked across the street. But it also jarred something deep inside of John. He stumbled, catching
himself on the side of a postbox, but the moment Sherlock tried to take his arm, he shook him off
and continue on again.

‘I knew,’ Sherlock said. ‘But I didn’t know how to . . .’ His voice trailed off hopelessly. He didn’t
even know how to finish that sentence.

‘Not a word,’ John said. ‘Not a damn word.’ He crossed the street at a corner, oblivious to the
world around him, and cut in front of a car that had to slam on its brakes to avoid a collision. The
car skipped on the wet road but stopped in time, and still John carried on like nothing had
happened.

‘Please, John, stop,’ he said when they had reached the next street. ‘You’ll hurt yourself.’

‘Molly, too,’ said John, as though not hearing him. ‘Who else? Lestrade? Mrs Hudson? Mycroft?
The doctors and the coppers and the damned reporters—!’

‘Only Molly and Lestrade,’ Sherlock assured him. ‘And only because of their involvement in the
investi—’

‘Agh!’

His leg finally gave out, and he caught himself again, this time on the brick of a building that stood
on the corner of a narrow alley that dead ended in rubbish bins and wet cardboard boxes. Even
before he could right himself, he flung himself down that empty byway. He was shaking so badly
he couldn’t move straight. Sherlock followed.

‘How could you not tell me?’

‘How could I, John? Knowing this, *this*, is the kind of pain it would cause?’

“So all of London can know, but not me?” He whirled on Sherlock, his face bright red with fury, twisted with anguish. ‘She was my wife! She was carrying my child! You had no right, Sherlock, no right!” Then he covered his mouth with both hands and turned away in agony, doubling over as though ill.

“Perhaps,” said Sherlock, desperately, drawing nearer, ‘perhaps you can take some comfort, however small, in knowing the foetus was then unknown to you both. Eight weeks, not even a child yet—”

John sprang upright and punched Sherlock square in the face.

He fell hard against the alley wall, and his head cracked dully on the brick and exploded in pain. Losing both vision and balance, he slumped to the ground. His sight cleared slowly, and when it did, he saw that John had thrown himself at the opposite wall. He kicked, punched, again, again, bloodying his knuckles, damaging an already impaired leg. Then he took to pacing, thought he could barely stand upright, both legs unstable beneath him, one from the injury, the other from a phantom pain, returned. He pulled at his hair, scratched his neck and face; his mouth stretched wide in a soundless, silenced scream. But finding no release, he returned to the wall and beat himself against it.

Sherlock forgot his pain and scrambled to his feet. He rushed to John’s side, pulling him back by the shoulder. ‘John, stop!’

John shoved him away roughly with a war-like shout.

The world paused. The snow fell softly. They faced one another squarely. John’s whole body heaved with furious breath and bursting heart, and he glared at Sherlock, who stood stolid but with arms spread, palms exposed. For a long moment, no one moved. Then John rushed forward and shoved him again. Sherlock fell back two paces. Again, and he rocked back but held his ground. A fourth time, John came at him with a cry of rage, pushed him back, back, again, again, a hand flat against his chest, a fist driving into his side, his shoulders, his stomach, and with every blow and cuff that Sherlock absorbed, John broke a little more, hard stone cracking, an outer shell crumbling. Tears pressed beyond the seams of his eyelids. A sob tried to tear from his throat and caught.

It was too much for the broken man, too much. Sherlock received the next weakening blow to his shoulder, but at last he grabbed John’s swinging forearm and held him, pulled him close, and wrapped his arms firmly around his friend. In this unyielding hold, he crushed John’s hands between their bodies and pinned his upper arms to his sides, and he held on fiercely. Still, John fought. He twisted and tried to wrench himself free, push back, undo this hold, but Sherlock was immovable. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ he whispered. His arms tightened even more; he pressed John closer to his breast.

Something shattered inside of John; one need drained, and another came to life. What had seconds before been a violent impulse to get away became a desperate need to hold fast. Sherlock felt John’s fists curl around the front of his open jacket in a ferocious, clutching grip. His forehead came to rest just below Sherlock’s chin at the collarbone. But weariness and torment overcame him. As his full body began to quake, he unleashed at last his wild anguish, his ghastly sorrow, and with mouth gaping wide against Sherlock’s chest, he screamed.

And Sherlock took it inside himself. He let that horrible cry of despair seep into his bloodstream, resound in every nerve, chill every bone. As John lay his head against Sherlock’s shoulder and sobbed against his neck, Sherlock held him tighter still, until John, his strength depleted, no longer had to bear himself up at all.

There they stayed, locked in a fierce embrace, on an empty street, in a lonely corner of the world, while the snow gathered at their feet and covered them in white.
Chapter End Notes

Very special thanks to belladonnaq for her wonderful artwork and willingness to share her talents. You can see more of her work for other fics at her Tumblr account at belladonnaq@tumblr.com.

Also special thanks to kellpod for her stunning artwork. Follow her at kellpod@tumblr.com
The Iceman and the Watchtower

Buckinghamshire, 1980s

When Sherlock was four years old, the family left him overnight at the funeral parlour with the body of his great-uncle Vern, who would be buried next day. In the hubbub of relatives, acquaintances, politicians, and reporters (for Uncle Vern had been a man of some importance), and amid errands and to-dos and a dozen back-and-forths, they had simply misplaced the boy, and had forgotten both where and when. All night they searched, and as the hours dragged on, they phoned the police to report a missing child. It was the undertaker who discovered him, next morning, sleeping in a display casket.

His only living company had been the grandfather clock, its pendulum ticking loudly with the rhythm of a beating heart.

Were you frightened? they asked him, later, once the panic had subsided and order had been restored.

What of? he asked in return as he squished his peas at the dinner table, delighting in their revolting ooze. And they sighed out their relief. A friend of the family, a psychologist of the anti-Freudian persuasion, assured them that at his age, if they let the incident alone, it would make no real impression on him in the long run. All the same, it was perhaps wise to lay off the ghost stories for a time.

This was not a problem. Mother did not approve of ghosts.

In time, nearly everyone forgot about it. Sherlock seemed to be suffering no long-term (or even short-term) effects, and he had had very little to say about it to start. Mycroft, however, would always trace the tragedies of his little brother’s life to the night he fell asleep in a coffin, and wasn’t afraid.

He was fascinated by death.

By five, Sherlock had memorised the name of every bone in the human body. He could list them alphabetically, by groupings (facial bones, ribs, bones of the feet), head to toe, large to small, and in ascending order based on the number of letters that made up their names. No one thought much of it. After all, by the same age, Mycroft could name all the countries of the world, their capital cities, their populations, and their kings’, presidents’, and prime ministers’ birthdates without missing a beat. So bones were nothing special and impressed no one. Nevertheless, the knowledge delighted Sherlock. He marched in rhythm around the house with Cook’s saucepan overturned on his head, smacking it with a wooden spoon, and shouting at the top of his young lungs: ‘Mandible! Maxilla! Palatine bone! Zygomatic bone!’

His father, a great lover of quietude and order, shouted for the au pair to shut the boy up and take him away. As if the woman had any control of him whatsoever. She removed him to the nursery, where Sherlock proceeded to tear up the carpet instead of listening to her read to him Robinson Crusoe, never minding that his favourite stories were from Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur. Later, his mother scolded him and asked why he had done such a thing. His one-word answer: ‘Bored.’

He memorised the periodic table next, in the course of one afternoon sitting on a chair in his father’s library during a ‘time out’ (the nursery was being repainted after he had set fire to the curtains, and his bedroom still smelt of sulphur, for some reason, and was being aired out, thereby rendering his usual punishment corners useable). The reason he was being punished this time was that he had become overexcited—as the au pair put it afterwards—during a simple game of Memory with a neighbour boy who had been brought over to play while their mothers sat tea. Sherlock quickly decided that the other boy was too stupid to play properly and so took over, running around the room and hiding all fifty-two playing cards in corners, on shelves, in, under, and atop tables, and daring the other boy to find even one pair in sixty seconds. When he failed, Sherlock called him a moron and zipped about matching pairs himself, beginning with the black twos, threes, and so forth, giggling all the while. The boy, failing to be amazed, called him cheater. Sherlock rejoined with another iteration of idiot. Within seconds, they had wrestled each other to the ground, resulting in a bloody nose (Sherlock’s) and a badly chipped tooth (the idiot’s).

So the library it was, for one hour, on a stiff wooden chair facing the wall in an effort to de-stimulate him and let him think about what he had done wrong. He had no idea what he had done wrong, so he thought about other things instead, like the large framed drawing on the wall, the one with all the uniform boxes and varying letters (they were different colours, too!) and the little numbers underneath. Not knowing their meaning, he stored them away in little cabinets inside his brain (H-1, He-2, Li-3) to make sense of later.

When he had learnt their real names and set the entire table to themes from Beethoven’s Ninth, to sing loudly in every corner of the house, they saved their ears by putting him out in the garden whenever he started up, until one afternoon they found him uprooting Mummy’s petunias and burying them in little rows he called the Magnoliophyta Necropolis. (‘A cemetery for flowers, Sherlock?’ Mycroft asked him later, while visiting him in his new punishment room: the empty larder of the unused second kitchen. ‘Really?’)

For that infraction, they took away his supper.

‘What do you have to say about that, little man?’ his father said with folded arms and upraised chin. ‘Fm? How do you like going without your supper?’
Sherlock thought a moment, screwed up his little face in anger, and declared, “Transport!” before marching off and slamming his own head against the keys of the grand piano. To the dry larder he went.

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“What is wrong with that child?”

It had become almost a family mantra, so often Mrs Holmes, aggrieved by her odd little boy, repeated it and Mycroft overheard it and Mr Holmes nodded his agreement from behind his newspaper. Even Sherlock had been heard to mimic her in inflection and cadence, whenever he saw another child at the park throw a tantrum (“What is wrong with that child?”) or a homeless man mutter to himself on a street corner (“What is wrong with that man?”) or a woman cry on the news (“What is wrong with that girl?”). Never knowing when another mood would strike him, when another burst of uncontainable energy would come on, a tantrum would strike, or bout of excitement would seize him, Mrs Holmes avoided taking him on outings whenever possible, and she counted the hours when he was in the charge of the au pair as blessed, as he was rather too much for her to handle. For his part, an embarrassed Mr Holmes essentially ignored his youngest son, when he was able. He did, however, take an estimable measure of pride in the elder. Mycroft had long been a favourite of both parents.

For months, the Holmeses tried to handle Sherlock themselves—the moody, unreasonable, recalcitrant child—if ‘handling’ meant delegating his rearing to the young, untrained, and underpaid German au pair (after the Italian, Polish, and Slovakian ones quit), whose English was, at best, poor. But between au pair lulls, the discipline was left to them, and none of their threats or punishments seemed to have any corrective effect. Sherlock was excitable, he was loud, he was destructive, he was disrespectful—in short, the perfect opposite to the only member of the family who could manage him to any degree of success when he worked himself into a state, and that was Mycroft. Seven years Sherlock’s senior, Mycroft had always been a sober and practical child, highly intelligent, unfailingly gregarious with his superiors (adults), and fittingly sociable with his peers (all prospective Eton boys). A proper child.

From the start, Mycroft had always had a way with his little brother. He could sense a fit coming on like a clairvoyant knowing when the next bolt of lightning would strike, and he was expert at redirecting the energy—by distracting Sherlock with word games, board games, or outdoor play, or by suggesting that he audibly revise his latest recitations (Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Raven’, a list of creatures in the phylum chordata, or their mother’s favourite, the names of stars and solar systems). Failing that, Mycroft alone found any success in calming the storm in him whenever he got to screaming or throwing a tantrum or embarrassing his mother in any way, public or private.

He was the only one who could keep Sherlock in his room, face down in a pillow to wear himself out screaming while Mycroft crawled on top to pin down his arms, legs, and neck; the only one who would bother holding that same pillow while Sherlock punched the stuffing out of it, his little fists ferociously whacking away while his face, red with rage, steamed like a kettle and Mycroft encouraged him to get it out, get it all out, and the only one who could have him laughing again within minutes. It was a suitable arrangement: Sherlock seemed happiest with Mycroft around, and Mycroft felt proud that he alone had such an influence over this extraordinary child. Their parents took their brotherly bond for granted. After all, they were, and always had been, terribly fond of one another.

It was when Mycroft, at the age of thirteen to Sherlock’s own six, left for Eton in September of 1982 that Sherlock took a turn for the worse.

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He loved bones.

Skulls, particularly, but any bone captured his fancy. At his pre-preparatory school, while his peers drew pictures of their families and dogs and houses and flowers, Sherlock drew bones. Skeletons. Fleshless children kicking a football or a skeletal dog digging for bones in the ground. His teachers, a highly strung but longsuffering woman, once recommended that he draw more Skulls, particularly, but any bone captured his fancy. At his pre-preparatory school, while his peers drew pictures of their families and dogs and houses and flowers, Sherlock drew bones. Skeletons. Fleshless children kicking a football or a skeletal dog digging for bones in the ground. His teachers, a highly strung but longsuffering woman, once recommended that he draw more normal things, like a little boy with clothes on. ‘Boring,’ he muttered, though on his next skeleton, he deigned to adorn it with a top hat.

He became frustrated easily when it took him so long to pencil in all twenty-seven bones of the human hand and angry when he was rushed to finish, and not a few times did his temper get the better of him, at which point he would crumple up his paper into a tight little ball and whip it at whichever of his peers had annoyed him most that day before storming out of the classroom like a miniature hurricane. He was told repeatedly that he was not allowed to leave, not without permission, and he was often made to sit in the corner, or kept after school to copy lines, or prohibited from playing with the other children. What did it matter to him? He had no friends. He made the others nervous. If he came near a cluster of them on the grounds, they scattered like a flock of ducks at the crack of a rifle. They treated him as if he were made of electricity, gathering to strike, and lord help the boy who got zapped. In an effort to keep the peace, the teachers kept him separated from the others whenever possible. He had a reputation among them, too, the teachers. Blessed was the man or woman who had a Sherlock-free term.

The real cause for concern, however, came not from his outbursts, his refusal to socialise with the other children, his disengagement with his schoolwork, or even his disturbing drawings. No, none of those things caused too much alarm. The consensus was that he would grow out of it in time and not to worry. Their attitudes changed, however, the day that Sherlock was found in the boys’ loo, kneeling on the tiles with a pair of teacher’s scissors and a dead pigeon, surrounded by toilet paper, feathers, and blood.

He wanted to see the bones in the wings, he said. He was trying to learn what made the bird fly.

It was that incident that sent him to his first child psychiatrist.

***
Dr Hennessey sat with Sherlock for a mere twenty minutes before making his diagnosis. ‘There’s nothing wrong with him,’ he said to a sceptical Mrs Holmes. ‘A boy like any other, if only, perhaps, more curious.’

Curious, yes, and highly intelligent, things which the Holmeses already knew about Sherlock. But when Dr Hennessey called him under-stimulated (‘Under-stimulated!’ his mother repeated, aghast), he went further: ‘Bored. He’s like a pot of boiling water with the lid firmly clamped down, trapping all that energy inside that little body. He needs a healthy way to release it, to channel it into something disciplined but productive. Otherwise, it will come out in destructive ways. Like with the bird.’

He suggested physical activity, sport. ‘Fencing. Football. A junior rugby league. A team sport to help him learn to play with the other children.’

Mrs Holmes drew up in proper indignation. ‘I won’t have my child engaged in such barbarisms.’ Sport, rugby especially, was not what proper little boys did.

‘Then perhaps . . . music?’

Sherlock was already a proficient pianist, having begun lessons at age three, but he had never had much passion for it. Passion, Mother believed, was something children did not possess inherently but developed with time and so in the past had entertained none of Sherlock’s complaints or desires to quit. She expected similar resistance when she repeated Dr Hennessey’s suggestion to her husband, thoughtlessly within earshot of their son, who always noticed things they never expected or intended him to.

He declared that he wanted to play the violin. Father said no, he wouldn’t have more noisemakers in his house, and Mother tried to convince him that piano was enough and attempted to distract his overactive imagination with other trifling hobbies, like coin collecting, vexillology, ornithology. But Sherlock could be neither distracted nor dissuaded.

Mycroft heard about the affair of the violin during the autumn months of 1982 through letters from home. His mother’s:

He’s an irascible child, so stubborn and single-minded. Honestly, treasure, I’m certain he’s acting out only because he misses you. You were the only one who could really manage him, and he needs that sort of handling. Speak sense to him, would you?

And Sherlock’s:

They’re both so unapologetically irascible. My request is by no means unreasonable. When are you coming home? Eton is ghastly and old. Spend not a second longer there than needful.

Sherlock must have been reading nineteenth-century epistolary novels again, Mycroft thought with a smirk of affection. He did have a tendency toward imitation.

He wrote home:

Dearest Mummy,

Buy Sherlock the violin. And if he’s rubbish, as I shall discern this Christmas, I’ll tell him myself that he is not for it. He’ll listen to me.

Their parents also listened to Mycroft, and so bought Sherlock a child’s Windsor three-quarter size violin, thinking his interest would wane in a week and they would return it. It was with that confidence that they neglected to hire on a tutor and left him to his own devices, promptly forgetting about it.

That Christmas, Sherlock played for Mycroft: ‘Good King Wenceslas’, ‘Sussex Carol’, and ‘We Wish You a Merry Christmas’. At the conclusion of his recital, no one applauded. Mother and Father sat stunned. Mycroft gave a curt nod of approval and offered one word of praise: ‘Flawless.’

Sherlock kept the violin.

***

Though he loved the violin and even took to compositions of his own, scratching them out note by note on the string before scratching them out note by note on the paper he lined himself, he had no interest in performing, neither in recitals nor with other children, and he refused to play in front of anyone who was not family.

And though he now had outlet for his energy, thanks to Dr Hennessey’s recommendation, he was not a ‘fixed’ child.

During the 1983 summer holiday, when Mycroft was fourteen and Sherlock seven, Mycroft noticed other oddities in his little brother’s behaviour, patterns missed by parent or doctor. At first, it was just the small, ritualistic things, like straightening his cutlery before picking up fork and knife; or eating the food on his plate in clockwise fashion; or obsessively sharpening his pencils and ordering his crayons according to the colour wheel. Then there was the way he wore his clothes. It took only three cycles of laundry before Mycroft saw how Sherlock wore his clothing on a very particular rotation after each washing, shirts to socks. Upon investigation (as Mycroft was more curious than concerned), he saw that Sherlock’s shirts were hung in the wardrobe and his trousers were folded in the chest of drawers in the same chronological sequence each time. He wore his outfits left to right, like reading notes in a composition or words in a book.

An oddity, perhaps, but not something Mycroft was particularly worried about. Rather, he thought it funny and, as an experiment one morning, went into Sherlock’s bedroom while his little brother sat breakfast. He removed that day’s shirt and kicked it under the bed, then rearranged the neatly aligned socks and swapped the first day’s trousers with the last, just to see if he’d notice. Then he
stepped back to the breakfast table, and waited. He wasn’t quite prepared for when, twenty
minutes later, Sherlock, alone in his room to dress, began to scream. Mother came running, the au
pair started crying, and Father slammed down his newspaper before stalking out the front door,
not to return again until evening. Not even Mycroft could calm him, not until all his newly washed
clothes were washed again and ordered properly in the wardrobe and chest of drawers. Only then
could Sherlock stand to dress.

***

Behavioural problems in school worsened in his fourth and fifth years. Teachers reported that he
seemed intent on isolating himself from the other students and had no friends, that he was willful
and disrespectful and spoke only to correct the teacher, and that his interests were inappropriate
and disturbing.

Mrs Holmes was called in to discuss incident after incident:

One: Not long after Katie Wenham’s mother died in a car accident, Sherlock spent an entire lunch
period asking her whether her mum had bled out, and from where, and for how long, and so forth
until Katie dissolved into tears.

Two: During art, he drew pictures of tragic figures of history, literature, and mythology: a
decapitated John the Baptist, Anne Boleyn, and Sidney Carton; the immolations of Joan of Arc
and Patrick Hamilton; and the feasting of an eagle on the liver of a live Prometheus. The teachers
were bothered but, being the ones to have shared the stories to begin with, weren’t sure what to
do.

Not long after, he drew a picture of a gravestone, with his own name on it in bold black letters.
‘Why have you done this?’ his teacher asked in distress, shaking the page at him, nearly tearing it
in two. Sherlock frowned at what she was doing to his work. He answered, simply, that he had
wanted to see what it would look like. After all, it was what the other children told him, they who
had never heard the name Sherlock before but in very old stories about very dead men. It was a
not a normal name, they said. It was a name belonging on a gravestone.

But it wasn’t until Sherlock began to illustrate the deaths reported in the papers and on local news
that they finally decided to put a stop to it, sent him to the school counsellors, and phoned his
mother.

Three: When all the other students were at lunch, Sherlock disappeared. No one noticed his
absence until, upon returning to class, they saw that his chair remained empty. They thought he’d
left the school grounds altogether, and in a panic they phoned his mother and the police. Hours
later, they found him locked in the sound room above the stage in the school’s theatre. He sat on
the floor with his legs drawn to his chin and arms wrapped around his ankles. Rocking, slaming
his head against the wall. There was too much noise, he said. Too much noise, and he couldn’t
think, and he needed to think, but there was too much noise.

Four: A male teacher discovered Sherlock in the loo, soaking from head to toe in toilet water and
sporting a swelling bottom lip and torn blazer. The headmistress asked what had happened, who
had done this to him, or had he done it to himself? He said nothing. She demanded that he speak.
He did not. She insisted that he look at her when she spoke. He did not. She called him
intransigent and insolent. He didn’t care. And when she came forward to lay a hand on him, he
shook his wet head like a dog and sprayed her with toilet water. She assigned him three detentions
and an official school sanction.

Five: When a group of boys found a dead dog on the edge of the schoolyard between two
buckthorn shrubs, they called Sherlock over to scare him; instead, they were the ones who got
scared when Sherlock pulled out a pocket knife and began sawing off little chunks of dog hair and
stuffing them in his pockets. ‘For my catalogue,’ he told them, but they thought him wrong in the
direction of the Board of Governors, she suspended him for five days and left Mrs Holmes
unangustric, accused Sherlock of cruelty to animals, and phoned his mother straightaway. Under
the direction of the Board of Governors, she suspended him for five days and left Mrs Holmes
with a fresh list of child psychologists.

***

Mycroft heard about the parade of shrinks over the phone, primarily. He listened to his mother cry
and his father rage. Sherlock didn’t come to the phone anymore. But he still wrote Mycroft letters.

_They make me take all manner of tests. Pointless. They show me blots of ink and ask what I see. A
blot of ink, of course, perfectly symmetrical along y-axis only because the paper has been folded
over, but they don’t like this answer. They say, ‘What’s the first word that comes to mind when I
say ______’, and then they’ll say a word like ‘home’ or ‘dog’, and of course ‘home’ and ‘dog’
are then the first words that come to mind, so I repeat them, and they get angry and say I’m not
playing their games. But their games are stupid. They’re stupid. Ink is ink. They say dog, I think
dog. What else can they reasonably expect?_

Mycroft heard all about the remedies, too. One psychologist, believing that Sherlock had too loose
of boundaries, recommended a firmer disciplinarian hand: a more rigid schedule, every hour of the
day structured to keep him occupied in one task or another, to wake and eat and bathe and sleep
according to the clock; he discouraged play and creativity, and encouraged a reprimand system for
bad behaviours, including the loss of privileges and domestic corporal punishment to reinforce an
understanding of his wrongdoing. In the Holmes household, these methods were instituted for a
solid eight months. But when they failed to improve him, they took him to another shrink who
pooh-poohed the last therapist’s tactics and maintained that a change in diet and exercise was what
Sherlock needed most, but neither Mr nor Mrs Holmes thought this solution drastic enough for
their problem. They took him elsewhere, to a trendy New Ageist, whose philosophy was to free
the spirit and let Sherlock sing his own song. Mr Holmes hated the man, called him a ‘moon-child hippie nutter’, and yanked Sherlock out of his therapeutic wonderland before he could attempt to prescribe his son marijuana.

But it was the next doctor who recommended medication.

‘Three different pills,’ said Mother on the phone to her eldest, ‘that I’m meant to give him. Can you imagine? He’s just a boy, and already he’s on pills. Two dailies, and one taken every forty-eight hours to control the side effects of the other two.’

‘What pills?’ asked Mycroft distractedly. The Eton boys behind him were whipping each other with their ties and telling loud, lewd jokes. Mycroft had long been underwhelmed by their immaturity. He plugged one ear with a finger and leant into the wall by the phone, wishing the house master would pass by to shut the others up.

‘They’re to keep him calm, the doctor said. Calm and focused. They’re to control his behaviour.’

‘Like a sedative?’ He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He whacked away one of the boys who tried to engage him in their play and turned his back to reinforce the private nature of this conversation.

His mother replied something, but for the racket behind him he couldn’t quite make her out. Then, through the phone, he caught the words: ‘. . . neuroleptic for aggression.’

‘What?’

‘Mycrof, are you quite all right?’

‘Did you just say neuroleptic? You’re giving Sherlock neuroleptics?’

‘Like I said, the doctor says it will help with his aggression.’

‘What aggression? He’s fine, Mummy, there’s nothing wrong with him. You can’t start feeding antipsychotics to a child!’

‘Well, I’m sorry, Mycroft,’ she said, sounding a little offended. ‘You know I think you’re terribly bright, sharp as flint, but you’re not a doctor, love.’

‘Mummy—!’

‘And you’ve not been living here, day in and day out, have you? When you’re home, Sherlock is on his best behaviour, and even that is a challenge. But the moment you’re gone—’

‘You never learnt to handle him! You always left him to me. Always.’

‘I’m at my wits’ end! If I have one more conference with his teachers, one more mother phoning to tell me something else nasty he said or did to her child—’

‘They’re idiots, the lot of them. You know Sherlock’s not crazy.’

A long, loud pause hummed through the phone. Then, ‘I have to go, treasure. We’ll talk again Sunday.’

***

The pills made Sherlock sick. For four months, when he wasn’t nauseous, he was dizzy. He got headaches that kept him home from school, and he lay in bed and groaned and complained that he couldn’t think. Father called it an improvement. Mother petitioned the doctors, who worked on adjusting his dosage, saying that it might take several weeks before they found the most effective balance of medications. Meanwhile, Sherlock went through bouts of moodiness, sickness, and lethargy.

The day came when he refused to take the pills.

Mother started hiding them in his food, dissolving them in his drinks.

So Sherlock stopped eating.

Mother had him hospitalised.

***

Mycroft came home during the summer holiday of 1986, when Sherlock was ten, having only one more year left at Eton. It was the first time since Christmas that he had come through the front door and not seen Sherlock waiting for him in the entryway.

He sought him out and found him in his bedroom, writing at his desk with a metronome at his elbow. The swings of the pendulum, Mycroft noted instantly, were perfectly timed with the ticking of the clock on the wall, and with the tapping of Sherlock’s middle finger at the side of his head at the temple. The skin there was red and raw, suggesting he’d been at it for a while.

‘There you are,’ said Mycroft.

Sherlock didn’t turn, didn’t so much as grunt. There was no acknowledgement whatsoever. Mycroft let the door fall closed and sat himself on the mattress. Only then did Sherlock speak.

‘You’re late.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Your school ends on Friday. It’s Monday. You’re late.’
'Prefects stay the weekend,' said Mycroft, 'to see everyone off and help the teachers get things ordered for the holiday. I told you that.'

'You said you were staying on a bit.'

'Yeah, well. A bit meant the weekend.' He inclined forward, trying to see Sherlock's face, but the boy's head lowered, and he kept tapping, kept writing. 'What have you got there?'

'Nothing.'

'It's obviously not nothing.' He stood, and before Sherlock could stop him, he grabbed the notebook from under Sherlock's pen and yanked it away, leaving a long slash of ink across the page. Sherlock spun in his chair, furious, and made an effort to spring forward and retrieve it, but Mycroft pushed him back into the chair, holding the notebook out of reach.

'EASY there,' he said. 'You can't hide things from me.' He lowered the notebook to eye level and saw . . . hash marks. Hundreds of them, in neat lines and tightly stacked rows. Occasionally, a large number interrupted the patterns: 2,580, 4,335, 18,304. Page after page, it went on like this, and in the bottom corner of the page, what appeared to be a numeric total. 'What the hell is this?'


'Sherlock, are you counting seconds?'

'Can't stop. You were late.'

Mycrof shook his head, befuddled. He converted the numbers to explanations in his head: 2,580 seconds equalled forty-three minutes, the time he had readied for and sat his dinner; 4,335 seconds equalled one hour, twelve minutes, and fifteen seconds, the time he had spent in the car driving to the therapist, sitting in the therapist's office, and driving back home; 18,600 seconds equalled five hours, ten minutes precisely, the time he had spent sleeping. Over the past three days, when he hadn't been making marks on the page, he had been keeping totals in his head. Mycroft's concern elevated. 'I'm here now.'

Sherlock nodded, but his body kept bobbing like a bird.

'You need to stop.'

Again, Sherlock nodded. In time with the clock.

'You've gone too skinny.'

'You're growing too fat.'

Mycroft grinned. At last, his own smile cracked Sherlock's face, the clock stopped, and they started laughing together.

***

That was the summer Mycroft discovered that his little brother was in danger.

It was morning, and he was sitting in the parlour, reading the paper before breakfast—he had developed a habit of staying current on politics, economics, world affairs—where his mother sought him out.

'Some men are coming by later today to speak to Sherlock. They'll be in the library and are not to be disturbed.'

'What men?'

'Teachers. Educators, they said. They're here to give Sherlock some tests.'

Mycroft folded the paper and set it aside. 'Tests,' he repeated. 'Placement tests?'

She nodded and looked out the window. 'But his name is down for Eton,' said Mycroft.

'Eton may not be the best fit. Other institutions may be better suited to Sherlock's . . . needs. These men are going to assess whether he might have a place with them.'

'What institutions? Where do you mean to send him?'

'We've made no decisions yet, treasure. Don't look at me like that. I just want what's best for Sherlock.'

But Mycroft was little placated. 'Why was I not consulted about this?'

Her eyebrows rose in amazement. 'It's hardly your choice, Mycroft. You do not always know what is best for him. Besides, we didn't seek this out. These people came to us.'

So someone had had an eye on his little brother. Why? And for how long? What did they want with him? He feigned disinterest and left for his room. There, he watched through the window until a black 1983 Lincoln rolled up the long drive. Two men in pinstripes and carrying attachés, the pair of them, exited the vehicle. One checked a gold wristwatch; the other smoothed his lapels and checked the knot of his tie in the side mirror. Those were not educators.

Before the bell rang, he abandoned his room and made for the music room, which stood adjacent the library, and locked himself in. Moments later, he heard the bell, and while Mother went to answer it, he opened a vent leading to a flue that ran from the boiler, through the fireplace, and up
through the chimney. But it was also connected to the flue that ran through the next room. He knew from past experience, spying on his father from this very room while the man made important phone calls after dinner, that this was the perfect space to overhear the goings-on of the library.

He waited.

A few minutes passed while Mother spoke to the men in the entryway, then another few while she called Sherlock down from his bedroom. Sherlock was in one of his more rambunctious moods today, perhaps because Father was away, and had spent the morning playing alone in the garden with his toy rapier (he had wanted a real one, and lessons, but Father hadn’t even entertained the conversation), climbing trees and leaping onto invisible enemies. It was when he began prying up paving stones and digging his bare hands in the soil beneath for buried treasure that Mother had spotted him desecrating her garden and shouted him into the house and up to the bath, lest the neighbours should see, or worse, their imminent guests.

Now he came hopping down the stairs—Mycrof heard him pound each step in a way that was sure to upset Mummy. Sure enough:

‘Sherlock, you silly spot, behave! We have guests.’

Apologies were offered and refused, introductions were made, and at last, Mother showed the men into the library. Mycroft placed his ear against the flue just as the library door clicked shut.

‘Why don’t you sit down, Sherlock?’ said one of the men. His accent was the perfect model of RP. He might have been a cousin of the queen or a commentator on the BBC. ‘Then we can talk. We just want to ask you a few questions, if it’s all right with you.’

‘You’re not a teacher, are you?’ Sherlock said, more of a declaration than a question.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Your shoes. They’re too shiny. Teachers shoes aren’t shiny.’

‘No?’

‘Because of the chalk dust.’

There was a short laugh, and the other man spoke. ‘Maybe we wiped them clean.’

‘You can’t wipe chalk from laces. And you don’t smell of school, either. You smell of leather and polish and old-man cologne. Who are you?’

‘Sherlock, if you don’t mind, we’ll be asking the questions. Will you be co-operative?’

There was a harshness behind the polite delivery, and Mycroft frowned. He wished he could be in that room standing beside his little brother, observing every bat of the eye, every crease of the lips, every twitch of the fingers. Because, like Sherlock, he didn’t trust that they were who they said they were. And it did not sit well with him.

Sherlock didn’t answer the question, but perhaps he nodded and sat, because the first man began what Mycroft would later remember as an interrogation, though it started off innocently enough.

‘How old are you, Sherlock?’

‘Ten. How old are you?’

‘Do you like school?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Everyone there is stupid.’

‘What about your teachers? Are they stupid?’

‘Yes. Are you a psychiatrist?’

‘Why do you ask me that?’

‘They ask lots of stupid questions, too.’

There was a long pause. ‘You’re a very intelligent boy. Do you know that?’ He didn’t give Sherlock a chance to retort. ‘That’s partly why we’re here. You score very high on intelligence tests. Very high indeed. The question is, what will you do with a mind like yours? Have you given any thought to that, Sherlock? Do you know what you’ll do when you grow up?’

Years before, Mycroft knew, their parents had nurtured the hope that their sons would do well in life. Mycroft had long been encouraged to follow his father into politics, local government to start, but eventually (inevitably, certainly) he would be an MP in the House of Commons, and there was even talk around the dinner table of the day he would become Prime Minister. Barring that, he would at least work for a ministerial department. The Ministry of Justice or Home Office, something of the sort. It would be important work.

Sherlock? Even Mycroft struggled to remember what the early ambitions of his parents had been for him. Perhaps something governmental. Perhaps a professorship, or something in finance, or a doctor. But as Sherlock grew, talk of anything of the sort dribbled to nothing at all, save the occasional mention of keeping him out of trouble, out of the public eye, if he didn’t sort himself out. Mycroft didn’t know what Sherlock envisioned for himself.
‘Piracy.’

Mycroft snorted and covered his mouth to keep from laughing aloud.

‘Pardon?’

‘I’ll be a pirate. I’ll waylay passing ships and steal their treasure. I’ll use cannons and torpedoes. I’ll throw the captain to the sharks and take their gold and their maps and their clean water.’

‘Are you always this cheeky?’

‘Don’t ask stupid questions.’

‘Fine. You don’t want to be handled gently. I respect that. Then let’s be more direct, shall we? Why do you like bones, Sherlock?’

Mycroft’s smile slipped.

‘Who told you I like bones?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘Why shouldn’t I?’

‘It’s an unusual interest. Most boys your age are more interested in sport. Or comic books. Or going to the cinema.’

‘Dull, dull, and dull.’

‘Do you have friends, Sherlock?’

For the first time since the interview started, Sherlock fell silent. Ear pressed to the vent, Mycroft frowned.

‘Can you name even one?’

He couldn’t.

And as the interview progressed, Mycroft grew more and more agitated with the men’s questions, with Sherlock’s answers. They weren’t the questions of a schoolmaster vetting a potential student, or even of a psychiatrist trying to understand and help a sick mind. So who were these men? Why were they asking him questions about his social ineptitude, isolation, and intolerance for his lesser peers? What did it matter to them, Sherlock’s drawings and interest in skeletal structures and anatomy? What business was it of theirs, his history of aggression and discipline problems at school and in the home? Mycroft wanted to tell the men to bugger off, or at the very least to shout at Sherlock and tell him to stop answering their invasive questions.

But Sherlock himself seemed to be getting impatient with them.

‘Do you love your mother?’

‘Do you love yours?’

‘Let’s not be impertinent, Sherlock. Is she kind to you?’

‘She is not unkind.’

‘That’s not the same thing. What about your father?’

‘What about him?’

‘Do you love your father?’

There was the sudden sound of shod feet hitting the floor. Sherlock was out of the chair. ‘Shut up. Stop talking. I’m tired of answering questions. You’re not teachers. You’re not psychiatrists. I don’t have to talk to you anymore.’

What Mycroft heard next was a door opening, then slamming, as Sherlock hurried himself away.

He couldn’t.

‘Ah, Mrs Holmes.’

Mycroft heard his mother enter the room where the two men, quickly terminating their conversation, clicked closed an attaché and rose to their feet. He imagined them closing the top buttons of their suit coats resuming the mode of gentlemen.
'Is everything all right?' his mother asked; if she were not so dignified a woman, she would be wringing her hands. But Mycroft knew she had mastered every public face and posture, and she was certainly using them now. 'Sherlock just ran upstairs . . .'

'Perfectly all right. Thank you so much for inviting us. You have a lovely home. And a very special son.'

'Is he? That is, is he what you’re looking for? For your school?'

There is no school, Mother, Mycroft thought.

'Only, I know he would do so well there. He’s very bright. And talented. You should hear him play the violin. Do stay for tea. I’m sure I could persuade him to give you a performance.'

'That is very kind, Mrs Holmes. And he is very bright, there’s no doubt. Unfortunately, he does not quite fit our criteria. I’m sure he’ll excel, though, with his current curriculum.'

'Oh no. No, do reconsider. Please—'

'Good day, Mrs Holmes. You’ve such a lovely home.'

Mycroft slid shut the vent and hurried from the music room and into the hallway to see their backs disappearing through the front door. His mother bid them farewell, with all the dignity of her class and upbringing. But then they were gone, and in the silence of the house, his mother’s shoulders slumped and she rested her head against the closed door. That’s when Mycroft heard a rhythmic banging coming from upstairs.

His mother twisted around, her face pinched and reddening. She hurried up the long stairs, and Mycroft followed. But when they got to Sherlock’s door, they found it locked.

'Sherlock!' Mother said, rattling the handle. ‘You open this door right now.’

The banging did not change in tempo but intensity. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

‘This instant, do you hear?’ She slapped the flat of her hand against the door jamb. ‘What did you say to those men? What?’

‘Mummy,’ said Mycroft, putting a hand on her arm to stop her pounding. She slapped it away.

‘They just wanted to help you!’ she yelled through the door. ‘Why won’t you let anyone help you? Why must you be such a nasty little boy all the time? I can’t bear it!’

The banging got louder still.

Mycroft seized his mother by the arms and pulled her away, down the hall. ‘I’ll talk to him, I’ll talk to him,’ he said, even as she began to cry. He put her in her own room and closed the door, then returned to Sherlock’s.

‘Let me in,’ he said. He twisted the handle, but the lock held fast. And beyond: Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. ‘Sherlock. It’s me. Let me in, I want to talk.’ Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. ‘If you’re still counting those damned seconds, I’ll thank you myself. Stop it.’

The noise stopped. But Sherlock didn’t let him in.

He didn’t see Sherlock the rest of the evening. By dinner, Father had returned home, but still Sherlock did not leave his room. To Mycroft’s vexation, Father didn’t even ask about his empty seat. In fact, he didn’t ask about the interview at all, and Mother made no mention of it. Mycroft began to suspect that she had never told him to begin with, just as she hadn’t mentioned it to Mycroft, and he was seeing it now, that which he could not see and had not cared about while away at school. His parents sat at opposite ends of the table, but they might as well have been on opposite ends of England. Though they had never been especially affectionate in their marriage, they had at least been unified, a thing that no longer stood as true. There was a wedge that had been driving them apart for years, and it went by the name of Sherlock.

Dinner was eaten in near silence, forks clinking plates and small gulps from glasses, while Mycroft contemplated what had happened to his family. He thought about Sherlock, his mother’s attempts to fix him, and his father’s campaign to ignore him. He thought of the intruders, men who were neither teachers nor psychiatrists, and wondered why they had come. What about Sherlock had caught their attention, their interest, their concern? It couldn’t have been based solely on his intelligence, or they would have come after Mycroft, too. They would have come after Mycroft first. So intellect was a factor, but not the only one. The difference then? It must have been based on personality and behaviour. They had asked too many questions about his preferences and then gauged his reactions. They knew about his disciplinary problems at school and his morbid fascination with skeletons and corpses and death. And Sherlock? He had done nothing to promote himself as a normal, healthy child. He had been belligerent, indecorous, and offensive as a mode of defence. Tally it all together and . . .

They were afraid of him.

Or rather, they were afraid of what he might do, who he might become. They thought he had the capacity to be dangerous. To whom? Not to the family, surely. Then to others. Classmates, teachers, strangers, society? The light of Mycroft’s understanding was illuminating hitherto unseen truths, and he didn’t like what he saw. It was clear to him now, their words: He fits the profile, no question. Profile? But of course. A checklist, a checklist of attributes that one can spot in early childhood that, when combined, are the summation of warning signs of . . . what? Criminals? Not just criminals. That was too simple, a matter for the police, and those men were not police. Who then? What greater authority was there? Were they government? They had not identified themselves as such, and certainly the standard government authority would not cloak himself in secrecy. But then, he supposed, what if there were underground branches of government, divisions within M15 and M16, who had an interest in monitoring people like Sherlock? If it were
true, then they were watching him now, and they intended to watch him for the next twelve years.
There would be a file somewhere secret, inaccessible to the common citizen or even standard
official, with Sherlock’s name on, evaluations every three years, strange men who didn’t even
know him determining just how risky he was. And Sherlock wouldn’t even know. Father and
Mother wouldn’t even know.

But Mycroft. He knew.

And in that moment, it was obvious what he would do with his life. He would go into government
after all, but not as a politician. No. He would discover what those men did, who they worked for,
and when he did, he would take all the necessary steps to become one of them. He would learn
their secrets, their plans. It would be the best way to keep his eye on his little brother.

And he would do whatever it took to get Sherlock’s name off that list.

***

‘Be normal.’

‘Stop fidgeting.’

‘Shut up.’

There were many reasons Sherlock did not like his father. Nevertheless, he learnt important life
lessons from the man. Like how one should always abhor sentiment, recoil from physical
affections, and never abide fools. Such were the Holmes brothers’ earliest lessons, and they learnt
them well.

He preferred it when his father was away, which was most often. And when he was home,
Sherlock kept his distance, staying in his room, playing in the garden, and leaving the house to
wander the streets. He liked being on his own. He liked public transportation—buses, mostly—
just hopping on, paying the fare, and seeing where it would take him. He always found his way
home again, sometimes in time for dinner, though not always. He got as far as London, once,
which he had visited before with his family, back when they used to go on holiday together, to
London, to North Devon, to Southern France; but the city seemed to have a new life when he set
his own two independent feet on those streets, far from the shadow of his mother, the reach of his
father, and he decided that he quite liked the thick London air in his lungs, the noise of traffic in
his ears, and the pulse of the city, like the beat of a heart.

Mother called the police on him a few times, if dark fell and still he hadn’t returned home. It was
how he came to know the backseat of a copper’s car, and how the police came to know the road
to his front door. It embarrassed his mother, having them show up again and again with Sherlock
tow, and it infuriated his father, if ever he was there to witness it. His ire was aroused, but not
because Sherlock had been caught doing something criminal. After all, all he had done was
wander. No, it was because of the suspicious look in the policemen’s eyes, and the questions, the
insinuations: ‘Normally, Mr Holmes, children don’t make a habit of running, unless there is
something to run from.’

‘There’s nothing normal about this one,’ Mr Holmes rejoined, making every effort to appear in
control of his own house. Once the door was closed in on them again, however, he turned a
hateful eye on the boy. Sherlock returned it in full measure, for once again, he had noticed the
distinct scent of perfume on the cuff of his father’s sleeve when he had grabbed Sherlock to pull
him into the house. It was a woman’s fragrance, though foreign to his mother.

‘Stewardess or receptionist, this time?’ he asked balefully, raking Mr Holmes from collar to shoe
with his gaze, looking for signs that might indicate one answer over the other.

His father’s eyes went wide and his jaw fell open a moment before snapping shut. He snatched
Sherlock up by the collar. ‘Shut your goddamn mouth, and get the hell up to your room. I don’t
care. In the end, he didn’t talk for fifteen days. At the dinner table, in classes, and
everywhere in between, he was as mute as a fish, and it didn’t seem to bother a soul. This
astonished him, their failure to observe, their pure stupidity, but what astonished him more was
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Sherlock up by the collar. ‘Shut your goddamn mouth, and get the hell up to your room. I don’t
want to hear another word out of you. Not one. More. Word. Or I’ll shut you up myself.’ Then he
thrust Sherlock toward the stairs like he was casting out the devil.

Sherlock did shut up. Experimentally. Just to see whether anyone would notice, whether anyone
would care. In the end, he didn’t talk for fifteen days. At the dinner table, in classes, and
everywhere in between, he was as mute as a fish, and it didn’t seem to bother a soul. This
astonished him, their failure to observe, their pure stupidity, but what astonished him more was
uses words like _absolution_—until he started drinking too much. And Father is having sex with other women. The receptionist this week, I think, because he’s not flying anywhere until Monday.’

The words came tumbling out of him without reserve, all the thoughts and observations that had been building up in him during his period of self-imposed silence. He simply couldn’t hold it in any longer. But he had not anticipated her response. Surely, she would want to know she had been stolen from, lied to, and cheated on. Didn’t people want to know such things? Shouldn’t she be impressed, praise him for his acuity, thank him for bringing these things to her attention?

But no. Instead, she did something she had never done before and would never do again. She rose to her feet and slapped Sherlock hard across the face. Then, without another word, she walked away, leaving him alone in the middle of the room, silent once again.

‘Sherlock, you idiot.’ Mycroft nearly shouted into the phone at the conclusion of his brother’s recapitulation, some days later. ‘Why did you have to go and say a thing like that to her?’

‘Why? Because he’s a——!’

‘We all know what he is. I’ve known it since last summer. And Mummy’s known it longer. You think you’re telling her something she doesn’t already know?’

‘But——’

‘She was happy that way, pretending.’

‘But——’

‘And now you’ve taken that away from her, because you’ve shown that you know, too, and she can’t pretend anymore. Badly done, Sherlock.’

‘She’s not been happy, I was only trying to help, and I would do it again.’

‘Are you really so hell-bent on upsetting her? You’ll ruin the family.’

‘I’ve only told the truth. People _want_ the truth.’

‘Not that truth. Very badly done, indeed.’

‘You disapprove of me?’

‘You’ve done little to warrant my approval. Stop trying to be so clever sometimes, and just _think._’

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Even in his most rational of moments, Mycroft would always blame Sherlock for their parents’ divorce. Cause and effect, and Sherlock was the cause. He was sorry for the dissolution of their marriage, and not because he hated to see the man go (far from it), not even because of his mother’s subsequent dependency on tricyclic antidepressants and almost complete withdrawal from parenting. Rather, his primary concern was that Sherlock’s secret file would now be re-evaluated to include the fact that he came from a broken home. His profile was worsening, and he was doing nothing but harming himself in this regard, thereby making Mycroft’s future job all the more difficult.

The last time the Holmes brothers saw their father, he was leaving through the front door, though they did not stand together to watch him go. While Mother lay in her bedroom, wide awake and listening to the sounds in the house, Mycroft stood at the end of the hall and watched his father’s back pass over the threshold for the last time. High above them, Sherlock observed the man through a window. Once the car rolled away, silence fell on the house, and each kept to his or her respective spaces until dinner, which Mycroft arranged with the kitchen and for which Mother did not show. It was only later that Mycroft discovered that Sherlock had spent the hours dismantling his violin, regretting it, and trying to put it back together again, but in vain.

The last time they heard from Mr Holmes was nine years later, in an obituary.

But it was in the succeeding two years that Sherlock and Mycroft’s bond of brotherly affection and camaraderie, already plucked and fraying, began to unravel. Mycroft no longer held back in being openly critical of his little brother’s deviations and eccentricities, or of his failure to utilise his mind in productive and normalising daily occupations; and Sherlock’s earlier displays of adoration fizzled and vanished like white smoke. From afar, they regarded one another warily, and in close quarters they practised sharp repartee and insult, Mycroft usually gaining the upper hand for wit and wiles while Sherlock tried mightily to keep up. Never mind that he was seven years older, Mycroft dealt his little brother sharp mental blows as if he were of equal cerebral standing and a perfect intellectual counterpart, of which Mycroft, in truth, had none. He was not unaware of what he was doing, of course, but he had a purpose: if Sherlock could but divorce himself from all passions and sentiment, he would—logically—be of more stable mind and character, and of little interest to those in higher, more dangerous circles.

**Eton, 1989**

Mycroft completed his schooling and went on to university, just as he was meant to, and Sherlock, making every sign of displeasure, followed in Mycroft’s footsteps and went to Eton. Mother would hear nothing of his desires to go to London schools, not when so fine an institution as Eton was willing to accept him. On the day she sent him off, hiring a car to carry him away so she wouldn’t have to leave the house herself, she stood before him and severely adjusted his tie and flattened his mess of dark, curly hair.

‘I don’t want to see you again before Christmas, hear me?’ she said. ‘You are to behave. Keep your nose clean and keep to your studies. I don’t care if you don’t make a single friend, but if I get one phone call from your house master, even one, _so_ help me God, Sherlock, I will ship you off to
It was 1989, and Sherlock was thirteen years old. As his mother predicted, he made no effort to befriend any of the other boys and kept mostly to his study-bedroom, if he could help it, earning him something of a reputation as a reclusive, if not a pariah. But unlike the children of his youth who had made efforts to avoid him, the Eton boys singled him out as peculiar—for his manner of speaking, his funny face, the way he seldom smiled (some called him a cyborg)—and made sport of ridiculing and humiliating him. It was in this way that he became intimately acquainted with the floor of the boys’ loo, learnt how to untie himself from all manner of knots, and began practising the arts of foregoing both food and sleep while he kept vigil against another midnight attack of boys pissing on him while he slept, or against another midday prank wherein they bid rat shit in his food.

And it was while sitting in the nurse’s station, holding a cold compress to his left eye, that his right eye caught the headline of The Times left on a nearby table:

11-year-old Sussex boy drowns in pool

For lack of anything better to read, he dragged the paper closer.

London – The Stratford Recreation Centre has been closed indefinitely while officials look into the death of 11-year-old Carl Powers, son of Marion and Judy Powers of Brighton. His death comes as a shock and tragedy for all who knew him. His family was unavailable for comment.

Powers, a member of the Brighton Junior Swim League, suffered an apparent seizure while swimming in the Stratford Recreation Centre pool at approximately 9.00 Friday morning while on a school trip. He drowned when help failed to reach him in time. His coach, Mr Terry Granger, says that Powers had been swimming regularly for the last four years and was a strong and capable swimmer for his age.

‘He took to the water like a fish,’ Granger said. ‘We all expected such great things from Carl, and he was such an upstanding lad. Clearing out his locker was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.’

Powers kept a temporary locker at the Centre, which his coach took responsibility for emptying. Granger recalls the moment of turning over Carl’s folded shirt, trousers, underwear, shampoo, towel, and gym bag to his mother.

‘I felt like an American soldier,’ Granger said, ‘handing a folded flag to the mother of a fallen comrade. Awful, just awful.

Services for Carl will be held . . .

In his mind’s eye, Sherlock saw the pool and a boy seizing beneath the water, splashing wildly as his body convulsed. He scowled a little, thinking of how incompetent the lifeguards must have been, to fail to see it and pull the boy out in time. How could they not see that? He also imagined the locker full of the dead kid’s possessions. It really didn’t seem like much to leave behind, the simple evidences of a life, the shell of a body, dressing the boy from head to . . .

He quickly reread the article. Curiously, the coach had not mentioned . . . shoes. He had named everything else, even the underwear, but there had been no mention of shoes. Odd.

Terribly odd. Was it odd? Why was it odd?
He mentioned it to the nurse. She thought he was odd.

But he couldn’t get it out of his head. He brought the matter to his house master while being written up for insulting the cleaning staff, slipped it into a conversation with the boys he caught filling his sock drawer with fire ants from the biology lab, and included it in his report on ‘current world news’ in his history class. Despite his efforts, no one seemed interested in the curious matter. So he took it to the next level.

He called the police.

‘Where are Carl Powers’ shoes? Have you found them yet?’

A sigh from the opposite end. ‘Sherlock Holmes. Stop c…ing.’

‘Stop ignoring me. No one goes on a school trip shoeless without someone noticing. It’s eccentric behaviour at best, and Carl Powers was not an eccentric, was he? No one mentioned a shoeless boy, so we can conclude—with a high degree of probability—that he had those shoes on when he entered the rec centre. Did you find them or didn’t you? Your refusal to acknowledge that you did not indicates you have not, in fact. So who took them? Why? I’ll suggest to you once again that the suspicious nature of their disappearance is highly indicative of foul pl—”

They hung up on him, once again.

That didn’t stop him. He wrote to the papers. All of them. The vast majority ignored him, but one small paper in Carl’s hometown printed his query as a letter to the editor. Excitedly, he waited for his in-print suspicions to light a fire, to incite the Powers family, at the very least. But not a thing. No one mentioned a shoeless boy, so we can conclude—with a high degree of probability—that he had those shoes on when he entered the rec centre. Did you find them or didn’t you? Your refusal to acknowledge that you did not indicates you have not, in fact. So who took them? Why? I’ll suggest to you once again that the suspicious nature of their disappearance is highly indicative of foul m—’

They hung up on him, once again.

The police phoned the school. The school phoned his mother.

‘. . . fixation . . . obsession . . . compulsion . . . Mrs Holmes, we would like Sherlock to see
somebody about this. A professional . . .

Eton, Early 1990s

In his notes, Dr Langlais described Sherlock as a subject with compulsive tendencies, strong antisocial inclinations, underdeveloped sympathetic responses, and resistance toward adaptation to communal norms. It was in this context that Sherlock first encountered the term *sociopathy*. Dr Langlais was out of the room, responding to a telephone call, and without compunction, Sherlock rose from his chair, seated himself behind the therapist’s large desk, and opened the man’s notebook.

‘. . . exhibits some of the traits commonly associated with sociopathy (or rather, some form of psychopathy, a question worthy of further exploration), though notably lacking some of the more basic . . .’

Dr Langlais returned suddenly and scolded him for being a snoop.

Later, on his own once again, he looked up the term and the long list of its traits. He was not a fit. Well, not a perfect fit. Well, the term itself was problematic. But he decided that he fitted well enough to the description: after all, he checked enough boxes; he could emulate the rest. In any case, it was something of a relief to him to have encountered an explanation for himself. Without further exploration, he adopted the term and started using it as a first line of defence against those who had taken to calling him *freak*, which, he supposed, he was.

His newest therapist was something of an experimentalist, and his treatment of Sherlock shifted every time he read about a new methodology being developed in places like Sweden, Switzerland, or the United States. But mostly, his focus was on correcting Sherlock’s errant behaviour and aberrant personality through shaming and scare tactics, and each session was a barrage of annoying, self-reflective, non-productive questions, like ‘Are you happy being different, Mr Holmes?’, ‘Which of your peers do you admire?’, ‘Wouldn’t life just be easier if you were more like your peers?’, and ‘If you were more like the others, would you want to be friends with you? Let’s try a thought-experiment and put yourself in someone else’s shoes, and observe you from the outside. What do you think puts you off about that Sherlock boy over there? What about him makes you not like him? Come on, now, Sherlock, play along. You’ll learn a lot about yourself this way.’ And finally, ‘What do you want to make of your life, Mr Holmes? Does loneliness attract you?’

It seemed to bother everyone but him that he had no friends.

To combat his friendlessness and antisocial nature, and to make him learn to play nice with other boys, they made him join teams where he played football, cricket, fives, and rugby. He hated it, all of it, and he was hated in return, because though he was competitive and liked to win, he couldn’t abide it when his teammates made mistakes, and he insulted them both on and off the pitch for their errors, win or lose. In return, they beat him up. He thought it a fair trade.

Then he discovered fencing, karate, and judo—single man sports that taught him more practical skills, like defending against an attack and incapacitating an opponent. None of this hand-and-ball goal-scoring rubbish. In the martial arts, he excelled, and in fencing, he became a champion, and by the time he turned fifteen, he effectively put an end to the physical bullying.

Emboldened by his newfound self-sufficiency, he wrote to his mother:

*Mummy,*

*I’ve told Dr Langlais that we are not having any more sessions. I am done with the pills. I am done with therapy forever, and I consider the matter closed.*

*Sherlock*

His mother cried to him on the phone. Oh, how she cried. It was not within her nature, such histrionics, and he suspected that she had overdone it on the wine before picking up the phone.

The filter was gone, and she told him exactly what she thought.

‘You must continue your sessions, Sherlock. You must.’

‘No.’

‘You scare me, sometimes. Do you know that? You scare your own mother. If you were only normal, if you could just be normal! You make it so hard to love you!’

He gripped the phone and stood taller in the phone box where he had chosen to make the call. Straightening out his face as well, he replied, ‘Don’t bother. You needn’t try anymore.’

‘Oh believe me, I shan’t. There’s no point to it, no point at all. All these years, it has never made the least bit of difference, has it?’

‘I’m hanging up now.’

‘That’s why your father left. Did you know that? You’re so clever, such a bright little boy, you must know how you pushed him away. You push us all away, everyone, your own brother, even. How he used to adore you! That’s why you’re so alone in the world, my darling. If you keep on the way you are, you will always be alone.’

‘Fine. Good. That’s how I like it.’

She huffed and sniffed into the phone, a loud burst of air that sounded to him only like static. He knew she was frustrated, and he didn’t care. Let her be. ‘Don’t you talk to me like that,’ she said.

‘I can’t love you when you’re like this!’

‘I said, don’t bother.’

He slammed the phone back onto its cradle, wrenched open the box door, and stalked away.
Mycroft didn’t come home for Christmas of 1991, citing exams and studies and a new job with responsibilities too complex and numerous for his mother to fully comprehend. Depressed, she kept to her room, neglecting the holiday entirely—no tree, no crackers, no pudding, no presents. Occasionally, she wandered out with an empty wine glass to refresh, padding soullessly throughout the expansive house in her slippers and dressing gown, hardly able even to look at her youngest son. Once, she ruffled Sherlock’s dark curls as she passed behind where he sat at the kitchen table revising his chemistry notes. But that was the extent of her warmth.

When she was gone from the room again, he ran clawed fingers roughly through his hair to get rid of the feel of her.

He returned to Eton as soon as possible and, to his surprise, found Mycroft on the grounds in front of his building.

‘Ghastly and old, you once called this place,’ Mycroft said by way of greeting. He was dressed sharply in a new light-grey suit, dark-red tie, and coal-black coat, and he held the lapels like one might hold a cape, as if he had become an important somebody in the world overnight. ‘How are you finding it, now you’ve been here a while? Has it grown on you?’

‘It’s just a school,’ said Sherlock. He was nearing his full height now, though he still fell shy of Mycroft’s. And, if things kept on as they were, he imagined he’d always be bested for girth. ‘I’ll be gone from it before long.’

‘Quite right. Some of these Eton boys, they grow far too devoted to the place. In their heads, they never really leave. I would not expect you to exhibit such foolish attachment.’

‘What are you doing here, Mycroft?’

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. ‘Don’t look so startled. I had the morning free, so I thought I would stop by and wish my little brother a happy Christmas.’

‘Christmas is over. You missed it.’

‘I was busy, as I said. Work, you know. New job. At this stage, one can’t be too careful about making a strong impression.’

‘You’re making a large impression, at least.’

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed at him. ‘Does Mummy know you’ve taken up smoking?’

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed back, wondering just how he knew. He had taken special care not to smell of smoke, and he wasn’t carrying a pack on him. He was further convinced that Mycroft hadn’t caught him at it. He would have to figure that one out, what subtle evidences had given him away. ‘Probably. Cigarettes are hers.’

‘You’re a terrible liar.’

‘I’ll work on it.’

‘Mummy smokes low tar. Mind you, we’re not supposed to know she smokes at all, so you’ll do well to keep that one to yourself. But that’s beside the point, isn’t it? You’re smoking Deaths. What attracted you to that brand? The skull and crossbones on the packaging? Really, you are too predictable.’

Yes, he really needed to figure out Mycroft’s methodology. ‘Is this why you came by? To scold me?’

‘If I wanted to scold you, I’d phone. No, I came to drop off your Christmas present.’

Sherlock eyed him even more suspiciously now. They were not in the habit of exchanging gifts. Furthermore, Mycroft made no move toward a pocket.

Mycroft saw his eyes flitting. ‘It’s in your room,’ he said. ‘I do hope you find it adequate.’

After that, there was little more to say. Each kept a straight face as they shook hands and parted ways, and though Sherlock chided himself, he couldn’t stop his legs from moving a little more quickly to speed himself to his room, nor his mind from guessing at what Mycroft might have brought him. A job, after all, meant extra pocket money, and judging by the suit he’d been wearing, Mycroft had plenty of it. He envisioned, a little hopefully, an IBM or the new MS-DOS. If it was another damn bird-watching book or dressing gown, he’d chuck it straight out the window.

He opened the door and saw, laid out on his bed, an open case, and inside, a new violin. Though he tried, he couldn’t stop himself from smiling.

Later, he would consider his years at Eton to be little essential to his education. Academically, he performed well, when performing well was required, and if hard pressed, he would actually admit to enjoying chemistry, maths, biology, and German. He tolerated Greek and philosophy, and absolutely abhorred the social sciences.

As it had been with Dr Langlais, it was a period of experimentation. Between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, Sherlock made a habit of sneaking out of his room and off the grounds, mostly at night, though sometimes in the middle of the day. He was never caught. Once free of Eton’s stone walls and snobbery, he escaped into Windsor, Maidenhead, West Drayton, or Staines-upon-Thames, where he practised a range of different accents from around the country, adopting new
names and strange personae and complex backstories, just to see if he could pull it off convincingly. He could. Additionally, he made a study of people—observed them, evaluated them, and emulated them. He was good at that: mimicry. And once he had learnt all he could, he exploited them. He taught himself how to pickpocket, how to sneak into private clubs, how to creep past all manner of securities and surveillance systems. He became a trespasser, a petty thief, and a schemer. This was where the real education was—the streets.

And he became acquainted with the kids of the street, the smackheads and snorters and smokers, who offered him his first fag at fourteen and his first needle a year after that. He got sick the first time he took a drag, but it wasn’t long before he actively sought the rush of energy and substitute euphoria. He crashed cigarettes off of them often, whenever his own stash ran low, and they passed the snout around a circle from time to time, but he would never call them his friends. They were a means to an end, useful, in their own way, especially when it came to satisfying his need for a stimulant, but ultimately they were too stupid to waste his time on.

That’s what it came down to, in the end: stimulants. An ever-growing need, a desperate craving, to keep his mind and body active, engaged, feeling something so he didn’t have to feel everything, and before long he felt nothing, nothing but thrilling highs and dreadful lows, and a pounding in his head that never went away. He spent countless hours in his room, thinking, rocking and thinking, hitting the side of his head to the beat of an internal clock, and thinking. The pounding answered back, always, a pounding that said more more more and never enough until his Eton days were done.

But somewhere, in the back of his mind, a little something kept gnawing away at him: Carl Powers’ missing shoes.

**London, 1995–1996**

Mycroft was precisely where he had designed to be. On the face of things, and what he told Mummy, who asked about his work, and Sherlock, who didn’t, he occupied a minor position in the British government. He was not a politician, not a policy maker, not a representative, nothing requiring an election, which was a disappointment to her. Instead, he worked as a researcher, strategist, and advisor. An innocuous profession, to be sure.

But there were other machinations at work within the governing bodies of Britain, flowing through them, interconnecting them, like invisible veins, organisations hidden and incalculable to all but those who knew how to look—and he knew how to look. He saw them, plain as day. It astounded him, sometimes, that others could be so blind. But then, he knew that the greater population saw the world in tones of grey where he alone could see colour.

Not that he let on. He was discreet, subtle about what he knew. He had made all the right gestures, had spoken all the right words to all the right people and with just the right cadences. His goal was the clandestine land of By Invitation Only, where he knew the true power of England lay, and he had already set his foot on the path to reach it. But one did not just walk through the gates, nor apply for entry, because none knew its existence. None but him. Instead, he had to wait, and patiently, for his personally addressed invitation to arrive. He prided himself on many things, and patience was among them.

He had every confidence they would invite him. They would want a man like Mycroft Holmes.

While Sherlock begrudgingly entered his first year at King’s College London (having declined offers at both Oxford and Cambridge, to Mycroft’s strongly vocalised disapproval), Mycroft continued about the business of positioning himself to eradicate—or at the very least neutralise—any sort of file the Big Boys Upstairs had on his little brother. That’s how he had come to think of them, anyway, given that they had no known name, title, or organisation. But he felt himself working on a clock. The men who had sniffed Sherlock out to start with, as a child, had said they would be monitoring him for twelve years. Nine had passed. And in recent years, Sherlock, though surly and unlikable, had done nothing to elevate their suspicions further. Nothing dangerous, at least. No bloodied animals in the toilets or drawings of dead children from news reports.

No, Sherlock had left Eton in good academic standing and with superior recommendations, and now he was attending university to study chemistry. That he had chosen chemistry as a course of study was respectable, admirable, even, and Mycroft felt vindicated in insisting, for so many years, that Sherlock would calm and straighten himself into a reasonable, socially adjusted young man, something like himself. Well, at least someone who didn’t draw attention to himself. An extraordinary mind, surely, but in all other ways normal. Mother expected—hoped—he might ultimately choose the path of a doctor, but Mycroft had slightly less ambitious career hopes for his brother, something involving fewer people and zero life-and-death scenarios, like a research chemist. Even early on, he knew that no one should trust Sherlock Holmes with a life.

Mycroft was so certain of Sherlock’s newfound stability, in fact, that he began to lose track of the man himself in favour of his cause. Furthermore, Mycroft’s own career was shaping into something quite attractive to him, even if his concern for Sherlock hadn’t propelled him toward it. As a result, he found himself extraordinarily busy with his work and never visited and seldom called, and Sherlock paid him the same courtesies of lack of engagement. Life was steady. He was steady. Sherlock, mired in his studies, was steady.

Or so he thought.

He had no idea how bored Sherlock really was. He didn’t know just how disliked and isolated he was. He didn’t know about the drugs. Or about the resurgence of interest in corpses. Or about how he had stopped attending classes regularly to study topics of his own interest in the library or in the ‘field’. Or that he was developing his own brand of science.

He didn’t know that his little brother felt like he was detached from the world, floating and aimless, spiralling and headed for a collision, and that the only things, the only fool-proof things
(aside from playing his violin), that could calm the storms raging in his aching head, were chemical. Mycroft didn’t know any of that.

At the end of Sherlock’s third year at King’s, Mycroft received his invitation in the form of a man, an older colleague, approaching him in a park, clapping a hand on his shoulder, and saying, ‘Mr Holmes. Walk with me.’

And just as he was entering the clandestine realms of the Big Boys Upstairs and pledging oaths of the most profound secrecy, Sherlock dropped out of university, and disappeared.

London, 1997

The default course of action, Mycroft learnt, when one of the subjects on the ‘watch list’ disappeared from surveillance, was automatic renewal of interest in the form of an additional nine years, minimum, on the list. Sherlock had already passed eleven years as a subject of interest. One more year, and he might have been removed altogether. Just one more year, Mycroft thought. Couldn’t he have behaved for just one more year?

Mycroft was furious, but he played unmoved instead. ‘I imagine I can ferret him out’, he told Them with carefully played exasperation.

‘You are too close to this one, Mr Holmes,’ the Big Boys said. ‘We wouldn’t risk your affections for the man compromising the necessary courses of action.’

‘Affections?’ He couldn’t let anyone imagine for even a moment that he had anything close to affection for Sherlock, lest he be prohibited from ever handling his case. So he allowed a posh sort of smirk to flavour his next words. ‘For Sherlock? He’s been a stain on the family from the start. My only interest is to bring him back onto the grid where we can monitor him properly.’

They consented to allowing him to search on his own, for now.

It was a time Mycroft would later think of as the ‘missing year’ from Sherlock’s life, before that larger stretch of time eclipsed it, when Mycroft believed for more than three years that his little brother was dead. Finding him proved to be tricky. He wasn’t really suited to field work—it was so tiresome and so dull. Nevertheless, he was not yet in a position to send others on assignment. So he went out on his own. His first stop, of course, was King’s. Sherlock’s things had all been left behind in his room, which Mycroft cleared out for him when rent collectors came knocking. Well, not quite all his things had been abandoned. His shoes, for instance were gone, as well as his violin. At least, wherever he was, whether traipsing about the countryside or lying dead in a ditch, he had something on his feet. But it was the absence of the violin that gave Mycroft real hope.

He would later claim to have found Sherlock the following winter. To be fair, though, Mycroft never actually found him. With time, he would come to learn that when Sherlock Holmes didn’t want to be found, he stayed hidden. So no, Mycroft didn’t ferret him out. Instead, Sherlock reappeared on his own, coaxed out of hiding when the papers announced the death of their father.

It happened while Mycroft stood at the gravesite, contemplating the pointlessness of his being there for a man he hadn’t seen or heard from in nine years, who was dead, and who couldn’t appreciate any of the gestures made on the occasion of his death. It was specious, he thought, the act of funeral rites, and he should be happy if he never attended another funeral again in his life. But he had a public face to wear and responsibilities pertaining thereto. Thus, he stood at his father’s grave.

From the corner of his eye, Mycroft recognised the slumped though angular form the moment it shifted in his periphery, fifty metres away and cloaked in the shade of the trees. But he didn’t let on. Not at first, when there were still well-wishers left to appease. But he kept the figure marked, waiting for him to try to disappear again, and steadfastly ignoring the sense of relief he felt at seeing him.

When the time was right, he told his driver to go warm up the car and wandered over to the shady grove. Sherlock hadn’t moved a muscle.

‘Is this what it takes to pull you out of hiding?’ he drawled. ‘A death in the family? I should have guessed.’

Sherlock didn’t answer. So Mycroft stepped out of the sunlight and joined him in the shadows. There, his eyes adjusted quickly, and he took the whole of him in at a glance. Sherlock wore a ratty black hoodie, his hands burrowed in the front pockets, and though the hood was thrown back, his unkempt, unwashed hair hung listlessly like a shroud around his face, which drooped low.

Mycroft grabbed Sherlock under the chin and forced his head up. There, he read the story in his bloodshot eyes and pallid skin and hollow cheeks. ‘Dear god, look at you,’ Mycroft scowled. He seized Sherlock’s wrist next and pushed the sleeve to his elbow, revealing the reddened punctures and skin damage. Enraged, he threw the arm away from him, nearly causing Sherlock to spin if Mycroft hadn’t grabbed his shoulders to keep him straight. ‘Well? Which is it? What have you being using?’

‘Dunno,’ said Sherlock, sluggishly. ‘All of them?’

Mycroft grabbed the back of his hoodie and marched him to the road where his driver was just arriving. ‘Get in the damned car.’ And he threw him inside.

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In his will, the deceased Mr Holmes had stipulated that all of his considerable assets were to be liquidated, and his eldest son, Mycroft, was to be bequeathed the whole of his rather sizeable inheritance. In the event that Mycroft was unable to act as recipient, the inheritor was to be Eton College, his alma mater.
Sherlock’s name appeared nowhere in the will. He was, however, alluded to, in the phrase until my son Mycroft, and no other soul. ‘No other soul’, Sherlock knew, meant him.

***

He refused to go to a rehabilitation clinic. He wanted to be back in London. He secretly wanted Mycroft to put him up, just until he got well again.

Mycroft didn’t even offer. He couldn’t. He had not yet seen Sherlock’s file for himself, and if he exhibited any displays of compassion or concern for the man himself that might override his devotion to Queen and Country, he never would. He would be deemed ‘compromised’ and removed from his place. Really, his coldness was for Sherlock’s own good.

So he sent him to the very last place Sherlock wanted to go: home.

Buckinghamshire, 1998

She died on a Tuesday, some seven months following the death of her ex-husband. Sherlock found her in her bed, stiff with rigor mortis, two empty bottles of wine on the floor, a full bottle of antidepressants in the cupboard, and an empty bottle of sleeping pills by the bathroom sink, where she had also left a note:

Sherlock, this isn’t about you. I’m just so tired of not being happy anymore. My love to Mycroft.

Setting her morning tea aside, he sat on the edge of the mattress and touched her stiff hand, which lay atop the pillow by her face. Then he just stared. Her face was pale, her skin waxy. Her hair was seven days past its last wash and silver around the hairline where she had stopped colouring it two months ago. She had died facing away from the window and the night table where she kept a picture of her sons as children on the beach in North Devon, taken many years before. For nearly an hour, he just sat there, looking at her, thinking. He had seen the signs of her depression. They had been there for years, even before the divorce—hence, her medication, the therapist bills, the wine. But upon the death of her ex-husband, things had worsened considerably, and this puzzled Sherlock more than anything else. Why should she care? How could she still feel anything for a man who hurt her like that?

Weakness. Sentiment. That’s what it must come to, in the end. Her own affections had poisoned her.

What a dangerous thing they were! Feelings!

Sherlock stayed with the body for hours, but not because of sentiment. He was curious about this rigor mortis he had read about only in textbooks and observed only in animals, and he wanted to investigate it further. The body was well past its period of primary flaccidity; the neck and jaw were especially rigid, but also arms and fingers. She had been dead between four and six hours, he supposed. Knowing her nightly patterns, and estimating the time it must have taken for the excess of sleeping pills to take their effect, he supposed that she had deliberately overdosed around two in the morning. Due to the steadiness of her handwriting in the note, he believed that she had penned it while sober, before even the wine. Premeditation. Conviction and determination. He wondered if she had even thought twice about what she was doing to herself, to her sons, if there had been even a moment of fear or regret. Sherlock doubted it. Hell, he almost admired it.

They arrested him. Of course they did. For nine hours, they interrogated him, took a coffee break, and grilled him for three more. Why had he waited so many hours before phoning someone? (‘What was the rush? She was already dead.’) Why had he phoned the coroner’s office and not the police? (‘How can suicide be a crime? Who are you going to arrest?’) They were disturbed by his chilling calm, his unabashed claim that he had handled the deceased’s body and touched every bottle and taken the note. (‘She addressed it to me. It’s mine.’)

But in the end, they could not prove that Mrs Holmes’ death was not suicide. The police reluctantly released him. But the Big Boys were watching.

London, 1999

The estate went to Mycroft, as stipulated in Mrs Holmes’ will. He sold the property and all the possessions of the house, but when he offered to cut Sherlock his due percentage of the proceeds, Sherlock refused.

‘And just how do you expect to live?’

‘I’ll live.’

‘Then you’ll need a job.’

‘Job?’ He sighed in annoyance but said in monotone. ‘Jobs are boring.’

He was a right old prat, and only twenty-two years of age. He wouldn’t return to school to finish his degree, and he wouldn’t condescend to perform any work available to the bum of a drop-out he had become because none of the options were a match for his brilliance, and he knew it.

To keep him from becoming entirely dispossessed (and thereby keeping him from giving the Big Boys one more reason to worry over him), Mycroft provided him with a living stipend, enough to get him through a month-to-month sort of menial existence. But Sherlock was a stubborn soul and accepted very little. All the same, he insisted on living in London. This meant he had no choice but to find a flat share, with four or five flatmates at a time. And he hated people.

He was moving constantly that first year, booted from one flat to the next, never staying anywhere for more than six weeks. No one could stand him, and he had no patience for any of them. They certainly had none for him. He never did the shopping but helped himself to whatever was in the fridge, he disparaged any of his flatmates’ guests and revealed personal details about them with
merely a glance but without a thought, and he never tidied up after himself. His things (books, mostly, but also whatever newest tech gadgets he could acquire) were stacked in piles on the floor and on tables and in hallways. They rowed constantly, and if it ever came to blows, Sherlock proved himself an able fighter.

One time, for instance, Sherlock’s tolerance was tested during a party his three other flatmates were hosting. Students, all of them, and their girlfriends, along with at least half a dozen others, all crammed into one small sitting room, drinking and blaring music at half one in the morning. Uninvited, Sherlock kept to his room, grinding his teeth at the dial tone screeching while he tried to connect to the Internet, and trying to tune out all the noise of laughter and off-key singing to Cher’s ‘Believe’. Then, for the eleventh time that night, someone picked up the phone to invite another idiot over for snout, bong, and bonk. The Internet connection failed. He couldn’t take it anymore. Barefoot and tousled-haired, he strode into the sitting room, yanked one of the stereo speakers off the wall, and chucked it out the open window. The ensuing brawl resulted in a bloody nose (Sherlock’s) and a chipped tooth (his idiot flatmate’s).

‘You might do others a favour and leave them well enough alone, Sherlock,’ Mycroft said, not long after posting his bail. ‘You make them all miserable.’

‘Just returning the favour,’ he said.

‘I’m serious. You’re the kind of person who should just be alone. No one wants to deal with you. Me least of all. But here I am.’

**London, 2000**

The Big Boys had fingers in every pie where it concerned the safety and governing of the free world, and some of the un-free ones as well. They had operatives—eyes, ears, hands, and feet—in every government, military, and civilian outpost conceivable. They were MI5, MI6, JIC, GCHQ, MOD, and DI, and They alone knew of Their own existence.

They kept lists. Long and classified lists: military personnel (active, retired, and discharged) evaluated on the question of their threat level to the country, its civilians, or themselves; government officials (both politicians and those holding the leash) evaluated on the question of loyalty to the country and integrity respecting its people; criminals (incarcerated or released) evaluated on the question of danger to those in their sphere of influence; and the ordinary (or not so ordinary) civilian, neither military nor government nor criminal, evaluated on the question of capacity for widespread harm.

These were the mentally deranged, the antisocial, and the brilliant. And where all three met together in one individual, the threat level elevated, and the Big Boys watched closely.

‘His name is William Dower,’ They said. ‘Twenty-nine years old, currently residing in Bridgwater. He’s been on the list since he was twelve. Diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder in 1994. Scored a 148 on the Wechsler intelligence scale. His risk factor has been at a 12 for the last twenty-four months. Yesterday, it escalated to a 15 when Mr Dower’s computer was found to contain a listing of all police officers in Cornwall, and maps of the sewage systems and electrical lines.’

‘And I take it he’s not a city planning enthusiast?’

‘He’s a danger, Mr Holmes. He has breached the threshold of tolerability. Procedures are in place with cases such as these. I believe this is your first.’

‘What do we do about him?’

‘Initiate Emergency Protocol 68.’

‘What is that?’

‘He needs to be removed.’

‘Removed . . . We’re taking him out?’

‘No, Mr Holmes. We do not get our hands dirty. We merely apply the right sorts of pressure to incite the inevitable chain reaction leading to an arrest.’

In other words, Mycroft thought, we encourage the criminal behaviour that will get them taken off the streets for good. It was, as They said, an inevitable outcome. They merely hurried it along in a more controlled environment. And if there was some, say, collateral damage along the way, it could not be helped. Better few than many. Better the driver than a whole busload.

With interest, Mycroft watched the chips fall. Pressure was applied to a sensitive nerve: Mr Dower’s long-time girlfriend inexplicably announced that she was done with him. On the night she tried to move out, Mr Dower attacked her with the fireplace poker. The girl survived to spend the next several years enduring reconstructive surgeries, but Mr Dower was arrested on charges of attempted murder.

The girl had done nothing wrong. Mr Dower had acted of his own volition. The legal system was already in place to put him away for many years to come. A flawless system. The Big Boys Upstairs didn’t even have to turn the wheel—just give it a nudge.

**London, 2001**

‘Take a seat.’

She sat, spine straight, knees together, shoulders back, hands resting in her lap. A perfect figure of self-assurance and femininity.

He had already seen her entire application, one of the very few he had let cross his desk. It rose up
in his mind with ease and with perfect clarity. No need to refer to it again. Education, previous employment, qualifications and skills—it was a flawless curriculum vitae. And her recommendations were second to none. No, he needed to read her now, and he saw all he needed to see in the first five seconds, as she walked through the door and sat down.

Upper-class, Scotland born but Surrey bred, twenty-one or twenty-two years old. Young, but a girl of some intelligence, capable of being moulded. Orphaned, but not prone to self-pity or maudlin reminiscences. Accustomed to travel, finer things, and men doting on her; she had not bought those earrings herself, or she would not have gone with white gold. All the same, she was single, lived alone, and travelled most frequently by train. Acquaintances were many; friends were very few indeed, and not of the intimate sort.

‘You come highly recommended,’ Mycroft said.

‘I know.’

He was almost amused and quirked an eyebrow at her. ‘Nevertheless, government work does not feature strongly in your work history.’

‘I have no interest in government work, Mr Holmes. I will be your PA.’

‘Any PA of mine would need to be a practitioner of the highest discretion.’

‘I am discreet.’

He didn’t doubt it. That was what the background check had been for, the psychological screening, the two-week-long surveillance. He had narrowed down his pool of candidates to only two, and within moments of her arrival, he had already made his decision. There would be no need to see the other candidate. The interview, therefore, did not last long.

‘I demand the highest quality of assistance. You will keep a flat here in London, as near to Home Office as possible, and I expect you capable of making anything possible, or I shan’t tolerate you for long. Naturally, you will also need to keep regular lodgings in Washington, Paris, Vienna, and Hong Kong. Your considerable compensation should pose no challenge in financing your newest acquisitions. You will add Mandarin to your list of languages, so you’ll want to hire on a professional but private tutor straight away. You will get ample time off, of course, but must be available to me when I call, whenever I call. Any time of day, any day of the year.

‘And finally, you will answer to me, and only to me. As far as you’re concerned, I have neither colleagues nor superiors, so if anyone asks you for information beyond that which I have cleared you to give, you will refuse them. Whatever I tell you to do, you will do it, and whatever secrets you overhear will be taken with you to the crematorium. Am I perfectly understood?’

She didn’t even blink. ‘Perfectly, sir.’

‘Quite right I should be. Now go. You will return in the morning to be summarily debriefed.’

She arose and started for the door.

‘One more thing.’

She turned back.

‘Your name. You can no longer use it. I’ll come up with something different for you. That other girl you once were . . . She’s disappeared.’

For the first time, the girl looked impressed. ‘You can do that?’

‘My dear,’ Mycroft said with a grin, ‘I can disappear anyone.’

***

‘This one’s fallen off the map,’ They said, handing him a silver memory stick. ‘We want you to find him.’

For a flash of an instant, he imagined that this one meant Sherlock (it was the only paranoia he allowed himself), but he dismissed the thought as illogical. He had checked in on Sherlock himself only the week before, even though Sherlock’s case was not one he had any authority over. Not yet.

Mycroft accepted the memory stick with a nod. ‘I take it his risk status has been elevated.’

‘In light of his disappearance, his risk factor is elevated to 14. Surveillance will resume at Grade 4, Active, once you have found him. And when you do find this man, Mr Holmes, keep a firm grip on him. He’s a slippery fish.’

Alone in his office, he slid the memory stick into the computer and pulled up the encoded file. He input his password and surpassed other protections before the file became readable, providing him with the name and full profile for one James Moriarty.

The file, to his surprise, was quite small for a man with such high scores in all risk categories, as displayed in the assessment summary at the start of the report. But as he continued through the file, he discovered why. There were large gaps in James Moriarty’s timeline, either periods of perceived inactivity or of genuine vanishing from surveillance. So this wasn’t the first time They had lost track of him. A slippery fish indeed. But what disturbed him more than this was that many of the characteristics of his profile sounded very . . . familiar. Moriarty’s intelligence scores and risk profile, his interests and aversions, his history with child psychologists, his bullying peers, his cheating father and suicidal mother, even his fascination with skulls—Mycroft felt like he was reading Sherlock’s own profile, but for a notable difference: unlike Sherlock, Moriarty was an only child.
He made plans to hunt down this James Moriarty, to put some of his operatives on the scent, beginning at his last known location in Dublin.

But he didn’t find him. He would have done—he knew he would have done—had it not been for a new exigency. The United States was attacked, and Britain found itself pulled into war. The Big Boys Upstairs collectively turned Their eyes to Afghanistan.

London, 2002

‘We should send you over there,’ Mycroft said tetchily, pulling The Times out from under Sherlock’s feet where he lounged—sprawled out—on the sofa in Mycroft’s very well-situated and luxuriously furnished high-rise flat. He clipped off the telly where BBCNews was reporting on the Tarnak Farm incident.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. ‘I don’t much fancy getting shot at,’ he replied glibly. He lazily reached for The Guardian on the coffee table.

He was there because he had been kicked out of another flat. This was becoming terribly annoying.

‘You would at least be useful to a cause greater than yourself—’

‘God, here it comes. Queen and Country . . .’

‘—instead of doing nothing with your life, nothing with your brain—’

Sherlock groaned loudly and let the newspaper fall over his face. His arm drooped dramatically to the floor. ‘Idiots,’ he muttered.

‘What?’

He slapped the paper away from his face and dragged himself up to sitting. ‘The lot of them. Sheer morons.’

‘The devil are you on about?’

‘The Littleport murders of the twin girls.’

Mycroft glanced down at the floor where the front page of the paper displayed the photographs of two little girls under the caption Still missing. He hadn’t really been following the two-day-old case. Boring. ‘Oh, they’re murders now, are they?’

‘Obviously. The shrubs in the front garden have moved. Rotated. Uneven trimming went from left to right literally overnight. And you can see that the soil has been turned, even on the telly. Since the first report, three more shrubs have been added. So the Kroger girls go missing, and Mrs Kroger and her boyfriend get a sudden urge to plant forsythias? No. The girls aren’t runaways, and they’re not kidnapped. They’re dead. And they’re buried in the garden. Sloppy, really. Not how I would have done it.’

Mycroft scowled. He hated when Sherlock said things like that.

‘So clearly, the police are idiots. They miss more evidence than they find. My bet is they’d find freshly turned soil on the garden shovels, if not DNA from bludgeoned skulls. I bet they haven’t even thought to look in the garage. Morons.’

‘A pity,’ Mycroft said without any real interest. He was looking around at all the empty coffee mugs Sherlock had left strewn about in his day-and-a-half being there. The housekeeper hated it whenever Sherlock stayed over, which, though infrequent, was still too frequent for Mycroft’s tastes.

‘Their incompetency is maddening. Speaking of which, where’s that housekeeper of yours? I’m out of tea.’

‘If it bothers you so much,’ said Mycroft with heavy sarcasm, slipping into his suit coat, ‘just solve the case yourself. Now then. I’m off. I should be happy to return and find you gone. But do leave a forwarding address. You know how Anthea hates tracking you down.’

And he was out the door, mind already on other matters, not realising that he’d left his brother—unshowered and in two-day-worn pyjamas on the sofa—in a moment of epiphany.

2002–2008

The first time Mycroft heard Sherlock call himself a consulting detective, he had passed it off as a joke.

Then he noticed Sherlock had filched one of his credit cards to buy himself nice shirts, suits, and dress shoes. He also found himself a flat in Camden, and a flatmate, Tim, who lasted a whole five months. An impressive feat, thought Mycroft, who had run the background check on the bloke shortly after he had learnt of the arrangement. But Tim was harmless. A computer salesman or something, unremarkable family history, dull acquaintances, nothing to raise an alarm. Five months for the poor, long-suffering fellow, until he couldn’t bear it another day and gave his notice.

As the years went on, Mycroft made a habit of running thorough background checks on all of Sherlock’s short-lived flatmates and acquaintances, ensuring that he didn’t involve himself with the questionable sorts (drug addicts, particularly, but anyone, really, whose history or psychological profile might elicit some latent psychopathic tendencies in his untrustworthy little brother). Mostly, they were dull as doorknobs, but on rare occasion, whenever Sherlock happened upon someone even slightly interesting (or, as Mycroft thought of them, triggering), Mycroft took pains to get rid of them—through subtle threats and bribery. Sherlock never knew his hand in their
London, January 29, 2010

It was evening when Mycroft got the call.

‘He got ousted from another flat,’ Anthea said.

‘Lord,’ Mycroft groaned. ‘Didn’t last two months, did he? What was it this time?’

‘Exposed the landlady’s affair.’

‘Never learnt how to shut up about those.’ He sighed. ‘Let him sort it himself. Call me when he finds a new—’

‘He already has done, sir. He’s half moved in already.’

‘Is that so? What’s the address?’

‘221B Baker Street.’

He huffed. It was a good location. Too good. ‘He can’t afford that.’

The landlady is giving him a good rate. Owes him a favour, apparently.

‘Her name?’

‘Hudson.’

‘Run a full background check on the woman, see if she was ever involved in anything criminal, and figure out how they’re connected, what this favour is all about. That’s quite a deal, if he can

Without a gang of flatmates to kick him to the kerb, Sherlock usually ended up retaining the flat, making the disgruntled flatmate move house instead of him. Usually, but not always. He moved frequently enough himself, as if he were making of each new flat a long hotel stay at which he treated flatmates and landlords as hotel staff. It certainly wasn’t a home. Sherlock Holmes didn’t nest. A year or so in this flat or that, and after he had run up the bill or caused enough fire damage, he left, often to a different part of the city, but sometimes even abroad (once to Miami, once to Lyon, and twice to Vienna). But London always called him back.

It was the work, he said, though only when pressed. His only concern, his only love, his only devotion, was to the work, *The science of deduction*, he called it, and Mycroft laughed. When he looked into Sherlock’s work himself, though, he stopped laughing. Sherlock had been thorough and accurate, though unsystematic, in his explications, and the techniques he described were not far different from those Mycroft himself employed in reaching swift and useful conclusions about those around him. It was also obvious that Sherlock had taken for granted that these techniques required a high-functioning brain and intense powers of observation to join dots the average mind was not likely to join.

But Sherlock was not trying to educate or train—he was showing off what his brain could do. And how? By offering demonstrations in the form of solving mysteries. And there it was again, his self-chosen title: consulting detective. Mycroft had never heard of such a thing. So this is how his little brother had chosen to employ his intellect? Not in any respectable profession, not engaging in work that actually generated money, but as a private detective? Finding people’s lost puppies and uncovering sordid love affairs?

Only, that’s not what he was doing at all. Observing from a distance (and mostly in silence, except for those occasions when he couldn’t resist poking fun at the way Sherlock raced all over the city), Mycroft noted how Sherlock snubbed a host of potential cases in favour of the bizarre, grotesque, and perplexing. It was hardly the sort of behaviour he could approve, especially if it worried his fellow Big Boys with whom his opinion of Sherlock as risky had gradually, over the years of working as one of Them, aligned.

Mycroft wasn’t sure when it had happened, precisely, but his intent was no longer to get Sherlock’s name off the watch list. Obviously, he was on it for a reason. His goal, instead, was to keep Sherlock’s risk status as low as possible. That was all.

But They were . . . placated. For the most part. Sherlock was solving crimes, not committing them. He was working hand in hand with the police (well, more like dragging them around by their noses, sometimes). One in particular: a Mr Gregory Lestrade, whom Mycroft first got wind of in 2003. Lestrade was a newly commissioned inspector, and for some reason Mycroft couldn’t quite suss out (his deductive skills failing him on this particular), Sherlock seemed to favour him out of all the officers. That is, he made a point of involving himself in Lestrade’s cases more than anyone else’s. Perhaps it was Lestrade’s unusual tolerance that attracted him. True, he threw the occasional fit when Sherlock tampered with evidence or started investigating a crime scene before he had a chance to show up, but he bore the insults to his own intellect well enough and actually listened to what Sherlock (a man quite a few years his junior) had to say. So maybe there was simplicity in the mystery after all: Sherlock wanted an audience, and Lestrade and his team gratefully provided.

Once Sherlock’s new hobby gained traction, he and Mycroft rarely saw each other. In fact, if ever contact was required, Mycroft was the one to initiate, though he seldom made as much as a phone call. He was one of Them, after all—he had governments to run. Sherlock’s antics seemed . . . trivial to him, now. He was fine, more or less. And even if he wasn’t, Mycroft had people monitoring him and reporting any troubling observations. He needn’t concern himself. What was more, his relationship with his brother was now so strained that any encounters they did have the misfortune of inflicting upon one another left him with a sour taste in his mouth and stronger resolve to leave the annoying prick to his own devices, just as long as they didn’t land him in a jail cell, or worse, a coffin.

London, January 29, 2010

It was evening when Mycroft got the call.

‘He got ousted from another flat,’ Anthea said.

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‘He already has done, sir. He’s half moved in already.’

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‘Her name?’

‘Hudson.’

‘Run a full background check on the woman, see if she was ever involved in anything criminal, and figure out how they’re connected, what this favour is all about. That’s quite a deal, if he can
afford to live on Baker Street all by himself.’

‘Not entirely by himself. He’s already secured a flatmate to help with the rent.’

‘Has he now?’

‘Nearly, I should say. But I suspect the man will agree. He seemed charmed in print, at least.’

‘And who is the next sorry sod to get tangled up with my brother?’

‘His name is John Watson.’

Mycroft exhaled slowly as he leant back in his chair, the thick file for Dr John H Watson still spread open on the desk in front of him.

Not Sherlock’s usual, this one. He wondered whether Mr Deduction himself had any idea what he had stumbled upon. Likely not. He had discerned Watson’s medical practice and military training at a glance (child’s play), without giving the man a chance to divulge the information himself, and maybe he had even cottoned on to the psychosomatic limp as well (he fingered the report hacked from the therapist’s computer—keeping electronic files, password protected or not, was really quite foolish). But there was no way Sherlock could know about the rest, not without access to the files the Big Boys kept.

He couldn’t know that, like Sherlock himself, John Watson was on a government watch list, too.

So, his predictably unstable ex-drug addict of a brother, and an invalided, insubordinate ex-soldier, were sharing the same bit of rug. It seemed like a potentially volatile combination.

For the first time in many years, his suspicions had been pricked, and he had his concerns about Sherlock’s newest flatmate. He needed more data. He needed to get the measure of the man, assess his threat level, and determine whether this little arrangement between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson would need to be . . . frustrated. He would have to handle this one himself.

Lord, how he hated field work.

London, January 30, 2010

The man in question came forward with a limp and a wry tongue. For having just been abducted, he seemed remarkably composed. For having just been abducted, he seemed remarkably composed. With the air of one who had no intentions of complying with anything, however politely suggested, he declined the invitation to sit in the chair Mycroft had thoughtfully provided. He also refused to be intimidated, but in this Mycroft read not bravery but recklessness. But if he failed to impress Dr Watson with subtle intimidation and implied threats, he couldn’t help but be impressed himself—impressed at how easily the man snubbed his trick bribe to spy on Sherlock, as though the money held no temptation for him whatsoever, even though his finances were in a miserable state (Mycroft had seen his pathetic bank account and knew the pittance that was his pension).

Loyalty, or integrity? Or was there really such a line between the two? The therapist had written that Dr Watson had trust issues, and reviewing his history, Mycroft was hardly surprised that such was the case. He was a man who did not make friends easily, and Sherlock was one who did not make friends at all. An interesting combination, to be sure. How had they stumbled across one another?

And yet, there they were, like two old war buddies, scoping out the scene of a serial killing. He knew Sherlock would be interested—he was always interested, and he had been following this case for months. But why was Watson there?

And therein lay Mycroft’s concern. The others had been so easy to read, so easy to manipulate. John Watson was a question mark: he was not afraid of Mycroft, whereas all the others Mycroft had deigned to meet had practically pissed themselves in his presence; when Mycroft tried to provoke Watson by mentioning his left hand, he had halted his departure out of curiosity, not anger, despite the fire in his eyes; he had pointedly held his ground, making Mycroft (who was not accustomed to not having control over everyone in the room) cross the distance to him, and yet he didn’t hesitate to respond to texted summons from a man he’d met only the day before; and though he shirked from being touched initially, he allowed Mycroft to prove a point by touching his perfectly steady hand, simply because he had wanted to know what was wrong with himself.

Interesting.

He left Dr Watson to Anthea’s care, knowing, even as he departed via a different town car, that he would take the necessary actions to drive Dr Watson away. A question mark, though intriguing, was an invitation for trouble, and he would not allow his brother to get tangled up with it. Two men on two separate watch lists treading the same rug? It wouldn’t do. Getting rid of Dr Watson would be easy. Everyone had a pressure point. He just needed to discover it.

But then an unexpected thing happened. That very night in fact, mere hours after Mycroft’s encounter with the curious army doctor, his mobile rang. It was Anthea.

‘Roland-Kerr Further Education College,’ she said.

‘What about it?’

‘That’s where Sherlock is now. Someone just tried to kill him. Shall I bring the car?’

No one had ever made an attempt on Sherlock’s life before, and Mycroft wasn’t prepared to feel his heart racing as it did at the mere thought that such an attempt might have been successful. His first thought was of Watson. Damn him, he should have sniffed him when he had the chance! He
had known (and felt deep in his gut—not that he gave heed to such feelings) that Watson was 
dangerous. During the car ride over, he carefully composed himself while Anthea briefed him on 
exactly what had transpired, everything from Sherlock being lured away by the serial killer to 
the business with poisonous pills to an unknown shooter who had, well, who had saved Sherlock’s 
life.

Mycroft saw it at a glance, as they approached, the two of them together, shoulder to shoulder like 
. . . like old friends? Friends? It startled Mycroft, the concept, at least in connection to Sherlock. 
There was an unexpected expression of glee and unadulterated wonder on the face of his little 
brother, something he had not seen since they were children, something he hadn’t realised he had 
missed so dearly until this moment. But it was directed at the man who strode beside him. Watson. 

Watson had shot the cabbie. He saw it plain as day. Had it been recklessness and lack of 
conscience? Would he prove to be a peril to Sherlock, in the end, spurring the horse onward, 
down darker and more dangerous roads than those he had already chosen for himself? Or, 
contrarily, were his actions indicative of a high moral character and protective instincts? As it was, 
Sherlock’s feet were already set to walk that treacherous road. Perhaps what he needed, then, was 
a protector. John Watson’s companionship could prove to be . . . beneficial.

The smile on Sherlock’s face vanished the instant he saw Mycroft, and by the time they had made 
curt introductions and exchanged the usual diatribes, Mycroft had come to a new decision. He 
would use this John Watson to keep a watchful eye on his brother, to keep him not only alive, but 
safe.

For the time being, he would simply upgrade their surveillance status: Grade 3, Active.

Undisclosed, Summer 2010

They handed him a note, a corner ripped from a larger sheet, inscribed with a dull pencil.

You and me, Mr Holmes. Just you and me.

‘I’ll talk to him,’ he said.

It had been nine years. Nine years of searching, nine years of holding the file in suspension, and 
nine years during which Mycroft had speculated on the possibility of his having died in a drug 
den, leaving them all none the wiser. He still couldn’t shake the feeling that James Moriarty had a 
little too much in common with a certain younger brother. But it was both illogical and wrong to 
superimpose the details of Sherlock’s life onto this case.

Moriarty—as far as anyone had been able to discover—was not an addict. Not that sort, at least. 
Rather to the contrary, he was masterfully in control. He hadn’t been ferreted out into the open. 
No, he had reappeared quite on his own, right at the time They were busy with the Greece bailout, 
the 771 project, and the Bruce-Partington Plans. He had returned, not out of interest of any of 
these pending disasters, but to dangle a carrot in front of Sherlock Holmes, and watch him dance.

Then, two explosions and four Semtex recoveries later, he disappeared again.

But they caught him, this time, not knowing, then, that he had had every intention of getting 
caught.

‘Good afternoon, Mr Moriarty,’ said Mycroft Holmes, closing the heavy, steel door behind him. 
His voice reverberated like tin in the hollow room. ‘We’ve been looking for you for a long time. A 
long time indeed.’

James Moriarty sat, cuffed, on a metal chair on the opposite side of the table. Shoulders slumped 
and knees widespread, he glanced up from where his head was quirked at a low-hanging angle, 
and smiled. ‘I’ve been looking for you, too.’ His voice suddenly pitched into a tune: ‘Found you!’

Mycroft sat and folded his hands together on the table. ‘I understand you’re not talking to my 
people.’

Moriarty threw his head back, rolled his eyes. ‘Boring. They’re so boring. Not like you. I bet 
you’re more fun. I bet you have stories. I bet you have loads of good stories.’

‘I’m no storyteller. I’m here to get information, Mr Moriarty, and until I get it, you’re not going 
anywhere.’

‘But that’s not exactly true, is it? You’re working on a clock. A countdown. Boom!’ His feet lifted 
off the floor and slammed down again dramatically. Mycroft didn’t so much as flinch. ‘Can’t 
charge me, can’t hold me, and let’s face it, Mr Holmes: you ain’t got nothing on me. Clean hands, 
you see.’ He spread his cuffed hands and cocked his head innocently with a closed-lipped, big-
eyed smile. ‘So I don’t have to give you anything. I’ll just bide my time and not say a word.’

‘Oh, you’ll talk.’

‘Will I?’

‘You and me, Mr Moriarty. Just the two of us. You want to talk.’

‘Yes, yes, good, good. Because I have stories. See? Stories you want. And you have stories I 
want. So how about we make a game of it?’

‘You do like games.’

‘I adore them. When I have a worthy opponent, that is. You’ll do for now.’

‘So what’s your game?’

‘Eye for an eye. Tit for tat. I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. Capisce?’
Mycroft thought about it, thought it through. It took him one-and-a-half seconds. He would glean whatever insights he could into this madman’s mind and machinations, even if it meant playing his games. ‘Very well, I’ll play. Why don’t you start?’

Moriarty shook his head slowly. ‘White goes first.’

Controlling his impatience, he asked, ‘And just what story do you want me to tell?’

Moriarty suddenly sat straighter, drew his knees together, then crossed one leg over the other and folded his hands on the table, mimicking Mycroft’s position like a mirror. ‘Oh, where to begin? How about this: What was little Sherlock’s favourite bedtime story?’

Mycroft blinked. His teeth clenched. Sherlock? This was, admittedly, not the direction he had expected this conversation to take, and it dredged up all the questions from six weeks before that had gone unanswered. Why had Moriarty targeted Sherlock with whom to play his little game with the pips in the first place? Sherlock was a nothing, a nobody, a play-acting detective with a silly little website and no money. How he had developed an ego the size of all London was anyone’s guess. And why it had attracted the notice of a man like James Moriarty was even more perplexing, unsettling. And it didn’t rest well with Mycroft.

Though his expression did not alter and his body remained still, Moriarty sensed the tendril of trepidation, and he smiled. ‘Or did he not have bedtime stories? That might be a story in itself.’

‘Le Morte d’Arthur,’ said Mycroft tersely. Not wishing to elaborate in the slightest, he turned it back around. ‘My turn. You’re going to tell me where you’ve been for the last nine years.’

Moriarty grinned. ‘Spinning webs, Mr Holmes. Spinning my pretty, pretty webs.’

London, June 2011

No one answered the bell, so it was Mrs Hudson who let him into the flat. For the first time since he had come to know her, she said nothing to him. She couldn’t. She saw him upstairs, then excused herself, dabbing at her eyes, trying to keep herself together. Mycroft refused to be stirred and offered no consolation. This was hard enough as it was.

He stood silently for a moment, in the centre of the sitting room, looking round at the remnants of Sherlock’s life: books, papers, experiments, laptops. Nothing had been touched. It hadn’t been much more than a week now, but already the dust was beginning to accumulate in his absence.

‘You didn’t come.’

Mycroft turned and saw John standing in the kitchen, overnight bag grasped in one hand; the other was clenching and unclenching at his side.

To the funeral, John meant, but how could he know that Mycroft had made a promise to himself about funerals? He hadn’t gone to his own mother’s, even. Besides, he had already seen Sherlock in a coffin. Once in a lifetime was enough for such a sight. Steeling himself against the hatred he could feel emanating off of this grieving man, Mycroft shrugged and looked away. ‘What good would it have done? The dead can’t see. They don’t hear.’

What few words that passed between them were harsh and unforgiving. They had been counting on one another to protect this man they both loved, and they both had failed him. There could be no forgiving that.

In the end, John told him to leave and then walked away, back through the kitchen, to the hall beyond. Mycroft waited until he heard a door close. Then he moved softly to the window. Against the wall, protected within its case, was the violin he had given his little brother for Christmas, so many years ago, when no one else had given him anything. He took it back.


London had lost its glimmer, and Mycroft had lost his purpose. Everything he was, all he had ever striven to be, had always orbited Sherlock. He saw that now, more clearly than he ever had before. And in the end, it hadn’t mattered. It hadn’t been enough. Sherlock had died anyway. And though Mycroft did not believe in fate, he could see the long path of consequence and knew, now, hindsight always sharper than foresight, that Sherlock had been bound to his end from the start, as sure as landing after a fall. If Mycroft had done anything useful at all, it was, perhaps, to delay the impact. Perhaps he had protected him from the Big Boys Upstairs, perhaps, but he had been impotent against that madman Moriarty. Worse, he had fed the madness himself. He had fed his own little brother to the beast in exchange for a few useless hints to a larger scheme. Tit for tat, and Sherlock was dead.

But however illogical, however fuelled by the sentiment he had so long abhorred, Mycroft found it impossible to let Sherlock be dead. So he turned whatever energy and devotion he had left to protecting the closest thing to his brother still left in the world: John Watson.

London, October 27, 2014

‘So he’s alive.’

Mycroft cleared his throat and tilted his head up. ‘Yes.’

He stood with his back to Them, hands folded behind him, staring out of the window. His reflection revealed nothing of the equal parts trembling joy and paralysing trepidation he felt every time he thought those words: he’s alive. Though it had been mere days, he knew he would feel the shock of seeing Sherlock again in that hospital hallway echoing in his bones until the day he died himself.

‘How are you feeling about that?’
This was the question he had prepared himself to answer, even though They hadn’t asked him how he felt about his brother since the start, since long before he rose to prominence among Them, valued for his icy logic and unflinching resolve to ensure the safety of the nation by any means necessary, even at great personal sacrifice. Queen and Country, before all. Always.

They were asking, now, if anything had changed in that regard.

‘Amazed,’ he answered, which was true enough. He would admit to no other feeling.

‘Yes, as are we. He fooled us all,’ They said.

‘For three years, we were deceived,’ They said.

‘One wonders how else he has deceived us,’ They said.

‘Or how he might again, in future.’

They were already thinking it. More evaluations. A new watch list. It was starting over. Mycroft’s empty stomach clenched unpleasantly.

‘One cannot help but wonder if he was ever what he once claimed to be. After all, given his intellectual profile, we had expected him to use his brilliance for something grander than detective work. It is possible that this charming hobby of his is just a front for more complex machinations. After all, it appears he did plot to take out James Moriarty, and with success.’

Mycroft turned and answered sharply. ‘He did not kill Moriarty.’

And with those words, he made his first mistake since becoming one of Them. To speak with passion was to speak with tainted logic. It was evidence of thawing ice. He knew this because he knew exactly how They thought. Because at some point, before Sherlock’s death, he had stopped thinking of Them as They but as We. He no longer thought that. And if They suspected it . . . He had to recalibrate, sharpen his flint and harden his steel. ‘The man committed suicide,’ he said levelly.

They regarded him calmly, calculating, and said, ‘We did not say kill. There are other ways to drive men to destruction, as we know. We expect your brother might know them, too.’

‘We need to know,’ They said, ‘where he has been, what he has seen. Three years is a long while to play dead.’

‘I will find out everything.’

‘Yes. You will. Because, Mycroft.’

He felt his face go pale. In his entire history, the Big Boys Upstairs had never once used his given name.

‘His return will draw the eyes of the largest crime syndicate on the planet to London. That’s a threat, and we can’t have it. It is the security of our country that concerns us most. You understand.’

Of course he did. As one of Them, he understood perfectly. Emergency Protocol 68.

London, November 2014

Moriarty had constructed a web. And along its many threads, he had stationed operatives—men and women, dancing on his string—to perform his work. So if something went wrong, anything, someone was set up to take the fall.

Mycroft needed a similar model, on a much smaller scale, to perform a different kind of work. A small operation, clandestine and inscrutable, subversive yet submissive, the parts of which only he could see, only he could direct. They would be the cogs in the wheel, and he would remain the iceman in the watchtower.

He began his work by choosing Greg Lestrade.

London, February 2015

Mycroft Holmes had never been more frightened. And when he became frightened, he got angry.

‘Just what the hell were you thinking, Sherlock?’ he said. He wanted to reach across the table where Sherlock sat in silver cuffs and ring his neck for all he was worth.

‘I—’

‘You weren’t. And that’s the problem. That’s always been your problem. You’re an emotional idiot, Sherlock, allowing yourself to be compromised like that.’

Trying to placate him, Lestrade said, ‘I told you what Anderson said. Any man would be hard-pressed not to react like—’

‘Sherlock isn’t allowed to be any man,’ Mycroft seethed. He glared at his idiot little brother, seeing the child who had frightened schoolteachers and goaded peers to violence and driven Mummy to madness because of his refusal to think. ‘He’s too deeply mired in greater things, so even his slighter actions have large consequences.’

He was letting his tongue get carried away with him, and he was saying things he should not have said. So when he turned away, it was to hide his face, because he worried Sherlock would see the
fear in his eyes. As for himself, Sherlock presented a mask of stoicism, an impression of indifference belied only by his tongue as he gave directions for John’s care while he was stuck in jail. So while he spoke and Lestrade made his promises, Mycroft quickly determined what needed to be done.

He dismissed Lestrade curtly, saying, ‘I’d like a private word with my little brother,’ and after the man was gone, he pulled back the chair opposite Sherlock and sat.

Then, he waited, until Sherlock at last lifted his weary, grey eyes to his.

‘I’ll say it one more time,’ he said, barely managing to breathe normally. ‘You need to leave England.’

Sherlock’s eyebrows pinched in bewilderment. ‘You’re not serious.’

‘I’m dead serious. I can help you start a new life, I can hide you indefinitely, no one would ever —’

‘No.’

‘Sherlock—’

‘I’ve already told you, no. Why are we having this debate again? You know— you know, Mycroft—what they’ll do if I disappear. They’ll go after John again—’

‘I’ll send John with you, if I must.’

‘—or Lestrade, or Molly, or god knows who. London is where they want me. They’ve as good as trapped me here. So London is where I’ll stay.’

‘Then you’re damned no matter what you do.’

Sherlock shifted crossly in the chair; his cuffs rattled on the table. ‘Are you finished? I have walls to stare at.’

‘Sherlock. Listen to me very carefully. You really don’t understand the precariousness of your position. You can’t even begin to fathom the gravity of what you almost did. If you had caused that tuft of a copper more serious injury, that would it have been it. No mercy. They would have locked you away forever. Why? Because you scare Them. Once, They were afraid of who you would become. Now They fear who you are. Who you are is someone They don’t understand and can’t control. Who you are is the target of the most dangerous criminal organisation on the planet. Your very existence makes all of London a target, don’t you see? Look at these men and women who have already died, while Moran has been playing his game with you. Look at all the suffering you drag in your wake. Even if you don’t see it, They do. So They need to nullify you as a target. Are you hearing me? They want you gone, and They’ll push you to criminality, if They must. They will fashion justifiable cause to get rid of you, once and for all. And They can do it, because They know your weak point. They know exactly what will incite you to madness. And They will exploit it.’

But no.

He didn’t say that.

It was what he wanted to say, what he felt Sherlock deserved to know. But he couldn’t say those things! He couldn’t say all he really knew, and not only because of the oath he had made those many years ago when he had joined Them. No, it was because, if They ever found out he had revealed Them, he would be permanently removed, and then there would be no one, no one at all, in the Tower who knew how great the danger to Sherlock really was, and no one who was willing to stop it. Already he walked treacherous ground.

Instead, he said this:

‘Sherlock. Listen to me very carefully.’ He waited, again, until Sherlock had lifted his eyes. ‘I spoke to John. I suggested that he leave. On his own.’

Sherlock’s teeth suddenly set on edge. ‘What the hell is wrong with you?’

‘Deduce it, Sherlock. I can’t tell you, so deduce it.’

‘How dare—’

‘He didn’t listen. Do you know why?’ Without giving Sherlock a chance to answer, he said, ‘Because he believes himself to be the toxic one. And is he so wrong? He is the reason you fell.’

Sherlock’s eyes burned, and his jaw was tight. He looked ready to throttle Mycroft. But that didn’t stop Mycroft from going further.

‘If not for your love for John Watson, Moriarty would have had no hold over you. You would have had no weakness for him to exploit. You wouldn’t have had to spend years playing dead and pretending John meant nothing to you. You would have had no one to protect, and so no one to lie to. You and Moriarty would have been perfectly and evenly matched.’

‘No. No, I’m not—’

‘Shut up and listen to what I am telling you. Because there are those who don’t learn how a bird flies by tearing its wings apart, Sherlock. They observe it in flight. And when they figure it out, they believe they know how all birds fly.’

At first, Sherlock looked furious, embarrassed. But then a new light in his eyes flashed. The
cryptic metaphor had done its job. Good, little brother. Keep thinking. Let those wheels turn.

‘Moriarty didn’t have a John Watson. And he was one of the greatest dangers of our time. So. He needed to be eradicated. If he had not shot himself, he would have been eradicated. Understand?’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock, softly, but the cogs were spinning rapidly.

‘Him, and all birds of like feather.’

‘Yes.’

‘No matter the collateral damage.’

‘Collateral . . .’

‘Because collateral damage is justified. If one man perish to spare two, it is justified. And if one man perish to spare hundreds, even thousands, then it is morally right. Morality is mathematics. Tell me you understand.’

Sherlock swallowed and his eyes shone with fear. Good, thought Mycroft. He should be afraid.

Silence hung between them like the air ringing in the aftermath an explosion. It was discomfiting, the way it stung their bones but kept them paralysed, hearts burning in frozen caverns. And it was then that Mycroft almost said it. I’m sorry. Sorry that he hadn’t destroyed either Moriarty or Irene Adler, when he had had the power. He almost confessed his sorrow that John was to Sherlock what Mycroft should have been, might have been, but now could never be. In that resonant quiet, he almost admitted that he was ready and willing to sell out his own country, for Sherlock’s sake. When his lips parted, he almost said, I’ve never forgiven them, our parents. You deserved so much better than what they gave you.

Instead, he pushed back the chair. It scraped noisily along the floor. ‘I have people watching Baker Street. Try to sleep tonight. I’ll see what I can do about getting someone to take off those cuffs.’

He would have done it himself, but he didn’t have the key.
MONDAY, MARCH 2, 2015

IT WASN'T HIM

Little girl held hostage by alleged kidnapper Sherlock Holmes speaks out for the first time in more than three-and-a-half years

Special Report, by Michaela Warner

Croydon – It was a story just waiting to break.

In June 2011, 7-year-old Claudette Bruhl and her 9-year-old brother, Max, children of Rufus Bruhl, British ambassador to the United States, were kidnapped from St Aldate’s, a boarding school in Surrey. Within hours of their abduction, the children were recovered from a disused sweets factory, dehydrated and suffering from mild cases of mercury poisoning.

Their saviour? Sherlock Holmes. Their abductor? Also believed to be Sherlock Holmes.

‘He wanted to question the little girl,’ said Sgt Sally Donovan of the MET in an interview to The Guardian given back in July 2011. ‘But when he came into the room, she pointed a finger at him and started screaming. She was terrified.’

It was this incident that first aroused Sgt Donovan’s suspicions about Mr Holmes.

‘I thought there could be only one explanation,’ Sgt Donovan tells The Guardian today. ‘So I pursued it.’

That pursuit led, as many have long believed, to the suicide of the self-described consulting detective, a suicide which the world now knows never actually took place. Today, with Mr Holmes’ return, police officials and reporters alike are forced to reconsider what it is they thought they knew about the events leading up to a death that never happened. The famous Brook–Holmes murder-suicide is a false narrative being refashioned in light of new evidence that strips away everything that the moniker implies, and a new narrative is emerging: There was no murder, Holmes didn’t commit suicide, and Brook . . . might not have been Brook at all.

While the world waits for a DNA analysis of the recently exhumed body of a man long-presumed to belong to Richard Brook, an actor from Southwater, Sgt Donovan is pursuing answers to a different but related question. ‘Holmes didn’t kidnap those children,’ she says. ‘So we need to discover the truth behind why we all believed he did.’

The trouble is, Claudette and Max Bruhl have been silent on the matter for more than three years. Traumatised by the event, the Bruhl children have been kept out of the public eye and under the watchful care of mental health professionals and their parents. According to a family spokesperson, Max, only 9 at the time of his abduction, had come down very ill from mercury poisoning and dehydration and spent several days in and out of consciousness in intensive care, leaving him with very few memories of what really happened. His sister, Claudette, however, remembers it very well.

‘For so long, it upset her so much to talk about, so we never pressed it,’ says her mother, Emmeline Bruhl. ‘The doctors told us not to press it. But end of last year, we started seeing these stories coming out about Sherlock Holmes, that he was really alive. I was shocked. At first, I tried to keep her and Max away from the telly and the papers, but it was impossible to stop them learning he was back. But she came to me one day, and she said, “Mum, I need to talk to someone about this.” So I called Dr Reynolds.’

And it was just yesterday that Claudette, now 11, sat down in her living room with her mother, her therapist Dr Reynolds, Sgt Donovan of the MET, and a journalist from The Guardian. There, she told the story of what really happened.

At midnight on June 13, 2011, Max and Claudette were forced from their beds at gunpoint and dragged outside to where a car was waiting to steal them away. The man with the gun, Claudette remembers, wore a suit and tie and a black mask. He told them that if they made any noise, he would shoot them.

‘Max was crying,’ Claudette said, ‘and holding my hand. I was too scared to do anything but squeeze his hand back.’

The car took the children to a disused chocolates factory in Addlestone. There, they were placed in an upper room, given sweets, and encouraged to eat as many as they liked, not knowing that the aluminium wrappers had been treated with mercury. They were warned to stay put and keep quiet, and if they did, someone would come and find them, and they would be safe. But before the men left, they made one more threat.

‘He showed us a photograph of a man, someone I’d never seen before,’ Claudette tells Sgt Donovan. ‘He said that this man wanted to kill me and my brother. He said this man would put bullets in our brains. He said I should be very afraid of him. I was.’

The photograph, of course, was of Sherlock Holmes.

‘Showing the little girl the photograph was all part of the campaign to cast Holmes as supervillain,’ says Sgt Donovan. ‘It worked. Claudette identified Holmes as the perp, and before he could be properly arrested and questioned, he was dead. Suicide. We all believed it. The case
was closed.’

But although Claudette’s reaction to coming face to face with Holmes was taken as verification of his orchestration of the kidnapping plot, she never told anyone about the photograph. ‘No one asked,’ she says. ‘And then he was dead. Mum said he jumped, all on his own, because he was guilty and had been found out. But no one asked about the other men, and I didn’t know what to say about the photograph anymore because people were, you know, happy he was gone. I thought I shouldn’t say anything. In her own defence, the 11-year-old girl adds, ‘I was still very young, I didn’t know what to do.’

As the years passed, Claudette silently began to question what had happened to her and her brother. She even began to doubt the validity of what the men had told her about the man in the photograph. What if they had lied? What if Holmes had been innocent? The thought tormented young Claudette, who believed that it might have been her fearful reaction that had led to a man taking his own life.

‘Warranted or not, guilt of that magnitude is a heavy burden for a little girl to carry,’ says Dr Reynolds. ‘Afraid of the consequences, she never gave voice to her doubts. But the stress of it was affecting her schoolwork, her moods, and her appetite.’

With Holmes’ return, Claudette’s anxiety symptoms worsened. Her parents and therapist believed she lived in fear that he might come after her again. ‘It was a very stressful couple of months,’ says Mrs Bruhl. ‘She couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, and sometimes just burst into tears in the middle of the day with no reason. I couldn’t stand that my little girl was living in fear, and my heart broke for her. I had no idea she was reading everything she could about Sherlock Holmes online when I wasn’t looking, including the old blog.’

‘It seemed wrong, what they were saying about him,’ says Claudette. ‘I don’t know how to explain it. It just seemed wrong. They said he kidnapped me, but he didn’t. All I saw was the photograph. I talked to Max, but he didn’t remember. So I told Mum. Sherlock Holmes never kidnapped me.’

‘When she told me this, I knew we had to phone the police,’ says Mrs Bruhl. ‘My husband called them up, straight away.’ She pauses and takes her daughter’s hand. ‘I wanted to believe her. To be honest, the story never did rest well with me, that Mr Holmes had been the one to abduct and poison my children, only to find them again. What sort of man would do that? But the police considered the matter closed, and I had my children home safe, so I didn’t press it. All the same, the stories that came out at the time, and that are coming out again, they just don’t make sense to me.’

And they don’t make sense to Sgt Donovan. ‘Every time we turn over an old piece of evidence, we find something to contradict the old story and support the new. Everyone wants the answer to one question: Is Sherlock Holmes a criminal? I think it is becoming very clear that no, he is not.’

One essential piece of that puzzle remains missing, the key to supporting the story Sherlock Holmes has been telling all along. Fortunately, for the Bruhls, for Mr Holmes, and for all of London, it has just been unearthed, and we will soon have an answer to the question we were all asking ourselves three years ago: Is James Moriarty real?

In the meantime, we can answer one equally important question: Did Sherlock Holmes abduct the Bruhl children?

‘It wasn’t him,’ says Claudette Bruhl. ‘It wasn’t him.’

Larry Heinrich set the proofs flat on his desk, folded away his glasses, and lifted his age-spotted head. Across the desk from him, Michaela Warner gripped her crossed knee and held her breath.

‘And this is the story you want me to print?’

‘It’s good, isn’t it?’ Michaela said. ‘It’s got that I-didn’t-bullshit-this thing going for it.’

He laughed shortly. ‘Is this just you going after Kitty Riley and The Sun?’

She put a hand to her chest and affected a look of offence. ‘Moi? Do you really take me as so petty a reporter?’

‘Junior reporter.’

Her smile hardened. ‘This isn’t about my ego, Mr Heinrich. Or my career. Unless, that is, I can claim an insistence on accurate news reporting as a career objective. Which I do. Kitty Riley needs to know that there are professionals here at The Guardian who won’t tolerate the fiction she’s passing off as journalism.’

Heinrich shrugged. ‘Maybe she’s run out of stories. She’s not printed anything since your editorial came out.’

‘Four days of silence doesn’t mean anything. And I doubt she is desperate. She’s probably revving up to print something else of equal parts false and awful. But I guarantee she doesn’t have this story.’

‘How did you get it?’

She smiled, but a little sadly this time. ‘That editorial you so graciously allowed to go to print? People are reading it. The Bruhls read it. Their solicitor contacted me directly, said the family wanted the story to come out the right way.’ She pointed at the pages on the desk. ‘That’s the story they told the police. I have every word of it on digital recorder, faithfully transcribed. I already have news stations bidding for sound bites. But I’d like to see it in print first.’

He drummed his fingers on the page, deliberating.
This story will break, and break big. The Guardian can be the first paper in the city to stand behind Sherlock Holmes.

You really believe he’s an innocent man, don’t you?

Michaela nodded soberly.

Even though he assaulted a police officer?

Forensics analyst, technically. And I think there’s more to that story than has been reported. Look, I know there are still plenty of holes in Sherlock Holmes’ story. But what we’ve been given just doesn’t add up, and I’m not buying the neat little package The Sun is selling. The Yard cleared Holmes’ name weeks ago, and this Sally Donovan has done a complete one-eighty when it comes to her position on the matter of his guilt. I’ve met the woman—she’s a hard woman—and she doesn’t strike me as the type to be easily persuaded. She’s changed her mind, and it’s only a matter of time before the rest of England does, too.

At last, he let out a long sigh. ‘Then let’s find ourselves on the right side of things.’ He lifted a pen and signed off on her report.

Mollified, and not a little euphoric, Michaela arose and took the pages back, with his signature on the approval form to send to layout. ‘Thank you, Mr Heinrich.’

‘I’ve already sent O’Toole to cover the hearing, but I take it you’ll want the story of the exhumation.’

She had been hoping he would ask, and she nodded, trying not to smile too broadly.

‘It’s yours.’

Chuffed, she turned to leave. But as her hand touched the door handle, she stopped, braced herself, and turned back.

‘Mr Heinrich,’ she said, ‘I think you should know . . .’

He had been in the act of picking up his glasses to continue reading others’ reports, but he set them back down again. ‘What should I know?’

‘I mean to be a thorough investigative journalist, to understand all aspects of people’s stories, just to make sure I get it right.’

‘Yes. That’s why you’ll be a good reporter.’

‘The thing is, while I was doing that, I found out why you didn’t want to print stories about Sherlock Holmes to start with.’

A small frown formed below his moustache, and he paled a little but said, ‘What are you talking about?’

‘I did some digging. In 2009, you tried to hire Holmes to investigate your son, who was then living at home but working as a petrol station attendant. Not much pay in that, but next you know, he’s driving a new BMW, moving into his own flat, and taking his girlfriend to Rome. You were concerned about where the money was coming from, feared it might be drugs, and wanted Holmes to tail him. But he wasn’t interested. He turned down the case.’

Fiddling absently with a paperclip on his desk, Heinrich kept his eyes from meeting hers. Deep frown lines canaled from the corners of his lips down either side of his chin. Seeing that she had embarrassed him, she opened her mouth to apologise. But he said, ‘Not quite, Ms Warner. He did take the case. Came to the house and everything. Stepped into Alex’s room, spent two seconds in there, that was all, and said, “Not drugs, Mr Heinrich. You’re son is a porn star, and he has syphilis.”’ Then he tossed me a bottle of penicillin G from the top of Alex’s chest of drawers and walked straight back out again without another word. ‘Tosser. I’d never met anyone so cold in all my life. But he was right. About Alex. He was right. What was it to him that Alex got syphilitic meningitis because that penicillin was rubbish? We nearly lost him, in the end, but what was that to Sherlock Holmes?’

‘I don’t blame you for feeling resentful,’ she said, a little quietly. ‘I would have done, too. I’m sorry.’ Again, she turned to go, but this time, he forestalled her.

‘Michaela.’ She looked over her shoulder. ‘You won’t . . . let on, will you? About Alex? Young go-getter like you could use a story like that, I suppose.’

She smiled reassuringly. ‘Not every story needs telling, Mr Heinrich. That one belongs to you.’

A warm, humming engine was the only sound in Lestrade’s ears; the rest of the world was so muted in snow that even the tyres of his car rolled soundlessly as he eased it down the white road. Every now and again, he cast a wary glance at the rearview mirror to the man in the backseat, who sat boneless and stared out of the window, uttering not a word.

Unwillingly, Lestrade was recalled to the night they had left Mary’s flat with the certain knowledge that she had been taken. Sherlock had been eerily quiet then, too. But his silence, that night, had been one of intensity, while, with superb energy of focus, he had sorted through new information, intent on deductions and solutions and a forward look at what needed to be done next. It had been cold, but Lestrade didn’t remember the cold—he remembered Sherlock like a furnace being stoked, preparing for a long, bitter night.

Now, the fire seemed to have gone out. For the first time in the whole of their long acquaintance,
Lestrade wondered whether Sherlock was thinking at all. His eyes had never seemed so grey, so non-reflective, like the brightness of the snow couldn’t touch them.

In front and behind were two more officers’ cars, part of Sherlock’s police escort.

‘I’ve been told there will be press,’ Lestrade said, a little shy to speak into the heavy silence but feeling he had to say something. When Sherlock made no reply, he said, ‘You don’t need to say anything. Just try to ignore them.’

Sherlock didn’t reply, and Lestrade wondered whether he was demonstrating just how accomplished he was at this ignoring lark, or whether he really hadn’t heard Lestrade at all. It was just a hunch, but Lestrade suspected it to be the latter.

He wished this wasn’t happening today, not so soon after . . . Well, the timing was rubbish.

It was Lestrade who had found them. After giving Sherlock the address of the Poor Sailor, he had waited anxiously, phone in hand, for any news. An hour passed before he attempted calling, texting, but receiving no answer, he set out for the Poor Sailor on his own.

By the time he pulled onto the right road, the snow was coming down steadily in wide, heavy flakes that fell like autumn ash, obscuring his view of the whitened street through the windscreen. He meant to drive slowly down the deserted road, but anxiety weighted his foot, pushing him on ahead at a precipitous speed. So what made him turn his head at that very moment, he didn’t know, so intent was he on the road, but look he did, down a narrow alley as the car rolled by. All he would have seen was shadow, if it were not for the brightness of the snow and the two figures, like one, silhouetted against it.

His heart stuttered, and he eased the car to the side of the road, bringing it to a stop a short distance from the mouth of the alley. There, he parked, flung off his seatbelt, and hurried from the car without bothering to close the driver’s door behind him.

But he halted when he came to the mouth of the alley, and held his breath. There stood Sherlock and John, like a single bronze statue, overlaid with winter. A crown of snow covered Sherlock’s head and sloped down his neck and shoulders like a silk mantle. His arms wrapped like protective wings around John, who, so fully enfolded in the embrace, was almost invisible. They were utterly still, a frozen sculpture, and nothing about them, not a huff of breath or a curl of hair brushed by the wind, broke the illusion.

Lestrade felt like an intruder. And for a moment, he froze, too, afraid to advance and shatter whatever spell held them in this suspended, silent moment that seemed to exist outside of time. He thought to retreat, softly, but concern planted his feet. Something was deeply wrong. He could feel it. He took one more step and let the snow pat beneath his shoe.

Slowly, Sherlock lifted his head off of John’s and looked up. Flakes stuck to the ends of his lashes as his eyes, dark with gloom, met Lestrade’s. Then, slower still, he loosened his hold on John. But he didn’t let go. Instead, one arm shifted further down John’s back while the opposite hand moved to support the back of his head. Sherlock’s own dipped a little, and Lestrade saw his lips move as he spoke soundless words to John, who nodded slowly, almost imperceptibly, his head hanging. A moment later, they turned together, moving as if their joints were frozen—slow and painstaking—until Sherlock stood at his side, bearing John up with an arm around his shoulders and the other hand gripping an elbow, and they came forward. With each step, John’s left leg trembled visibly, and he would have fallen, if not for Sherlock.

Snow continued to descend, heavier now, making it difficult to see, even at close proximity. As Sherlock and John drew nearer, Lestrade backed up toward the street, guiding them toward the car. He walked ahead of them, and once, he thought he heard John behind him stifle a moan, but it might have been the wind. He opened the back door and waited. At last, they came on, and Sherlock helped John into the back. He closed the door.

Lestrade didn’t need to say anything. Sherlock slowly turned to him, and without a word, he pulled a folded piece of paper from a pocket and handed it over. Then he walked around the car and climbed in the back on the other side.

Anxiously, Lestrade unfolded the page. Then he understood.

The journey to Baker Street had never been so long. Weather conditions were not helping matters. Lestrade drove with a white-knuckled grip, gently rolling to stops and easing forward again, but even so his tyres spun and slipped. In the backseat, there was absolute quiet. When he chance to take his eyes off the road to glance in the rearview mirror, Lestrade noted that John looked both ill and battered. His eyes were bloodshot, his lip split, and dried blood filled the crack. Sherlock didn’t look much better. The side of his face, just left of centre, was swelling like he’d been punched. The snow was melting in his hair and running down his face and neck, but he didn’t wipe away the cold streams, like he couldn’t even feel them.

Lestrade felt a desperate urge to scream, or cry, or let something rip free. Why hadn’t he said something? He had known as long as Sherlock, as long as Molly, but by unspoken agreement, none of them had told John. They should have known that, in time, John would go looking for answers on his own and discover the truth about Mary and the baby. It had been foolish to think it would never come to light. So the responsibility had been theirs, and in that, they had failed him.

As he drove, he tried to think of when the time had been most right to divulge it. While John was still in hospital, fresh from torture but still numb with grief? What was one more blow, on top of all that? But then, what might he have done, once the numbness had worn away? How much lower might he have felt? Or should they have told him during that small respite, when John had moved back into Baker Street? He had still been poorly, but recuperating, still having nightmares but without the burden of knowing about the stolen evidence and a string of murders by his former tormentor. But who would have dared intrude such devastating news when he was for the first time beginning to feel stable, even if only just? And once those murders did start up, one after another . . . Well, no, how could they have told him even then? Molly had told Lestrade that
John’s nightmares were only getting worse. How could they have said a word?

But one thing was clear. Someone should have. A friend.

He parked the car on Baker Street, in front of the flat, and killed the engine. Lestrade moved ahead of them, taking the keys from Sherlock and opening doors, turning on lights, clearing the path. Sherlock followed, more slowly, bearing John up at his side. He watched them pass silently into the flat, through the kitchen, and back toward Sherlock’s bedroom. And then, Lestrade waited. For several long, heavy minutes, he stood alone in the sitting room, not knowing what he might do but unable to leave. Once, he heard someone moving in the bathroom, turning on the tap, opening the cupboard, but other than that, all was quiet.

And even as he began to think that Sherlock had decided to stay back there, with John, Lestrade still didn’t leave, didn’t even move from his spot in the centre of the room. It seemed a heartless thing to do, leave. But then, at last, he heard soft footsteps and lifted his head to see Sherlock’s languid return. He looked absolutely drained. The pale lamplight cast long shadows across his face; his eyes shone damp; his shoulders sagged. There was something skeletal about him, brittle and breaking, as if his body had given up the ghost but still moved about as though in old habit, not knowing where to lay his bones.

He stopped three paces from Lestrade. Unable to make eye contact, he spoke to the rug beneath his shoes. ‘Sleeping,’ he said. His voice was gruff, strained in a thick throat. ‘There will be nightmares tonight. I don’t know if he’ll . . . make it through this one. He—’

But the words caught; he couldn’t continue.

Lestrade stepped forward, put a hand around the back of Sherlock’s neck, and pulled him in. Sherlock leant like a wooden plank, arms stiff at his side and back rigid, but his head bowed at the neck, and he allowed Lestrade to bring him closer until his forehead met with Lestrade’s shoulder and Lestrade wrapped an arm around him. There, he didn’t breathe, didn’t twitch, but he didn’t push away. He allowed himself to be held, if only for that moment.

Now, as Lestrade pulled the car up to the City of Westminster Magistrate’s Court on Queen Victoria Street, he wished he had been able to offer some greater comfort than a simple embrace. The press were already swarming: reporters swaddled in parkas and ski hats and black furs, cameramen in balaclavas and fingerless gloves, and officers trying to keep the horde at bay as they crowded the pavements in front of the underground bank station.

‘Right,’ Lestrade said tightly. ‘We’re going straight into the building.’

He hopped out of the car, put a hand out against the sudden flashes of bulbs, and pulled open Sherlock’s door. Sherlock stepped out, adjusted his twill overcoat, and fell in line right behind Lestrade, who made a beeline for the front doors. The cameras and microphones impeded their way.

‘Mr Holmes! Mr Holmes!’

‘How will you be pleading, Mr Holmes?’

‘Anything you want to say to Scott Anderson and his family, Mr Holmes?’

‘Sherlock Holmes! What do you have to say to those who—?’

Nearer the doors, Lestrade stopped, reached back to take hold of Sherlock’s arm, and pulled him in front and away from all the vultures. ‘Let’s get this over with,’ he said through gritted teeth.

Once inside, however, Sherlock and Lestrade parted ways. While Lestrade went to find a seat in the overcrowded courtroom, fearing he would be Sherlock’s only support to be found in the public proceedings, Sherlock reported to the Court Officer, then met with his solicitor, who, seeing he was alone, said, ‘Mr Holmes, where is your witness?’

‘He couldn’t come.’

The man looked uneasy. ‘But you said—’

‘Things change.’

‘But . . . You know you cannot enter a plea of not guilty unless you have witnesses to give evidence in support of—’

‘I know.’

Minutes later, before the bench of Magistrates, and with a room filled with now-silent press, public, and police officers present on behalf of the victim, the Chairman looked down from his lofty bench to the man standing alone behind the bar and asked him how he would answer the charge of assault. ‘Guilty, Your Worships,’ Sherlock Holmes said.

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‘Molly. Psst. Molly.’

Hooper!

‘Oh!’ Molly started so badly she almost upset the tray of blood tubes at her elbow. She pulled back from the microscope and swivelled on her stool. Donna Ure, one of the lab technicians, was standing in the doorway, frantically waving at her to come over. She glanced around at the others, but they were all so busy pointing their noses at Petri dishes and slides and listening to whatever was piping through their ear buds that they didn’t notice Donna’s flailing. Trying to appear nonchalant, Molly left her work and sidled over to the door. Donna pulled her through and into the empty hallway.
'Nothing, Donna. Don’t worry about it.'

'What is it?' Molly asked. She was still trying to pull her thoughts away from Baker Street, where John had been left alone, and from London Magistrate’s Court, where Sherlock was at that very moment pleading his case.

‘PCR analysis just came back,’ said Donna, producing a folder from around her back. ‘I know I’m not supposed to say, I know it’s not absolutely conclusive yet, but—’

Molly gasped and snatchd the folder out of Donna’s hands. She flipped it open and found the electrophoresis, mDNA analysis, and cadaver forensics report. Her eyes raked quickly, her brain processing all she saw with lightning speed. She looked up at Donna, eyes wide as saucers.

‘Not Richard Brook.’

Donna, failing to purse her lips into a straight line, shook her head no.

Molly flipped the folder closed and tucked it under her arm as she practically flew down the hallway.

‘Molly!’ Donna hissed after her. ‘What are you doing?’

Stopping just long enough to signal Donna to follow, she continued on down the stairs, following the familiar path to the morgue where she hadn’t set foot since her suspension. As they approached the double doors, Donna said, ‘You’re not allowed—’

‘That’s why you’—Molly shoved the report back into her arms—‘are going to stand watch.’

Without waiting for a response, she let herself into the morgue.

It was dark, deserted. She hit the switch on the wall, and the room burst into white light. The sting of formaldehyde hit her nose, and she thought it almost sweet. The chill in the air was as familiar and welcome as a home hearth. She chided herself; it hadn’t been that long, after all, and she had taken holidays before. She just didn’t like to be forbidden from this space. There was something macabre and depressing about it, yes, and that was what most people saw. And true, she had had her fair share of dark, heartrending hours down there. But it was also a realm of revelation, where the dead gave up their secrets and, post-mortem, pointed their fingers to their killers. It was in that room she had first met the captivatively bizarre Sherlock Holmes, whose first words to her had been spoken with a corpse between them: ‘Don’t talk. This body has more to tell me than you do.’

It was also in that room that she had realised, to her own surprise and pleasure, that she was in love with the detective inspector from Scotland Yard. There had been a dead body between them on that occasion, too.

She supposed that there might be a little something wrong with her.

Knowing she wouldn’t have long, she hurried across the room to the wall of silver doors. Taking a deep breath, she gripped the handle of the first stainless steel door, pulled the latch, and swung it open. But it was empty. Not this one. Nor the second, which contained the body of an old woman. It was the third one that held her quarry.

She seized the end of the rolling table and pulled. It came forward with a reluctant screech, and the body, encased in a black body bag, rolled out with it. Before she could go further, she grabbed a pair of latex gloves. Then she returned to the bag, unzipping it from head to toe where the body, further encased in clear plastic, lay waiting for her. Without a beat of hesitation, Molly unwrapped the plastic from around the head. Then she stepped back, glaring down at the hateful remains of James Moriarty.

Still wearing a rotting suit, white shirt, and tie, all once belonging to Richard Brook, the corpse was otherwise nothing more than skeleton dressed in the remnants of sunken, peeling tissue, a few black hairs still clinging to a scalp flaking across the bowl of the skull, the part not blasted apart by the force of a bullet fired at point-blank range. She could see that, too, the hole in the cracked bone. She saw it through other holes: eyes, nose, lips, all gone, leaving behind prominent white teeth and gaping black holes into a now empty head.

She stared at it in revulsion, not for the state of decomposition, but for the man he had once been. Her heart pumped madly with her hatred of him; she had not known it was possible to feel such loathing, especially for a man so long dead. She had not felt this the first time she had examined this very corpse. She had believed, then, that his power to harm had ended. He was defeated, and his work was over. But the evil hadn’t died with the man. His hand continued to stretch out of the grave to take his turn at the chessboard. When she began to see little white stars of hate bursting in her vision, she stepped away, put her face in her gloved hands, and breathed.

‘Are you okay?’ Donna asked when she reappeared. Her voice was awed and a little frightened.

‘Fine.’

They started walking back toward the stairwell.

‘It’s just . . . What were you doing in there?’

‘Nothing, Donna. Don’t worry about it.’
Donna was silent a moment as they climbed the stairs. But she couldn’t seem to resist asking, ‘Is it true that . . . um, that is, did you really, uh, date that man?’

Molly sighed, though she didn’t have the energy for annoyance. ‘Not really. I saw him a few times. But he was just using me to— It doesn’t matter. He considered me of little consequence.’

They reached the second landing, angling back toward the lab. But Molly couldn’t go back just yet. She needed to call Greg and let him know what they had learnt. She took a sharp left down another hallway, leaving Donna behind. Her hand dove back into her pocket for her phone, and she said to herself, ‘He miscalculated.’

A clock ticked on the wall, the only decoration in the room. He took a long drink of water. His fingers moved, slowly.

‘I feel hollow. Like I don’t really exist, or I’m in some horrible dream that just won’t end. It doesn’t matter how hard I beg, or cry, or scream. I can’t wake up. And this hell of a universe I’m trapped in is laughing at me, telling me at every turn that I was never meant to have her. Not even a piece of her. Not even a memory. It’s like, whenever I catch a glimpse of her again, she vanishes. Over and over again, she keeps disappearing from me. Death isn’t supposed to be like that. Not like that.’

What is it supposed to be like?

‘It’s supposed to be real. There should be a grave to visit. A photograph to hold. A dip on the empty side of the bed. I don’t have any of those things. After Sherlock died

Don’t stop. You’re doing so well.

‘After Sherlock died, I saw him everywhere. He wouldn’t leave me alone. It was one of the reasons I had to leave the flat. I had to get away from him. But it didn’t matter where I went, because I still saw him. Everywhere. I saw him just over my shoulder, reflected in every glass. He stood on every street corner, rode in the back of every cab, raced across every rooftop. He wore London like a shroud. But Mary. I can’t see her anywhere. It’s like I imagined her from the start.

‘And yet I still find myself looking for her. When I wake up, before I remember where I really am, I reach for her. But she’s not there. I still feel the impulse to make her tea—cream and two sugars—but there isn’t even any cream in the house. Neither Sherlock nor I take it, but her number isn’t even in my phone. My screen will never light up with her name. I’ll never hear her text alert noise. Because that was programmed into the old phone, and I don’t have that anymore. It was stolen from me, too.

‘I kept pictures of her on that phone. Not many, but they were all I had, and they were mine. I should have taken more, sent them to my email, printed them out, because now I don’t have even a photograph. I was dying in hospital, and her family took them all away. Every single one. And because of what I did to her, they won’t send me even a copy. Then they took down her online social accounts. So I don’t even know where I can go to see her face anymore, except the papers. But I can’t bear to see her there, below a banner of bold-lettered reminders. Murdered. Dead at 37. I can’t bear it. And yet, if I never see her face again, I’m afraid I’ll forget it, the way I’ve forgotten the advice my father gave me before he died. I didn’t write it down. Or the way I’ve forgotten the sound of my mother’s voice. I know I liked it. But I can’t remember why. You think you won’t forget things like that, important things, but you do.

‘Mary’s family has erased me from her life, and her from mine. They hate me for what happened to her. And the thing is, I understand why they do. I understand completely. I feel the same, most days. They’ve told me that they never want to hear from me again. They’ve told me to move on, because they think I can. They don’t know how I can’t, because they don’t know what she was to me.

What was she to you?

‘She was

‘She was my

‘I can’t do this. It’s too hard.’

You can. Keep going. The words are right there.

‘I can’t. I don’t deserve to feel like I do.’

How do you feel? Why don’t you deserve to feel it?

‘I feel like’—his fingers froze; he broke them to continue—’a widower. But I shouldn’t. I was never a husband. Or a

He clenched his fingers into a tight ball and squeezed his eyes shut.

Breathe. Go on, John. You can say it.

He forced his fingers to uncurl and his eyes to open. He continued.

‘Or a father. So how dare I feel what I feel. It shouldn’t even be possible. How can you feel the loss of something you never had? How do you grieve for someone who never had a face, never
had a name? How can you feel such ache over a child that never was? It shouldn’t be possible. It isn’t earned.

‘And this, this, doesn’t feel right, either.’

This what?

‘This exercise. This therapy. Trying to sort through these things to be whole again. The mere desire for happiness feels wrong.’

Why?

‘Because it isn’t fair! Because she can never have that! She will never be okay, never. For me to want to feel whole, for me to have a happy life, is a betrayal. It would mean filling that emptiness in my heart, pushing her out of my head. But I love her. I can’t stop loving her. I can’t stop missing her. So I can’t allow myself to want it. And I’m afraid that if I ever do feel it again, it will mean that I’ve given myself permission not to miss her anymore. Or that I’ve forgotten her. And I can’t do that. I just can’t.’

Have you done it before?

‘. . .’

Were you happy with Mary?

‘I was happy with Mary.’

Did you stop missing Sherlock?

‘I never stopped

‘No. Sorry. I need to stop here. I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t want to write anymore today.’

John pulled his hands away from the keyboard, his eyes away from the screen. Only then did he become aware of the wetness of his cheeks, the tremor in his hands. His scars throbbed dully, and though he was terribly thirsty, he didn’t trust himself to reach for the glass of water.

He didn’t save the document. But he didn’t delete it either. For now, he would leave it on the open laptop and walk away. Shakily, he reached for the wooden cane leaning against the side of the desk, the one Sherlock had dug out of the back of his wardrobe for him to use, until he could replace the aluminium one. He shuffled the short distance to his mattress where he lay down on his side while it was still light. But though tired, he couldn’t sleep. He lay there, trying to get Ella’s voice out of his head, a voice that told him well done, but not enough, try again, say what it is you keep stopping yourself from saying, and thinking.

But in his anger, confusion, and despair, he struggled to confront that singular and enigmatic topic: Sherlock Holmes, a man he had once considered his best friend, but now . . . Now, he didn’t know what he felt. He couldn’t find the words.

***

ITN. Take your pick.
GL.

Donovan hopped up from her computer and hurried to the break room where a handful of Yarders were lounging, taking lunch or tea, or chatting mildly.

‘Quiet, you lot!’ she demanded, grabbing the remote control off the sofa and aiming it at the telly like she was firing a weapon.

‘Always the model of highest breeding, you are,’ someone muttered.

‘Champion of common courtesy,’ added another.

‘Shut up, all of you,’ said Dryers, and their collective attention turned to the telly where Donovan had switched to BBC News where a field reporter could be seen standing on Queen Victoria Street, just outside the Magistrate’s Court, one finger holding in his earpiece, the other gripping the microphone into which he shouted over the noise.

‘. . . received word that the spectacle—that’s what they’re calling it in there, a spectacle—is now over and sentence has been rendered. If you’re just joining us, I repeat, Sherlock Holmes, infamous self-proclaimed detective, has pled guilty to the charge of assault against Mr Scott Anderson of New Scotland Yard and proffered no defence of his actions.’

Half of the officers in the room smiled and clapped each other on the shoulders. The other half frowned and did nothing.

‘Now apparently, Rebecca, Holmes brought no witnesses or evidence to his court case. Cameras were not allowed inside the courtroom, but insider Matt Ottavio is telling me that New Scotland Yard provided documents to the prosecution, including records of Mr Anderson’s medical treatment and a statement by witness Nakul Fazal. Mr Holmes did not deny striking Mr Anderson and reportedly displayed no remorse for having done so. And that, Rebecca, has largely contributed to the uproar over his sentencing, as many are already calling it too lenient.’

‘Well, what the hell is it?’ one of the officers said out loud; the rest waved their hands at him and shushed him so they could hear the continuing report.

The camera cut to Rebecca Fields in the newsroom. ‘Ted, you said that Mr Holmes offered no
defence. Did he not even speak?"

‘Details are still sketchy, but what has been reported is that Holmes initiated the hearing by pleading guilty. Now, viewers at home may be confused as to why there was any sort of proffering of a defence in a case where the defendant has already admitted guilt, but it all had to do with the severity of the Magistrates’ sentencing. They gave Holmes every opportunity to justify his actions and . . . Hold on. Rebecca, I’m getting clarification on this point. The chairman did ask Holmes why he did it.’ There was a pause while he listened to his earpiece. ‘Right, so Holmes was asked to explain why he attacked Anderson. He answered, quote, “I was caught in a moment of unforgiveable provocation, such that I felt compelled to answer it.” When pressed to be specific—again, he paused, listening—“he refused. He said, quote, “The nature of my provocation is personal, one which I will not disclose. Do with me as you deem just.” Other than that, Rebecca, he said very little but to confirm that he had struck Anderson two times with a gloved fist.’

‘Tell our viewers again, Ted, the sentence the magistrates passed down. Will Holmes serve any jail time?’

Ted looked a little put out and huffed quickly into the microphone, his way of indicating displeasure without sacrificing too much professionalism. ‘No, Rebecca. Holmes has been fined in the amount of £5,000 and a 150-hour community sentence to be served over the next six months.’

The officers in the room reacted with shouts and curses, but Donovan only turned up the volume.

‘What was the reaction of those in attendance?’

‘Like I said, there was an uproar. It took several minutes to re-establish order, at which point the chairman defended the bench’s ruling, saying that the papers and other news outlets—Donovan snorted, and thought with wry disapproval, Other news outlets, eh?—“have greatly exaggerated both the incident and Mr Anderson’s suffering, and that such a hearing as this does not deserve this kind of public attention. But—”’

‘Yes, we have copies of the medical records, which were made public this morning,’ said Rebecca in the station. ‘It does seem, wouldn’t you agree, that a bit of a fuss has been made about Mr Anderson’s condition, which seems to be no worse than what most short-tempered football fans sustain in pubs when Manchester United loses to Liverpool.’

Ted visibly riled now. ‘They were missing Rooney. But that’s hardly a fair comparison, Rebecca. Brawls between blokes is a different animal to assaulting an officer.’

‘The Red Devils’ offence might have woken up before the second half. But even a broken nose, surely, doesn’t merit jail time, a punishment the magistrates’ court does not even have the power to dole out.’

‘Clearly, Rebecca, these magistrates are overlooking Holmes’ problematic and disconcerting violent history in this ruling. It should have been passed up to the Crown Court for more appropriate ruling. You can be sure that many Londoners are concerned about letting this man back onto the streets with only a fine to pay. And shall we compare EPL titles?’

‘Ted, can you tell us what reaction, if any, Holmes had to the sentencing?’

‘I am told that he was removed from the courtroom directly following the pronouncement. We are out here now, waiting for him to come out, to see if we can get a statement. But to be honest, Rebecca, we may be waiting a very long time.’

‘Thank you, Ted. We’ll keep viewers informed of any updates as they develop. Go Reds. Turning now to Dublin, where reports of civil unrest—’

Donovan clipped off the telly, and while the arguments and whinging and general dismay started up, she arose to leave the room, ignoring someone (Dryers, she thought) calling her name. She walked briskly until she reached Lestrade’s office, where she let herself in and closed the door behind her. Here, she knew she wouldn’t be disturbed.

‘News says it’s a bit of a zoo down there,’ she said the moment he picked up.

‘Some accurate reporting, for once,’ Lestrade rejoined; she could hear the hubbub in the background. ‘We’re staying put in a holding room until things calm down a bit out there. Sherlock’s not happy, but he understands.’

‘It was the best he could have hoped for, a fine. Twenty-five hundred a pop is the going rate, is it? Hell, maybe I’ll have a go at Anderson myself. I’ve been saving up for something special.’ There was a pause; Lestrade apparently didn’t find her levity very amusing. ‘Why didn’t he tell them what Anderson said? At least, for the sympathy vote. Josie a few people’s understanding of what they think they know. I mean, I doubt the outcome would have been any different, but—’

‘Would you have done, Sally? Neither the press nor the public really knows the full extent of what happened to John, do they? They don’t even know he was at the scene that day, and that’s the way we’d like to keep it. Telling them what Anderson said throws a spotlight on John that he doesn’t need right now.’

‘I understand that. But I thought John had agreed to be a witness. He wouldn’t have been able to do that without repeating the provocation. What happened?’

Lestrade’s answer came slowly. ‘His testimony wasn’t needed after all.’

‘But—’

‘Let’s leave it at that, yeah? I should get going. I’ve got vultures to shoo away with a rolled newspaper. Oh, and Donovan.’
tugged at the fingers of his second-best gloves and stared at her closed door. In his head, he felt obviously, there was no one there, now, to turn it on. He stopped at the foot of the stairs while he listened as the car slowly pulled away.

The entryway was dark, cold. Mrs Hudson would have left a dim lamp lit near the staircase, but stolen. He waved a hand behind him to let Lestrade know it was fine, he could go home now, and four dots), and slid his new key into the new lock they had ordered after his last set had been

It was nearly ten o'clock before Sherlock stood again in front of 221B, hit the buzzer (three dots, and scanned quickly. Then again, more slowly. The blood drained from her face and limbs and left her fingers numb.

She would need to spin this. Corruption in the courts and Magistrates gone soft. No! Magistrates paid off. Yes, that was damning. And probably true. Such a supposition—in print—would at least launch an investigation into the questionable practices of these three magistrates. She would need to get their names, highlight their most lenient sentences, the criminals they let off who went on to commit greater crimes. All judges had something sordid in their pasts. She would argue that the case should have gone to the Crown Court to start with, given the severity of the crime, or at least the dangerous nature of the offender.

Maybe—and she didn’t want to do this—she would need to print Watson’s story after all. She still saw the look of horror on his face whenever she closed her eyes, and it deeply unsettled her to the point where she was having trouble sleeping. But maybe that’s what London needed, too, to be deeply unsettled. Don’t let them get too comfortable, knowing Sherlock Holmes walked free. It was for the public good, really. And for Watson’s good, ultimately. Besides, no one else had that story, no one, and it was too good to sit on for long. Holmes and Watson, pitted against one another, and with the deepest of sympathies on Watson’s side . . .

But before she could take to typing again, her mobile sounded: a new email to her person account. She checked the screen quickly. Ah! One of the Bart’s insiders! She opened the email and scanned quickly. Then again, more slowly. The blood drained from her face and limbs and left her fingers numb.

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘That’s not possible.’

Some ten miles away, Michaela Warner was receiving the same message. She sprang to her feet, shouted for her photographer, and flew to the lift doors, juggling her bag and coat in her arms.

At the same moment, Molly Hooper slipped into the crowd congregating outside of Bart’s, awaiting the official statement.

But before the spokesman began, before the cameras started rolling, Sally Donovan knocked lightly on the door to number 339 at the Rookery Hotel. Inside, she could hear the news playing on the telly, but in the seconds following her knock, it snapped off, and then the door pulled open.

‘Mr Brook, may I come in?’ she asked.

Wordless, he stood aside and let her pass. Entering, she looked around the hotel room where they had been staying since the casket was pulled from the ground in Sussex and the body transported to London. The Brooks had certainly not settled in. Two large suitcases lay on their backs against the far wall, still packed, ready to leave at a moment’s word.

She waited until they stood together. Mrs Brook held her husband’s arm, squeezing it so hard her knuckles shone white. For his part, Mr Brook stood tall and proud, but his eyes were lined with fear. Then she produced a file from her attaché.

‘On behalf of the Metropolitan Police,’ she said, ‘I thank you for your cooperation and patience at this difficult time. I’ve the official report here.’ She extended it, but neither moved to claim it. Donovan took a deep breath and looked Mrs Brook in the eye; she deserved that much. ‘I’m sorry. The body we exhumed—it’s not Richard.’

Then she watched as Mrs Brook, the proud, stalwart woman of class and composure, crumbled. Her face broke and her knees collapsed beneath her sudden weight. Enfolded in her husband’s arms, she began to sob. Mr Brook clasped her to his breast, and in his anguish he threw his head back and wailed, ‘Where is my boy? What has happened to my son?’

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London newsrooms were abuzz with the news, and Kitty Riley sat at her station, stunned at the reports that were pouring in, the sound bites that were flooding her inbox and the buzz quotes from interviewed witnesses and pundits. A fine? A fine? Never mind that it was the highest fine the lowly magistrates’ court could impose: it completely undermined the portrait of the madman she had been painting, if his horrendous and violent actions could be justified by his paying a mere five thousand pounds!

But before she could take to typing again, her mobile sounded: a new email to her personal account. She checked the screen quickly. Ah! One of the Bart’s insiders! She opened the email and scanned quickly. Then again, more slowly. The blood drained from her face and limbs and left her fingers numb.

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘That’s not possible.’

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She stood at the window and uncomfortably adjusted the hem of her skirt. ‘Just fixing a mistake,’ she said simply, hoping he would pick up on her disinclination to rehash the past. He did.

‘Any word yet on the identification of the corpse?’ he asked.

‘Still waiting for the call,’ she said, but at that moment, the phone in Lestrade’s office rang.

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It was nearly ten o’clock before Sherlock stood again in front of 221B, hit the buzzer (three dots, four dots), and slid his new key into the new lock they had ordered after his last set had been stolen. He waved a hand behind him to let Lestrade know it was fine, he could go home now, and listened as the car slowly pulled away.

The entryway was dark, cold. Mrs Hudson would have left a dim lamp lit near the staircase, but obviously, there was no one there, now, to turn it on. He stopped at the foot of the stairs while he tugged at the fingers of his second-best gloves and stared at her closed door. In his head, he felt...
the seconds ticking like a countdown. Nineteen more days before they were evicted. He needed solutions before then, satisfactory resolutions that would bring Mrs Hudson home. The injustice of her absence still riled him. What was worse, though, was that he had no way of contacting her, or of reassuring her that he would fix this. He wondered if she had followed the news today. He didn’t care what the others thought (well, he didn’t care much), but he cared that Mrs Hudson didn’t see him as a convicted criminal.

And he wondered whether John had been following the news, too. After the hearing, while he had been bored to death in holding for hours at a stretch while waiting out the horde of reporters, he tuned out Lestrade’s shouting at everyone who came within spitting distance and texted John.

It’s over. Be back soon.

He got no reply.

Throughout the day, he dropped the occasional update, just to make contact and explain his delay, in case John should, for whatever reason, grow anxious. He didn’t mention the outcome because he figured John could find out just by turning on the telly or going online. And also, because John didn’t ask. In all those hours, John replied only once, and succinctly, to a text about the exhumation.

Molly just texted Lestrade.
Results came back negative for Richard Brook.

SH

I’m glad of it.

JW

It had been a long, quiet weekend between them, and a heaviness fell on Baker Street that Sherlock hadn’t felt since John had first returned, still wearing bandages that needed daily changing. Friday night, John had slept for hours. Or, if not, he had at least stayed away, and Sherlock had kept to the sitting room, listening for any noises indicating a nightmare. There was nothing, which led Sherlock to believe that though John lay in bed, his bed, he did not sleep. All day Saturday and on into Sunday, they floated by like ghosts who couldn’t see each other. And when, once, Sherlock tried to speak, to express how sorry he was, John made no show of having heard him and left for his bedroom upstairs. Sherlock had discouraged Lestrade from visiting, Molly from calling. Then, Sunday evening, John had reappeared long enough to say, ‘I’m not going to the hearing tomorrow. I’m sorry. I know I got you into this— I know I was going to be your— I’m sorry. I just can’t.’

Sherlock didn’t even try to argue it.

He half expected to find the sitting room empty when he reached the first storey. Instead, he found John in his armchair, watching The Culture Show on BBC Two, not the news. John’s head turned a little to see him come in, but then returned to the telly without a word. Sherlock unwound the scarf from his throat and threw the twill overcoat onto the sofa as he looked around the room. John’s laptop was missing from the table, but four mugs of tea were scattered around the room and three empty water glasses. No plates, though. Softly, he crossed the room and sank into his own chair to watch whatever cultural rubbish they were highlighting this week.

The moment he sat, however, John snapped off the telly and pushed himself up with the wooden cane. Sherlock tried to hide his surprise as he headed for the landing, but he was talking before he could shut himself up.

‘John, I think there’s something we need to—’

‘I saw the reports,’ said John, pausing by the coffee table, his back to Sherlock. ‘A good outcome, all things considered.’ His voice was level, but Sherlock could see the tautness in his back and neck, and in the twitching fingers of the fisted hand at his side.

‘All things considered,’ Sherlock agreed warily.

John’s head turned a little bit, showing him in profile. There was a flash of a tight, false smile. ‘Looks like you didn’t need me there after all.’

Sherlock stared. What was he to say to that? That he didn’t need John? That he wished he would have come? That it was best that he stayed away? Because none of it was true, nor untrue. He couldn’t say yes, and he couldn’t say no. The stretching silence, however, was worse, so Sherlock tried his hand instead at levity.

‘Oh, I don’t think I could ever say that and mean it.’ The gravity in his voice belied his failed attempt at a grin.

John seemed not to know what to say to that, and for a moment, his body inclined forward, weight trusted to the cane, on the cusp of continuing out of the room. But his feet appeared fixed to the floor; something was keeping him rooted. Sherlock thought he must have said the wrong thing. He could sense something had changed, a charge like electricity hanging in the heavy air, and he feared a spark. So he didn’t move, or speak, or breathe. Instead, he held his breath, until John spoke. And the words cut him to the quick.

‘I mourned you,’ he said.

He spoke so quietly, so unobtrusively, that Sherlock almost wondered if he were even talking to him, and not to the floor, where his gaze was fixed. With John’s back still turned, Sherlock could read nothing of his expression. Nevertheless, he felt in his heart the magnitude of those carefully wrought, fearfully delivered, and unadorned words. He wanted to curl in on himself like burning paper.
‘Not just for days and weeks,’ John continued softly. ‘I mourned you for years. I didn’t know how to stop.’ He turned slightly, but unable to face Sherlock head on, he kept his face pointed at the floor. ‘I still don’t. You’re alive. You’re right there, right in front of my eyes, every time I look for you, even when I don’t, but I’m still . . . mourning you.’

‘I know,’ said Sherlock. He matched John’s tone in softness and candour. The wind sweeping past the windows was louder than they. ‘The way you look at me sometimes. I just know.’

At last, John turned to face him. When he did, he planted the cane and stood as straight as he knew how. There was a hardness to his face, one of resolution, determination. His fingers had stopped twitching, and he looked Sherlock straight in the eye.

‘I hate you, you know.’

Sherlock didn’t flinch. The bite had happened long ago. Now, it was just venom rushing to the heart.

‘I hate you for leaving. For dying. For lying. And I hate you for coming back. There are still days I wish you hadn’t, and that I had died down there. With Mary. There are days I wish you had died when you fell.’

Sherlock’s eyes stung; he blinked. He nodded minutely, accepting. Toxic.

‘And I hate that I find myself wishing for any of it. Because you did leave. It’s done. But the thing is, you came back. For me. I . . . I don’t understand it, Sherlock. Why you did all those things— for me. But I know that, if you hadn’t, I’d be dead. One way or another. So for that, for the very reasons I hate you . . . ’ He paused. His lips contorted, and he dropped his gaze again. He took a long breath and made himself lift his eyes again to find Sherlock’s. ‘I love you. More than I can say. More than I can hate. You need to know that.’

At that, John nodded sharply. He had said what he needed to say, and rather than wait for an answer, he turned and started once more for the door.

But Sherlock couldn’t let him go.

‘I don’t know how to fix this,’ he said. He was appalled to hear the strain of desperation in his voice, the control slipping from his grip.

‘Neither do I,’ said John. The windows rattled with wind. ‘Maybe it can’t be fixed.’

‘But you and I? Will we be . . . all right?’

John looked back at him, sadly. ‘I don’t know. I want to be. But I don’t know. I just need . . . time.’

At last, he left, mounted the stairs to his room where he would stare at his laptop but not write, lie on his bed but not sleep, and wonder whether the hour was already too late. Sherlock remained in his chair, in stillness and in quiet, until midnight passed, listening to the soft ticking of a clock.
‘Sherlock? You still with me, mate?’

Sherlock’s pale, colourless eyes came gradually into focus as he looked for who had spoken his name. For Lestrade, it was a little like watching someone waking up or coming out of a trance—the gradual brightening of a light bulb that had already been burning too long. Concerned, he stepped a bit closer and placed a hand around Sherlock’s upper arm.

There was a small recoil at the touch and a look of discomfiture on Sherlock’s face in the form of a furrowed brow and uninhibited frown. Any other day, Lestrade might have backed off. Not today, though. Today, Sherlock was inattentive, enervated, like he was coming on ill. He was not at all his normal self: he hadn’t made a single snappy insult, not a solitary deduction. He was an even lesser shadow than the soul-starved man at the trial the day before. Today, he just stood there, insentient, while Lestrade nattered on about press reactions to the hearing and public reactions to the press.

Lestrade tightened his grip on Sherlock’s arm.

‘It’s fine,’ said Sherlock, giving his head a shake and trying to step away, but he lacked the fortitude to pull himself free of Lestrade’s grasp. ‘Continue.’

‘You haven’t heard a word I’ve said.’

‘Of course I have.’

‘Prove it.’

Sherlock’s mouth fell open—a conditioned response to such a directive—but nothing came out. Lestrade waited. ‘How is Molly?’ he asked instead, but even Lestrade saw through it to the avoidance tactic that it was.

‘I’m here, Sherlock.’

Sherlock twisted around to see Molly standing on the other side of the counter. They were in the lab at Bart’s, the three of them, having what Lestrade had believed was a three-way conversation. Now he wasn’t so sure. Sherlock almost looked surprised to find himself standing there, as if he hadn’t remembered leaving the flat. A trance indeed.

‘She’s been here the whole time,’ Lestrade said carefully. ‘Sherlock, are you feeling well? Are you sleeping?’

There was a glazed look to his eyes and surrendering sag to his shoulders, but his skin looked its usual sun-shy pale, wearing neither flush nor sheen.

Waving away the question like a fluttering moth, Sherlock finally extricated himself from Lestrade’s hold and repositioned himself in their triangle as the most distant point. ‘Yes, fine. I sleep fine. Go on with it—’ he gesticulated vaguely between the two of them—‘what you were saying.’

‘I was saying,’ said Molly, ‘because I thought you’d want to know . . . They’ll be cremating the remains.’ When he didn’t react, she clarified, ‘That is, what’s left of the body.’

‘Whose?’

He really hadn’t been listening. Lestrade and Molly exchanged unhappy expressions. They had stayed up half the night talking about recent revelations and the more-than-apparent deleterious effects they were having, not only John, but on Sherlock. Lestrade knew about John’s nightmares, and now Molly knew about how Sherlock had been at the trial. They were over feeling guilty for sharing these things. Instead, they felt helpless, and the one person Lestrade thought had the greatest chance of successfully handling Sherlock and restoring him to some semblance of normalcy was still ignoring his phone calls.

‘Moriarty’s,’ answered Lestrade. ‘The Brooks won’t pay to have it reinterred, obviously, and the state won’t either. It’ll be incinerated.’

‘When?’

‘It won’t be for a little while yet,’ said Molly. ‘People are already crying hoax and demanding that other labs test the body as well. We’ll be scattering him like William Wallace at this rate, just to prove he’s really dead.’

‘Still laughing at me.’

At least, that’s what Lestrade thought he heard Sherlock murmur under his breath. He was sliding away again, enveloped in whatever was happening inside his head and losing track of the things and people around him. Then, from behind gritted teeth, Lestrade heard more clearly: ‘Solve it, solve it, solve it. Think.’

‘Sherlock.’ Lestrade braced, half expecting to be physically reproved for his forthcoming suggestion. ‘Come on, I’m taking you back to Baker Street. You’re not well, I’ll bring John home myself, when he’s finished at PT.’

Sherlock shook his head again, hardly this time, as if the dust kept settling and he couldn’t shake it off fast enough. Ignoring Lestrade’s declaration, he said, ‘His network wants to keep the people in doubt, don’t you see? As long as there’s doubt, Moriarty still lives. He’s the cat in
Schrödinger’s box. So what does it matter when the box opens and nobody looks?’

‘People are looking, Sherlock. They are beginning to see the truth. The Brooks won’t even talk to Kitty Riley anymore, and Michaela Warner is the best thing to happen to journalism since the invention of the printing press. People all over the country are reading her article about the Bruhl kidnapping. She’s unabashedly defending you in every line of that story.’

He didn’t mention the slew of online comments already expressing doubts about the accuracy of the young girl’s memory or questioning how a photograph disproved Sherlock’s involvement.

Sceptics were hard to kill, evidence or no evidence, reason or no reason. But that didn’t mean they weren’t gaining more to their side.

‘Then Moriarty will work twice as hard to silence her,’ Sherlock said.

‘Moriarty’s dead,’ Lestrade corrected sharply.

‘His people. They’ll not be happy to see his body treated like a lab specimen, not if they have even half the hero-worshiping devotion of Sebastian Moran. And burning the body will be a sacrilege. Moriarty won’t stand for it.’

‘How sacred, really, could the man be now?’ Lestrade reasoned. ‘They were content to let him lie under an entirely false name.’

‘Content because it was the ruse that drove me to my death, truth that remained veiled even with his own demise. A triumph. A legacy. He destroys me, and he gets the last laugh. Strip that away from him, and—’

‘No, Sherlock,’ said Molly.

‘Yes! Think, why don’t you people think?’ Trembling, he took two steps back, hands out in front of him as though to keep them at bay. ‘Moriarty was never about facts or truth. He was about manipulating people. Dead or alive, he is still manipulating them! If the people don’t believe it’s Moriarty who died on that rooftop, then it’s Richard Broek who is dead, I’m the one who killed him, and Moriarty lives—and he has beaten me. He’s won. But if the people agree with the facts, then Moriarty was defeated, and his people will need to make of him a martyr. Cast me as the slayer, tear down those who defend me, rip to shreds those whose demise will be my undoing. Don’t you see? Any way this plays out, he’s won. Alive or dead, it doesn’t matter. He wins in the end.’

He was despairing. Lestrade heard it in his voice, saw it on his face. For once, he couldn’t mask it. Molly looked frightened, and Sherlock looked just about ready to bolt. Surreptitiously, Lestrade repositioned himself between Sherlock and the exit.

‘You give a dead man far too much credit,’ Lestrade said, an edge to his voice. ‘Do I need to remind you whose corpse is down in the morgue at this very moment? Whose skull was blasted apart? He designed your death, and you outsmarted him. You did. And along the way, you saved my life, and Mrs Hudson’s, and John’s. That was bloody brilliant, by the way. You think he orchestrated everything that came after? No. There were consequences, yes, but not of his design. He’s gone, do you hear me? James Moriarty can’t hurt you anymore. There’s other evil at play here, so let’s focus on that and stop fearing a dead man.’

Sherlock’s eyes were wide and wet. Slowly, he shook his head. ‘He won’t let me, Greg,’ he whispered.

Molly stepped forward, silent and slow. She took his arm. This time, he didn’t recoil.

‘What do mean?’ Lestrade asked. ‘I don’t understand, Sherlock.’

There was long and pregnant pause. Sherlock drew in a long breath. ‘He’s still too real.’ Hands arose, fingertips pressed to his temples. ‘Every night—’

But whatever he was about to say was silenced when his mobile sounded in his pocket.

He started visibly, almost like he’d been shocked, and scrambled for his pockets, saying, ‘That’s John.’ He dug a hand into his coat. ‘Something’s wrong, he never calls.’ He pulled out the phone, nearly dropping it in his haste to answer. Even his usually dexterous fingers were inoperative.

‘I’m sure it’s fine,’ said Lestrade, though his words were hollow, rather than bolstering. ‘He probably just finished early.’

‘He never calls,’ Sherlock repeated, even as his thumb hit the screen to answer. He turned away from them, as though to create the illusion of privacy. ‘John?’

Lestrade held his breath, and he and Molly drew together. She gathered a fistful of the sleeve of his suit coat into her hand and held on. Through the phone, and in that eerily silent lab, he heard John’s voice come clearly through the speaker.

‘Sherlock . . . This is going to sound a bit barmy . . .’

John didn’t sound like he was in a panic, Lestrade thought, but his tone was unnaturally casual.

‘. . . but you didn’t, erm, send me flowers, by chance. Did you?’

Sherlock’s eyebrows knit together. ‘. . . No.’

‘I thought you hadn’t.’ A loud pause ensued. Then, ‘If you’re not busy . . .’

‘I was just leaving.’

‘Thank you.’
‘But don’t go anywhere.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Stay in the office.’

‘I am.’

‘Was there a card?’

A pause. Lestrade thought he heard John’s voice catch, but when it came through again, it was steady. ‘Just come.’

Sherlock grabbed his coat and headed for the door. Waiting for neither invitation nor permission, both Lestrade and Molly followed after him.

***

They found John in the waiting room, just outside Dr Harper’s physiotherapy office in a far wing of the hospital, nowhere near intensive care, the forensics labs, or the morgue, which was just as well. He was alone, save for the receptionist, and he sat in a dark-pink upholstered chair, elbows locking his arms straight while he clutched his knees and stared at the floor between his legs. Two chairs away, a bouquet of flowers, cradled in a cornucopia of green cellophane, lay neglected on the seat, seemingly unclaimed.

Before the glass doors even opened, John lifted his head, as though he sensed rather than saw Sherlock’s approach. His face registered momentary surprise to see Lestrade and Molly as well, but he quickly smoothed out the lines in his brow again, resuming an expression of both acceptance and resolve. He took the wooden cane in hand and pushed himself up to meet them on his feet.

Sherlock observed that John’s face was a little flush, and his hairline slightly damp. This was perhaps because of his exertions during his physical therapy session, and the way he shifted the weight off his left leg to give it reprieve seemed to support the hypothesis that he had possibly overworked it today. But then, the manifestation of ghost pains might have been because of the flowers.

‘All right?’ he asked John, before acknowledging the bouquet that had apparently terminated John’s session early.

John gave a clipped nod and a cut-off smile, eyes skipping over Sherlock’s face to Lestrade’s, Molly’s, and back. Then he gestured toward the chair. ‘You’ll want first crack at it, I expect.’

The flowers were of three kinds: a small, rose-coloured periwinkle; a dark-purple orchid; and a collection of soft-white, bell-shaped blossoms growing on a narrow branch. It was the oddest collection of flowers he had ever seen, none of them the sort he would expect from a London florist, whose standard fare would more likely consist of daisies or tulips, carnations or roses. And it was their oddity that suggested deliberation in their selection. Nevertheless, Sherlock could not reason out what they suggested, precisely. He observed their arrangement, fingered the leaves, sniffed the petals—but he could make nothing of it. Not a thing. He felt like the flowers were a foreign language, and he an illiterate.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ Lestrade was saying to John in a low voice, as Sherlock examined the bouquet. ‘We were with Sherlock when he got your call, and I wanted to make sure—’

‘I don’t mind,’ said John, placating.

Now Sherlock’s attention turned to the card, speared on the end of a long, plastic stem. It read:

For John, heartfelt condolences for your loss

He frowned. The sentiment was generic and suspiciously timed, and if Sherlock recalled correctly—though he didn’t fully trust that he did—it was the only form of sympathy John had received for any of his losses since the convent. In hospital, colleagues from St Elizabeth’s had sent flowers and notes to get well soon, but any sympathy cards regarding Mary, few in number though they were, the hospital staff had redirected to Samantha Hillock while John had been fighting for his life. Why this condolence, and why now?

‘I had wanted to say, John,’ said Molly, in a voice that seemed to be wary of breaking glass, ‘but I never knew how—’

The handwriting . . . felt-tipped marker, obviously, but was it the script of a man or a woman? Why couldn’t he tell? He could always tell these things.

‘Don’t,’ said John, equally gently. ‘You don’t need to. Not anymore.’

‘But what if I should want to?’

Slowly, Sherlock turned the card around to see if there was anything written on the back.

‘Let’s not talk about it right now,’ said John.

‘Rosemary and Thyme.’ Sherlock read aloud to spare John from a conversation he apparently didn’t want to be having. Then, he commented on the address: ‘Roman Road near Victoria Park.’

John’s head came around. ‘What did you say?’

‘Name of the florist, apparently,’ he said. ‘It’s on the back of the card.’

‘Rosemary and Thory— Oh.’ His eyes fell sheepishly and his jaw clenched shut as he stretched forth a hand and took the bouquet away from Sherlock. ‘I didn’t think to look. I only read the—'
Standing frozen, his hands positioned as if he were still holding the flowers, Sherlock stared. Something had happened, and he didn’t understand what. But if Lestrade’s and Molly’s identical pitying expression was any indication, he was alone in that regard.

‘Problem?’ he asked.

‘No problem.’ John answered too quickly. He sniffed and shifted his weight more fully to the cane. ‘Sympathy card. No problem at all. Thing is, no one has sent any— that is, I wasn’t expecting— Nothing. I shouldn’t have been so startled.’

Was that all it was after all? A sympathy card and flowers. Kindly and innocuous and end of story? No, that didn’t seem right. Something about it didn’t sit well with him. But he couldn’t say what. The pictures were usually so clear to him! Now, it was like he was looking through fogged glass. Not right, not right. He needed to discern the mystery, he needed to clear his head, he needed to think. Why could he not think!

But it was Lestrade who got there first. ‘I think, rather, that your instincts are correct, John. The flowers were delivered here, weren’t they? To this office?’

A quick dip of the head. ‘Yeah,’ John said. ‘Receptionist brought them to the back.’

‘And you didn’t see the delivery boy yourself?’

‘No.’

Lestrade did an about face and turned to the receptionist. ‘You signed for the flowers?’

She was just setting the phone into its cradle. ‘I did, yes,’ she said, uncertain about his interrogative tone.

‘The delivery boy. What did he look like?’

‘Just a kid,’ she said. ‘Sixteen, seventeen years old. Ginger. Seemed all right.’

‘Are there security cameras around here?’

She pointed. ‘Nearest one’s just outside the door there.’

Lestrade turned back to John. ‘Likely the boy was just doing his job, but we’ll check the footage. All right, who knows you’re here? Who knows you have PT today, at this hour?’

‘. . . No one. I don’t think.’

‘Then how did the florist know to deliver them, here and now? Why not send them to Baker Street?’

‘Because he wouldn’t have answered the door,’ said Sherlock, a little clarity punching through the fog. What Lestrade was saying made sense, though he couldn’t figure out why he hadn’t thought that through himself. To John: ‘Someone wanted to make sure you received these.’

‘So what is this, a joke?’ said John tightly. His face started to redden. ‘God, this is a joke. Sick bastards, sending me these from Rosemary and Thyme!’ He shook the flowers in a closed fist and thrust them back into Sherlock’s hands.

He was still missing something. ‘I don’t understand . . .’

Lestrade cleared his throat and stepped a bit closer, lowering his voice as a gesture of sensitivity. ‘It’s not just a flower shop. It’s a greenhouse and nursery. Mary worked there.’

Several things clunked roughly into place at once. The herbs Mary had grown on her windowsill, the trimmed houseplant, the books on gardening on a shelf in a flat with no garden, the inimitable scratch marks from rose bushes on the backs of her hands. He had assumed a hobby gardener, but he had never verified this. John never talked about her, and Sherlock had respected that choice and never asked questions. As for Lestrade—Mary’s murder was his case; he would have learnt everything there was to know about her. And Molly. She looked unsurprised. She had known, too.

Now it made sense why John had believed, for an instant, that he had received sympathy flowers from Mary’s former workplace. It made sense, too, why he was so upset now, realising he hadn’t.

‘I understand why you want to, but I want you to go home. You and Sherlock both.’

‘No.’

‘This is a police matter, John.’

‘And I’m a consultant. Last I checked, my status hadn’t been revoked.’

‘You’re not going without me,’ said Sherlock, a little panicked at the thought of being left behind.
"Wasn't planning on it," John returned.

"No," Lestrade said again. "I'll tell you what I learn, but I want you both to stand back from this one. Yeah? I want you to trust me to do my job. How 'bout it, John? Sherlock? Will you trust me?"

John lifted his eyes to Lestrade's. Both men recognised that look, and Sherlock thought there was something military about his stance now. "I do trust you. But I can't stand back from this, Greg. I can't. Leave me and Sherlock behind, and we'll be two steps behind until we're ten steps ahead. I'd rather work alongside you, but either way, I'm going to Roman Road. Right now."

He started for the door, and Sherlock followed in his wake. Lestrade called after them, half-heartedly: "I could put you under house arrest."

"You could," John said, pushing open the door, not looking back. "But you won't."

***

The bell tinkled, and all four of them walked into the front end of Rosemary and Thyme: Floristry and Nursery. The air was warm, fragrant, and a little dewy. John held the bouquet, Sherlock held the door, and Lestrade held Molly's hand at the fingertips, just briefly, until they had cleared the threshold and he became all business again: a detective inspector of New Scotland Yard investigating an 'incident'.

"Oh my God, it's John Watson," said the man behind the counter, a splayed hand over his heart.

"Janelle!" He raised his voice to call to someone in the back of the shop. 'Come here! It's John Watson! Mary's John!"

Sherlock's eyes darted quickly to John, to discern whether such an announcement was objectionable or upsetting, but if he was bothered, he hid it well. In the time it took for John to approach the counter, Sherlock, trying to grease the wheels turning too slowly in his head, had grazed the twenty-something shop attendant from the top of his spiky, bleached hair sporting a single blue streak down one side, past the 1950s' retro bowtie, to his multi-coloured braided belt. A fashion boy who hadn't made it in the industry and ended up at a flower shop, a second choice, or possibly a third after cake decorating. He held a length of pink ribbon in his hand, which he was fashioning into a carnation-style bow to affix to the three long-stem roses lying on the countertop. Harmless.

"Freddy, wasn't it?" said John, setting the bouquet on the counter beside the roses.

"Oh my God, how are you?" said the young man, Freddy, hand still over his heart. He glanced quickly at the flowers with an o-shaped mouth before continuing to explicate his astonishment. "We haven't seen you in ages and ages. We've just been so torn up around here, ever since we lost Mary. A sunbeam, that's what she was."

"Yes, she was. Thank you. Um."

"Oh John!"

They turned and saw a middle-aged woman in a green apron coming from the back. Her hair was shorter than Freddy's, grey and brown, and she wore red rectangular frames. She came right up to John and embraced him, but she seemed to sense more quickly than Freddy that the company he kept precluded this from being a social visit.

"Forgive me for not coming by sooner," John said.

"No no, not a word of apology from you," said Janelle. "We know this has been harder on you than on us. Tell me. How was the funeral? We arranged with a florist in Calgary to have a wreath sent, but we never heard anything."

John's smile was pained. "I wasn't able to go, I'm afraid."

"Oh." Janelle looked embarrassed now. "Sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"It's fine." John was saying that an awful lot lately, Sherlock thought, and never once did he believe it. 'Listen, Janelle, I was wondering if you could tell me about these flowers. They were delivered not quite an hour ago, and—'

"Oh, you're the John at St Bart's!" said Freddy. 'God, if I'd known, I would have spent more time on the arrangement. Added some baby's breath or Queen Anne's lace . . .'

"We need to know who ordered them," said Lestrade, fishing into his pocket and pulling out his ID. 'Detective Inspector Lestrade,' he said. 'New Scotland Yard.'

Both Janelle and Freddy went owl-eyed. "A detective?"

"When did the order come in?" Lestrade said, likely used to such a reaction after so many years in his profession. He pulled out a notepad next and flipped to a blank page.

"Uh, first thing," said Freddy. "We'd not been open five minutes. First customer of the day. Nine o'clock."

"Man or woman?"

"Man."

"Describe him."

"Uh . . ." Freddy ran a hand down the front of his chequered shirt and looked to the ceiling, thinking. 'Not so tall, a bit scruffy, dark beard you know. Wore a coat that was too big for him,
ratty parka with the stuffing coming out at the seams. Grey or green, I don’t remember. I thought he might be homeless, you know, but he had a wad of cash on him.’

‘So he paid in cash?’

Freddy bobbed his head. ‘Handed me five twenty-pound notes.’

Lestrade looked up from his writing. ‘How much were the flowers?’

‘Ninety-six pounds thirty.’

‘Jesus, for flowers? For that?’ He stabbed his pen at the bouquet John had set on the countertop.

‘Been a while since you’ve sent anyone flowers, eh?’ said Molly teasingly.

‘He requested some pretty unusual flowers, detective inspector,’ said Janelle. ‘He came in with a list, didn’t he Freddy, and he was adamant that we stick to it to the letter.’

‘Do you have the list?’

‘No, he took it with him.’

‘What else did he say? Every detail you can remember.’

There was a loud pause. Sherlock was staring blankly into a pot of marigolds while he tried to concentrate on the questioning and suss out the wheat from the chaff. He felt the pause more than heard it, and he shifted to looking at Freddy, who was now looking at him with an expression of great chariness.

‘You’re him, aren’t you?’ he said. ‘The fake detective.’ His eyes jumped to John, looking suddenly afraid for him. ‘The papers, they said—’

‘Please just answer DI Lestrade’s questions,’ said John tightly.

‘Oh right. Um. The bloke.’ But Freddy looked distinctly nervous now, and Sherlock thought to himself, I shouldn’t have come after all. ‘Well, he didn’t say much. Came in just after nine, like I said. Handed me a paper with the flowers written down, and—’

‘Written by hand?’ asked Lestrade.

‘Yes.’

‘Could you tell if it had been written by a man or woman?’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

‘Go on.’

‘He seemed real edgy, so I asked him if they were for anyone special, you know, just trying to be friendly, put him at ease. But he kept looking out the window while I was doing the arrangement, like he couldn’t wait to be gone. But they were sympathy flowers, weren’t they? So I just thought he was acting that way because, you know, he’d lost someone.’

‘Was there anyone out there waiting for him?’

‘Not that I saw.’

‘What did he say when you asked who they were for?’

Freddy nodded at John. ‘He said, “They’re for John.” That was it. Didn’t say who John was, of course, no last name or anything, no relation. And he had me write the card.’ He indicated the card still stuck in the bouquet. ‘I wrote it, just as he told me.’

‘He dictated.’

‘Yeah, but the words were also at the bottom of his little paper. He said my handwriting would be more legible than his, and that I needed to write it exactly, word for word. Then he said he needed them delivered.’

‘What were his exact instructions?’

‘I wrote them down,’ said Freddy. He opened a ledger book and found the pertinent page. ‘St Bartholomew’s hospital, physical therapy ward, office of Dr Westley Harper, care of “John”. To be delivered at 13.30 precisely.’ Freddy looked up. ‘He paid and left, and I put the flowers in the refrigerator to keep them fresh.’

‘Lucky he came to us,’ Janelle added, ‘because he couldn’t have ordered those flowers at any other shop. They’re not exactly common in bouquets and deliveries. They’re blossoms from bushes and trees. I tried to tell him no, in fact, but he insisted. Seemed a bit, erm, unstable, if you follow me, and I didn’t want to push him.’

Lestrade’s pen hadn’t stopped moving since Freddy started talking. ‘Tell me about the flowers.’

‘We grow them in the greenhouse,’ said Janelle. ‘They’re not indigenous to Britain, so we have to regulate the conditions they grow in. Humidity, light, UV, that sort of thing.’

‘Of course.’ She began to turn, but she paused. ‘John, can I find you a chair? Maybe get you off that leg for a bit?’

Sherlock doubted that anyone else could see it (maybe Lestrade), but Sherlock recognised clearly
the expression of tightly controlled affront hidden behind John’s mask of complacency. ‘Thank you, no,’ he answered. ‘I’m fine.’

Janelle led them to the back of the shop, past the bonsais and decorative ferns, the snapdragons and birds of paradise, the lilies and daisies and tulips and carnations and roses, through sliding glass doors and into a large greenhouse, which they hadn’t seen from the street. It was like entering a sauna—the humidity and the heat made Sherlock’s already heavy head swim, and he loosened the scarf around his throat. The cement beneath their shoes was wet and sloped so the water could slip into drains spaced evenly throughout the greenhouse. Visions flashed in his mind of a different drain, spotted with blood, set immovably in orange titles, and he halted abruptly at the end of their queue while he waited for the vision to clear. He looked to John, but John was looking directly ahead. No one noticed his pause.

She led them first to the periwinkles. ‘*Catharanthus roseus,*’ she said. ‘Native to Madagascar. They’re ornamental, for gardens, primarily. People around here like to plant the shrubs along their walkways come spring. We hardly ever use them in bouquets. Once, a bride wanted them, but that’s the only time I can remember.’

‘Is it, I don’t know, poisonous?’ asked Lestrade.

Janelle smiled. ‘Only if you eat it. Historically, it has been used medicinally, but I don’t think it is anymore. I don’t know much about it beyond that. I mostly just know how to grow it.‘

All right, think! Sherlock coached himself. *You can do this.* He started making new files in his head. Flowers—botany and flower lore—had not held much interest to him before, so his own data was shoddy at best, the files old and dusty. But it was critical that he see the meaning behind that selection of flowers. They were symbolic, *of course* they were, but *how?* He quickly ruled out their colouring (pink, white, and purple) as inconsequential at best, or coincidental at least. It had to be something else.

‘All right. And how much would these run you?’ asked Lestrade.

‘Not much, these,’ said Janelle. ‘We used five in your bouquet, John. Ran less than ten pounds.’

‘Show me the next.’

They continued on down a row, turned left in the middle, and came to the edge of the greenhouse where a small tree stood in a large pot. ‘This is the one he fought me on,’ said Janelle. ‘This is a snowdrop tree, from the family *Halesia,* endemic to southern China. This one is young, very young, but she’s already blossomed, as you can see.’ She pointed to the white blossoms like overturned teacups hanging in clusters from the individual branches. ‘He wanted a branch! You can see where I finally relented. I hate to trim them so young, especially if it’s a healthy tree, but like I said, he was getting agitated. So I gave it to him, one small branch. I charged him fifty quid for it, too.’

‘And is there any medicinal value in these?’

‘Not that I know. They’re primarily ornamental. Like the periwinkles.’

Lestrade was asking useful questions, questions that, to his great frustration, were making no appearance in his own head. Sherlock scratched toxicology off his list of subjects to pursue. But was it their *origin* that was significant? Madagascar and China? What did one have to do with the other? There were so many plants that could come from either location. Why the periwinkles? Why the snowdrops?

‘Last one,’ said Janelle, and she led them to a table on which stood a row of the spidery, dark purple orchids. ‘They’re expensive, so he bought only one. From Belize, *Prosthechea cochleata.* Known as the black orchid natively but around here, it’s more commonly called the cockleshell—’

The word pierced Sherlock’s brain and exploded like a supernova, whitening his vision and ringing in his ears. *The pages of the Peter and Iona Opie Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* fanned their razor-sharp corners into the folds of his mind like a thousand miniscule paper cuts as he combed the tome and sought to recall the pertinent rhyme. Simultaneously, dozens of web searches arose before his eyes, obscuring his vision of those pages and providing an onslaught of information from countless hours of research over the last six weeks. Research from decades before surfaced too, casual reading in his father’s library, his mother’s horticulture books. And more: conversations with John echoed in one ear, with Lestrade in the other, as fresh as if he were hearing them for the first time.

‘... all of them have to do with falling.’

‘Yesterday, we discovered’

‘... our dreams haunt us when we’re awake.’

‘that some evidence recovered’

‘... our names are in their deaths.’

‘from the convent’

‘Get me out of here, Sherlock. Please.’

‘has gone missing—’

‘—orchid.’

‘Damn it, Lestrade!’
He staggered backward, his hands clutching the sides of his head. A sharp pain pulsed deep within the cavern of his skull. He pressed his palms into his eyes and away, trying to clear them, but everything was bursting stars.

‘Sherlock?’ said John, his voice suddenly very near. Had John been so close before? Or was his hearing overly sensitive? He felt someone take him by the shoulders. ‘Sherlock, what’s wrong?’ The voice echoed, fading, swelling, fading again.

‘I know what he wants with me. I’ve known it all along . . .’

‘You want insight into the machinations going on at Scotland Yard, you need me.’

‘He was behind you, all the time behind you!’

‘. . . men with malice in their hearts and blood on their hands.’

‘He’s coming on ill,’ said Lestrade. ‘He wasn’t looking so good earlier.’

‘Is there a chair somewhere around here?’

‘We should take him home, let him rest—’

‘No no no,’ said Sherlock, pushing the heel of his hands more firmly against his temples, squeezing. ‘Three items. Three flowers. God god god.’

He felt John’s hands over his own now, angling his head to pull his chin away from his chest. Hardened thumbs gently lifted his eyelids, and as the exploding black spots of ink faded away, he saw John looking up at him with large eyes, bright with concern, trying to see the state of his pupils; behind him stood Molly and Lestrade, appearing alarmed and resolved, respectively; and just a little further on down the table, still lightly fingering one of the nonsucculent leaves of the orchid, was the florist, who had just proved her usefulness.

‘Now now, look at me,’ said John. ‘Focus. Greg, hand me that light.’

‘It’s Mary,’ said Sherlock. ‘Mary, Mary—’

‘Shh, stop,’ said John, a little more firmly now. He shone a light into Sherlock’s eyes and away, back and away. ‘Breathe, Sherlock. You’re not breathing.’

‘I still want to play.’

‘No.’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘No.’

‘He’s an amazing plaything.’

‘Agh!’

‘Right, we’re going.’

He felt John take him by the shoulders again and turn him around, then press a firm hand against his back to urge him forward and guide him out of the greenhouse.

‘It’s the flowers, John,’ he said. This was important, important, and he needed John to listen. ‘The flowers—’

‘We’ll talk about it at home, yeah?’

They stepped out into the too-bright world—a white sky reflecting in the windows of the surrounding buildings, white pavement beneath their feet, snow snow snow and he was jostled jarred jammed into the backseat an engine roared and a train quaked the earth rumbled bones weary and bending can’t take the pressure bending breaking falling blood like rose petals on the pavement a gasp of stolen breath and cast in the flickering fluorescence, shiny teeth gleaming red flesh choked and quivering silverbells silver bells and silver wires it’s called a stress position beneath the pitiless sun, he burned bones wrenched muscles tearing like paper escape to what? he wondered, knowing that behind the bars or beyond them he was dead dead dead why couldn’t you just stay dead? pretty maids, so contrary hands and knees and say hullo, Johnny and the pungency of blood urine vomit semen I do believe it is the end of the world—

‘There we go, in the chair. Easy now.’

He felt himself sinking into cool leather already configured to his bony frame, and he smelt the stale coffee hanging in the air; soft lamplight pressed past the seam of his eyelids—when had he returned to the flat?

A hand touched the side of his face. He prised his eyes open, and the image before him slowly came into focus.

‘Hey. Don’t go too far, okay?’

John. His face was close, still trying to get a good read on Sherlock’s pupils, and his voice was low. Don’t go too far. John wasn’t talking about leaving the chair.
Straightening, John turned aside to speak to someone else in the room.

“You’re sure we shouldn’t take him to see someone?” Lestrade’s voice now. Sherlock’s head felt heavy. He closed his eyes, squeezed them shut.

“I’ll keep an eye on him. Look.” The voices softened a bit, enough for Sherlock to hear the clock on the wall ticking, ticking. Only, they didn’t have a clock in this room. Did they? “You were right. We should have let you handle this. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. None of us knew he was so unwell.”

“But I should have. That’s why he needed me around before. To always make sure he was . . . Don’t worry. I don’t think he slept well last night, what with the trial and all. He’s probably just exhausted.”

“You’ll call us if things don’t get better,” said Molly.

“I promise.”

“And I promise you,” said Lestrade, “that I’ll get my boys on this description. The man who ordered the bouquet was obviously a dupe, probably didn’t even know what he was doing. But if we follow the trail, he may very well point us to who paid him off. I’ll take the flowers down to evidence and— John? What is it?”

“God, I’m such an idiot,” he said under his breath. Practically everyone is, thought Sherlock. Then, No, not John. Not John, no. Stupid, stupid!

“What?”

“They’re . . .” His sigh was nearly a groan. “They’re from Kitty Riley.”

“Kitty Riley?” repeated Lestrade. He sounded both surprised and disgusted. “Must be. They’re some sort of apology. God, I should have guessed it. Lestrade, I . . . We should probably forget it. Forget all of it. I overreacted.”

“No Kitty. Not Kitty. Why weren’t they listening to him? He was screaming to wake the dead! God, his head hurt so badly.”

“They’re from Kitty Riley,” repeated Lestrade. He sounded both surprised and disgusted.

“Must be. They’re some sort of apology. God, I should have guessed it. Lestrade, I . . . We should probably forget it. Forget all of it. I overreacted.”

“Kitty Riley. Not Kitty. Why weren’t they listening to him? He was screaming to wake the dead! God, his head hurt so badly.”

“Why would Kitty Riley send you flowers?” asked Molly.

“Out of guilt, I suppose.” There was something that sounded like a forced laugh. “She was probably too embarrassed to sign her name to them, but . . . Damn, I’m such a fool. That’s what this is about.”


Lestrade didn’t seem to be buying it either. “John, you’re not making sense. That woman has a mountain of things to feel guilty about, but why would she suddenly—”

“Because of Friday.”

A slight pause. “What did she have to do with that?”

“She, erm, tracked me down . . . somehow.”

“When? Wait. Was this right after your appointment with Dr Thompson?”

“Yes.”

“Let me get this straight. Kitty Riley cornered you on Friday. She found you in Kilburn and she cornered you.”

“That’s the long and short of it,” John mumbled. “She found me in the bistro.”

“How could she have known where you were?”

“I don’t know.”

“John, if she followed you there . . .” He fell silent, working it out in his head, and when he spoke again his voice was infused with excitement. “If she knows about your therapy sessions with Dr Thompson, she probably knows about your sessions with Dr Harper as well. And if she’s gone so far as to send you messages, we can nail her for stalking and harassment.”

“For flowers?”

“If they are perceived unfavourable, as unwanted advances or an invasion of privacy, absolutely. The two charges together? That can carry jail time. Not much, not more than six months, but it’s a start. It’ll stop that bloody pen, at least. The Sun will be forced to sack her.”

“I suppose . . .” said John, sounding a little unconvinced. He was probably remembering Ms Riley’s army of solicitors, courtesy of The Sun.

“What did she want?” Molly asked now.

“She’s the one who, you know . . . gave me the report.”

“The coroner’s report, you mean?”

“Yes.”
Molly gasped. 'But she wouldn’t have been given access to those records! Not legally. They’re sealed. No one at Bart’s would have given them up without a warrant because Mary’s case is still an open investigation.'

‘You mean,’ Lestrade started, but he stopped himself, seeming to realise something. ‘I’m sorry, John. I figured you had sought out the coroner’s report on your own. I should have asked—’

‘It’s done. Don’t worry about it.’

‘I have to worry about it, because if she bribed someone for those records . . . We’ve got her.’

Lestrade sounded both stunned and thrilled. ‘We have the photocopy she gave you, and your testimony. She can’t hide behind stalking and illegal possession of classified police materials. Besides, she already has a prior: those photographs of the kitchen she published. The charges were dismissed, but we can charge her again under a new case.’

‘You think it’ll stick this time?’ It was the scepticism of one who had not known a turn of fortunes in a very long time.

‘I do. This time, I really do. I won’t let this sit and get cold. I’m going to get right on it. Just watch, John—Kitty Riley won’t be writing anything else for a very long time.’

Movement toward the door. A repetition of promises to phone, offers to help, assurances that all would be well. Then the door clicked closed. What followed felt like a long stretch of nothing, and in that silence the chaos inside his head began once again to encroach from a deep, unacknowledged place and push outward in a rhythmic throb against his skull. That’s when Sherlock heard the creak of John’s old chair. A foot knocked against his, gently but with intent, like the knocking on a door. And John let himself in.

***

Lestrade drove her back to Bart’s. As much as he would have liked to, he couldn’t keep her at his side while he worked, and she had her own responsibilities in the lab to attend to. The charges against her for falsifying documents more than three years ago still stood, and though no one was rushing to resolve them, it was best not to rock the boat.

As he parked the car to walk her inside, he said, ‘If all goes to plan—God willing—she’ll be in custody before dinner. We’ll probably let her stew in jail overnight.’ Then he smirked. ‘Coppers don’t like working past five if they don’t have to. Paperwork and processing and her convoy of solicitors will just have to wait until morning, I’m afraid.’

‘Look at you.’

He killed the engine and turned his head. ‘What?’

‘You’re smiling.’ She was, too, and she stretched a hand across to where his rested atop the gear lever. She ran a finger across his thumb; he felt it travel down his spine.

‘God, am I?’ Perhaps it wasn’t the most appropriate time, or cause, and he tried to control it, but it couldn’t be helped.

‘Don’t stop.’ She leant in. ‘You’re quite handsome when you smile.’

‘Oh?’ He inclined toward her, as well. ‘I should try to do that more often then.’

‘I should help you find more reasons.’ And she kissed him, thin lips tickling his smile, and though her touch was light, her fingers tightened around his. ‘I wish I could be there,’ she said without pulling away, speaking against his skin; she kissed him again, ‘when you make the arrest.’

‘Mm?’ He put his free hand around the back of her head and slid her hair between his fingers.

When she surfaced for air, a short while later, she said, ‘I want—a kiss—to see the look—and another—on her rat-like face.’ She pulled away to see his eyes while leaning her head into his palm. ‘And to see the smile on yours.’

‘God forbid I should be so unprofessional. But some things can’t be helped.’ He kissed her deeply, and she giggled as she kissed him back.

Before Molly, he’d never kissed someone so expressively happy to be kissed, had barely known that it was possible to kiss and laugh at the same time. (Molly was teaching him that one could do all manner of things while laughing.) It made him forget, for a moment, that he was in a parked car on the side of the road, with people passing by them on the pavement. He forgot, too, that he was an on-duty officer who needed to be about his business, detecting something—or-other. But for that moment, a brief, glimmering moment, like the sun peeking through a dense haze of cloud after a long and endless winter, he couldn’t be arsed to care. Lately, with Molly, those bright patches had been coming more and more frequently, and either the weather was teasing him or spring was definitely on the way.

This was unconventional, and he knew it. They were unconventional. Their relationship, that was. Inappropriate, some might even call it. They had flirted over dead bodies, had fallen steadily in love alongside a stretch of serial killings, and had shared kisses at the news of exhumations and arrests. Perhaps that was what came with the territory when a homicide detective gave his heart to a mortuary attendant. None of that bothered him, though. If he felt guilty about any of it, it was that he and Molly were discovering such happiness in each other while their friends were mired in such seemingly inescapable misery.

‘You should go while the trail is fresh,’ said Molly, begrudgingly pulling herself away.

‘Maybe I’ll get wise and sneak a photo for you. Which would you prefer? Kitty in cuffs or Ms Riley’s mugshot?’
She giggled again. 'Naughty. But both, if you can manage it.'

***

John had seen it before; he recognised the signs: the retreat from conversation and from direct engagement with his surroundings, the walls coming up as a preventative measure against external stimuli, the pinpoint focus in Sherlock’s eyes as he scrutinised something invisible to everyone else but which he had stored away in that palatial repository of information. There was no sense talking to him at times like that. In the past, it had often just been best to leave him to it, to wait for him to emerge again having reached the conclusions he sought or having untangled a thread that had been vexing him.

This time was different. This time, he seemed lost, like he couldn’t remember his way back. Not on his own. His silence in the floristry had been just about as disconcerting as his subsequent outburst, his repetition of the words *flowers* and *Mary* in the backseat of Lestrade’s car on the return to the flat—something was happening inside his head, something important, but he seemed incapable of articulating it. The words weren’t coming, and in his bewilderment and distress, he had again fallen silent.

‘Sherlock.’

His fingers were steepled in a familiar pose, but they shook a little. Rather than his usual taut, poised position, he sat limp and legs spread. His expression was left unchanged at the sound his name.

‘Are you here with me?’

Still nothing.

‘I wish you would talk with me, let me in. I never said, but it bothered me, sometimes, when you didn’t talk for days. Back then. I know you warned me, but . . . I couldn’t help it. There were times when the things that came out of your mouth drove me up the wall, but I always preferred it when you talked. I still do.’

Sherlock blinked. Gradually, his eyes shifted, focused, this time on John. And suddenly, he was there. ‘Do you?’

John blinked back, almost surprised to have gained sudden access. ‘Of course I do. I don’t like feeling like I can’t reach you.’

‘Oh.’

It was a perplexed kind of *oh*, the kind he used when he didn’t want to admit that he didn’t understand.

‘You’re not ill. But you don’t look well.’

‘I need a cigarette.’

‘No, you don’t.’

‘Where’s Lestrade?’

‘He just left. With Molly.’

‘Oh.’ There it was again.

‘I’m going to need to bandage that hand.’

‘You changed the bandages this morning. That was today, wasn’t it?’

‘I’m not talking about that hand.’

Because Sherlock’s hands had lowered to his lap, and the nails of one had begun to reblaze their familiar track across the back of the other. At John’s words, they stopped.

‘Why do you do that?’

His hands parted to grip the armrests. ‘I don’t know. A stimulus-seeking compulsion in response to a heightened state of anxiety. Maybe.’

‘Or maybe it’s time you talked to someone—’

‘No.’ He made an attempt at an appeasing smile. ‘I was lying. I don’t really need a cigarette.’

‘Talk to me, at least. You need to tell me what happened in the greenhouse. You were acting pretty scary, to tell you the truth. And on the way home, you kept muttering about flowers and . . . about Mary.’

‘John.’

He waited.

‘I should have known about Rosemary and Thyme. But I didn’t. I’m sorry I never asked about her. Properly, I mean. My observation-based conclusions were wrong. It may be none of my business, but I know very little about someone who was very important to you. I expected you would prefer not mention her, and I was determined to respect that, but under the circumstances . . . ’ He trailed off, noticing John’s clenching fist. ‘I’ve upset you.’

‘No,’ said John, making a sad go at a mollifying smile of his own. He flattened his hand along one
thigh, flexed the fingers, tried to relax. ‘It’s fine. Ella, she says I need to work on talking about . . .
Mary. Without getting upset, that is. I was never able to do that before. With you, I mean. I could
barely say your name.’ No, this isn’t where the conversation was supposed to be going. He
needed to pull it back on track. ‘About the flowers—’

‘Did Molly leave, too?’

John frowned. ‘She left with Lestrade,’ he repeated. ‘He’s taking her back to Bart’s. Then he’s
going to arrest Kitty Riley.’

‘What for?’

‘All right. You’re not well.’ He moved to the edge of his chair, about to rise, and he took the
wooden cane in hand. ‘I’m going to take your temperature, and then you are going to sleep—’ But
as he began to push himself to his feet, he found his wrist caught in Sherlock’s clammy hand.

‘You were right, John. When you guessed that Irene Adler was Riley’s source, you were right.
They were feeding each other. Kitty knows your habits, your patterns. She knew where you
would be today. She told. But she didn’t send the flowers.’

John didn’t stand, didn’t move. Slowly, he set the cane aside. ‘How do you know? How do you
know they aren’t from Kitty?’

‘Because Kitty Riley would not have chosen those flowers. Those flowers, John, they . . . They’re
too specific to you. And to what happened to you in the convent. They’re part of the pattern, they
fit the rhymes, it’s pointing to number eight, it’s all happening again—!’

‘Sherlock, slow down. I’m listening, yeah? I’m here. Just, just talk to me.’ Gently, he extracted his
wrist from Sherlock’s grip and eased back into his chair. ‘Go on, then. Tell me about them. The
flowers, I mean.’

‘You heard it yourself, John. You did. The cockleshell orchid, you heard her say it—’

‘Yes. Yes, I did. But you know me. Slow brain and all.’ He had hoped the simple joke might calm
Sherlock somehow, but he only seemed more agitated: he kneaded the floor with the soles of his
shoes and squirmed in the chair. ‘Walk me through?’

‘And the snowdrops. I remember now. They go by another name: silverbells.’

‘Okay . . .’

‘The periwinkles, too. Old maids. They’re called old maids, John.’ He nodded vigorously and
spread his hands like he was revealing his cards, the whole deck, laying the evidence before John.
When John didn’t react straight away, he shook his hands violently in fists. ‘Don’t you see?
Silverbells and cockshells and—’

‘. . . and pretty maids all in a row,’ John finished, propelled by the old childhood impulse to finish
a recognisable verse.

‘Yes!’

‘Okay. Okay, I see it now. The rhyme. Mary—’ And he saw that now, too. Mary, Mary, quite
contrary . . . When he spoke next, he could barely get the words out. ‘The flowers came from
Mary’s garden. My Mary.’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s what you were trying to say. In the car.’

‘I don’t remember what I said in the car. It was all noise, John, just noise, everything screaming at
me, all of it, all at once, I couldn’t think.’

‘You’re thinking now, though. Aren’t you? You’ve figured it out, the rhyme. What it means. You
said yourself that they all have to do with, you know, falling. Show me.’

Sherlock, already so pale, seemed to drain even further, making him appear almost transparent.
‘Do you know the rhyme, John? Do you know where it comes from, its history?’

Whatever recollection he had of it, from school, was hazy and unspecific. In any case, his
knowledge would pale in comparison to the thorough research Sherlock had probably performed
in recent weeks in his quest to learn anything and everything under the sun about nursery rhymes,
their origins, their variations, their interpretations. So he answered simply: ‘Not really.’

‘Highly contested, but there are popular theories, most of them stretching back to Mary I of
England.’

‘Bloody Mary.’

‘Yes. Known primarily for her execution of hundreds of Protestants in her campaign to restore
England to Catholicism. She burned most of the dissidents at the stake. Others she had tortured.
The word garden in the rhyme is sometimes given as graveyard: How does your graveyard grow,
Mary? A garden of the dead. Look at all those you have killed. And how.’

‘With silverbells?’

‘A euphemism, John. The flowers in the rhyme all speak to devices designed for torture. Silver
bells refer to rudimentary mechanisms of iron used to extract confessions. They were instruments
of unrelenting pain, like thumbscrews, or the foot press.’

John felt his mouth drying out, but he ignored his rising temperature and quickening heart. ‘And . . .
cockshells?’
Sherlock looked away. ‘Genital clamps, or possibly the pear choke. It bears a resemblance to the flower in both size and shape.’ In a small voice, he started to ask, ‘Do you know what—?’

‘I know what that is,’ John answered quickly. His hands were beginning to sweat, and he felt a constriction in his chest, but he pressed on. He had to know it all. ‘Okay, go on. The pretty maids?’

‘I’m not sure. That could refer to many things. There was the iron maiden, of course, a man-sized box of steel with spikes on the inside, though its use as a medieval torture device is highly suspect. But it may more accurately refer to the Maiden, a Scottish gibbet introduced during the reign of Mary Queen of Scots, used for beheadings. A sort of preliminary guillotine. Some scholars contend that it was she, Mary Queen of Scots, to whom the rhyme refers. She herself was beheaded. Famously, it took two blows, as the first strike of the axe failed to sever her neck entirely.’

‘God,’ John gasped softly. ‘Just breathe. Five in, five out. You’re not back there. She’s dead, not dying. Look at the hearth, the bookshelves, the man seated across from you. You’re on Baker Street. But he was so thirsty, and a sudden chill permeated the air and sank through his skin like a thousand small knives.

‘We should stop.’

‘No, we’re not finished,’ he countered. ‘Tell me what you are saying. These flowers, they’re what? Some sort of sick tease? A perverted gesture of courtship? Reminders? As if I haven’t enough of those already!’

Sherlock held his breath, answered slowly. ‘Symbols. Eight weeks ago, evidence was stolen from the Yard. Three items.’

‘God,’ he moaned, again, but when Sherlock closed his mouth, looking like he was about to shut up, John pressed forward. ‘Three items,’ he repeated, and the glare he gave Sherlock told him to finish it.

‘Silverbells. Like thumbscrews or the foot press, a silver instrument of unremitting pain. The cilice.’

He could feel it now, the skin ringing each thigh—pulled tight into the teeth of the barbed metal belt.

‘Cockleshells. Like the pear choke, an analogous kind of violation, represented by the underwear.’

‘You need to say it.’

‘No. I don’t.’

‘You do. Because you’ve never said it.’

He shifted forward in his chair, trying to relieve the sudden pressure.

‘But I’m not certain about the third. The dog dish. It fits, it must, but I don’t see how.’

John saw himself on the floor, the bones of hands and elbows pressed painfully into the tiles as he dipped his head to lap at the water like a dog. Just a dog.

‘It’s the Scottish Maiden,’ he said without breath, moving his hand to shield his eyes. One, two, three . . .

He interpreted Sherlock’s silence as a question.

‘When a person is about to get his head chopped off, that’s exactly the position he takes. On his knees.’

‘Oh.’ This time, there was no misunderstanding. ‘Okay,’ said John, dropping his hand. His voice pitched a little. ‘I’m about a six right now, borderline seven. I need to stop for a moment.’

Next he knew, Sherlock was on his feet. ‘I’ll get us water.’

‘Thank you.’

Sherlock stepped past him and into the kitchen, moving quickly. ‘Are you breathing?’

‘Yes.’ It was laboured, and somewhat painful, but yes, he was breathing, and his mind was still his own. Nevertheless, he continued to stare at Sherlock’s chair, avoiding the darker corners of the room, just in case. ‘We need to tell Lestrade,’ he said, endeavouring to maintain the guise of sanity through a demonstration of reason. He swallowed, and a little whine died in his throat.

‘I’ll call him.’ The opening of a cupboard behind him. ‘Any intrusive images or noises?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Keep breathing.’ The sound of the tap, a steady rush of water. He licked his dry lips.

‘God, I wish you still had your violin,’ he murmured, and only when it had left his mouth did he realise he had spoken aloud.

Sherlock returned with slower steps. He passed John a glass and held one of his own. ‘Me too,’ he said, resuming his chair. ‘But you’re doing well. We’ll talk of other things. Bring you back down to a two. Good?’
John nodded. He drank from the glass, deciding not to ask about how this rhyme pointed to the fall, not until he could bear to hear it. Truth was, he could see it for himself. He just didn’t want to.

***

It had gone six o’clock that evening when the official letter was hand delivered, and with trembling fingers, Anderson set it aside and picked up his mobile even as he sank, weak-kneed, into a chair.

‘I thought I told you to stop calling.’

‘I’m sacked,’ he said. Shit, even his voice quavered. He ran a hand down his scratchy face, across his sticky brow, smearing the sweat around. ‘The inquest is over. They made their official decision this morning, and I’ve been served with discharge papers. They’re not even calling it redundancy. They’re calling it a discharge.’

He heard her sigh. ‘I’m sorry, but this ist’s my problem—’

‘I’m out of a job! I’ve not been paid for a month, and now I’ve no work at all! I can’t even afford to live in London anymore. I can’t pay my bills, I can barely afford to eat, I’ll lose my flat. Who’s going to hire me? My face, my name, I’m all over the papers, your papers.’

‘Hey,’ she said, hissing at him through the phone.

“You said you would protect me! You said you would expose him for the fraud and criminal that he is, but look at me! He pummels me senseless and gets a fine, just a few thousand pounds, and I lose everything!”

‘Hey. I’m not the one who told you to play it like that.’

‘You said——!’

‘Nothing. I promised you nothing. You’re not even supposed to be calling me, we agreed.’

‘Kitty, please.’

She sighed in exasperation. ‘It’s fine. It’ll be fine. You’ll be——’ The sound cut off abruptly, and he thought he had lost her.

‘Are . . . are you still there?’

‘What have you done? What did you tell them?’

‘What? Who?’

‘The police are here, the DI, they’re . . . What did you tell them?’

‘N-nothing!’

‘Dammit! Damn you, you coward.’

‘It was an inquest! What could I do? They were digging, things came out, and——!’

In the background on the other end, he heard a familiar voice. ‘Ah, Ms Katherine Jane Riley. I come bearing gifts. Another warrant . . .’

This time, the line really did go dead.

***

It was a bitterly cold March night. Bone-cracking cold, and Karim couldn’t stop shivering. This coat the Christian shelter had given him, it was no good. Too small for the length of his arms, too thin for the skin on his back. Every sweep of wind caught up his sleeves and down his collar. Four winters now, and he still hadn’t adjusted to this terrible climate, neither the chill nor the damp.

‘Oi, mate, you’re looking a bit frosted over tonight.’

Teeth chattering, he turned and saw a man approaching from around the corner. He adjusted his cardboard sign to make sure that it could be read in the orange light of the streetlamps: Cold and hungry. Every little bit helps. And in smaller print underneath: ﻣﻄﻠﻋ ﺎﻗز. The man’s eyes skimmed the sign quickly, then he pointed at the tiny script.

‘Don’t know how much good that’ll do you ‘round here. You might wanna try throwing something from Proverbs or Revelation instead. John 3:16.’

‘I am . . . grateful for helps,’ Karim said, not quite understanding. His English was still very poor, and it embarrassed him, how little he could communicate. He was fluent in three languages, was a well-educated man, could build a motherboard beginning with a single microchip, and yet this confounded English eluded him. In his own country, he had been somebody. Now? The words refugee and asylum meant so little in this country for people like him. He held out his cold hand, thinking hopefully that the man might press a coin into his palm.

‘Nonsense, old boy,’ said the man, instead placing a hand around his shoulders and turning him. Deftly, he removed the sign—Karim, fingers numb and uncooperative, lacked the strength to grip it—and tossed it to the pavement. ‘Let’s get something warmer in you, eh?’

‘We eating food?’ He gestured toward his mouth with his fingertips and thumb together at a point, just in case his words failed to convey his meaning.
‘Oh sure. Hope you’ve an appetite, Karim.’

Startled, his feet came to a stop and he tried to look at the man and get a better measure of him, but he was urged along. ‘You are knowing me?’

The man cast a sidelong glance at him and grinned. ‘Karim Omid Niazi. Sure, I know you. I know lots about you.’

His heart skipped a beat. ‘You are immigration?’ He tried to pull away, distance himself. Things weren’t good, but he didn’t want to be deported. He didn’t want to be sent back.

Grip tightening, the man steered him around a corner where the winter road stretched long and quiet. ‘No need to be nervous, Karim. I’m not from immigration.’

Headlights behind them cast their shadows long and dark, but as the vehicle rolled nearer, those shadows shrank and reversed. A dark transit van pulled to the side of the road, and the brake lights glared. The back door opened. As two men jumped out, Karim panicked. He broke the man’s grip, twisted to run, but he was apprehended. An arm wound round his neck and he was pulled off his feet. He kicked, but his legs were seized. He tried to scream, but his windpipe was crushed. Then he was hauled into the back of the van. The van doors slammed closed; the van rolled on.
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4, 2015

It had just gone seven when the bell chimed, not the one at the old gate but the one attached to the front door, which they seldom ever heard because, well, because people always rang at the gate. Odd, Cynthia thought. Did we forget to close up last night? Maybe it was a neighbour from down the glen who had noticed the dog had got out again and was bringing her home. But no, she could see, in the garden, the young Irish setter burrowing her nose through the most recent snowfall, playing, not a bit bothered by the cold. Still wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown, Cynthia hurried to the front door, nearly tripping on a toy truck on her way.

‘Good morning, Mrs Knight,’ said the unknown woman on her front porch, and though it was she who had come uninvited and unannounced, it was Cynthia who was made to feel instantly inferior, never mind her own class and breeding, which was not insignificant. The woman was beautiful, there was no denying, and she carried herself with an air of intense professionalism. Everything from her black, shined court shoes to her pinstripe pencil skirt hitting her so perfectly at the knee that it was almost certain she had had it professionally tailored, to her dark, salon-treated hair that fell in perfect waves down both shoulders. Even her smile seemed expertly trained.

‘Hullo, can I help you?’ said Cynthia, holding the front of her dressing gown closed and trying not to stare at the woman’s perfectly sculpted eyebrows. Behind her came the quick patter of feet, and her two-year-old launched himself at her legs, wrapping arms around her knees, eager to play. She proficiently wrangled him round in front and stroked his fair head.

‘Thank you, yes. I am here to speak with your husband.’

‘Regarding . . . ?’ She glanced beyond the woman’s shoulders but saw no car, and the gate was still closed. How had she not sounded the alarm?

‘Mummy, I hungry,’ said the little boy, tugging at her gown.

‘Hush a moment, love.’

‘A private matter, Mrs Knight,’ said the woman, flashing a cordial but uninterested smile at the child, ‘though nothing indiscreet, I assure you. Is he at home?’

The question was a mere pleasantrty; those dark, incisive eyes suggested that she already knew the answer.

‘Um, yes, shall I go and . . . Sorry, who did you say you were?’

‘Call me Eucleia.’

Cynthia’s eyebrows arose. ‘What, like the Greek spirit of good repute?’

The woman looked equally surprised, her countenance of total composure shifting to something more human. ‘You know your mythology.’

‘I studied the classics. And Henry knows you?’

‘No, but I am hoping we share a common interest. I expect we may.’

‘Well, we’re about to sit down to breakfast. Come in, please. It’s too cold to be standing with the door open like this. I’ll put on the coffee.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Knight.’ She entered the house and waggled her fingers at the young boy, who stared up at her with wide-eyed curiosity. She followed mother and son further into the house.

***

Cynthia Knight was not alone in receiving an unanticipated early-morning visitor while still in nightclothes.

‘Sally,’ said Thomas Dryers with a surprised but pleased smile. Despite wearing only flannel bottoms and a white vest, he appeared unabashed to be caught so underdressed, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to see him like this at such an hour. She’d never been to his flat before—Yard colleagues did not make habit of socialising beyond the occasional pint (at least, not in her experience)—but she offered no immediate explanation as to why she was there now.

But the unusual visit didn’t seem to perturb or worry him. Dryers rolled wet hands in a towel, which he flipped over his shoulder to hold the door for her so she could step inside the overly warm room. ‘I was just doing the washing-up,’ he explained.

‘Fancy that, a man who does the washing-up,’ she said, snapping open the buttons on her dark-grey pea coat and fanning herself with its lapels.

‘A bachelor’s gotta keep the place tidy,’ he said. ‘You never know when you’ll have an unexpected guest.’ He winked. ‘Welcome to my humble abode. Coffee? Tea? I make a mean brew.’ He led her into the kitchen, which, being a rather cozy flat, was not far from the front door.

‘No,’ she replied coolly. ‘You’re alone then. No one in the bedroom?’

He chuckled good-naturedly, then put on an air of self-pity. ‘Just me, I’m afraid.’

Dryers poured himself a mug from the coffee pot and looked her over. For a breath of a moment, she waited for him to comment on the fact that she was wearing day-old clothes, reeked of coffee,
and had bags under her eyes from too many hours on her feet and not in a bed. She waited for him to deduce, correctly, that she had spent the night working down at the Yard, and maybe even hazard a guess as to why. But he didn’t. He probably didn’t see any of that. He just sipped his coffee with a doozy kind of grin, waiting for her to justify her coming.

‘Good.’ She pulled back a chair from the dining table; it screeched along the lino and hit the wall. ‘Then wipe that idiot smile off your face and sit the fuck down.’

His smile froze, leaving him with a bemused sort of expression as he tried to understand the joke. But Sally Donovan was anything but a jokester. Not one thing about her spoke a playful kind of language at all, not her eyes (sharp as flint), not her mouth (ruler straight), and certainly not her tongue. ‘Do it,’ she said.

‘What’s going on, Sally?’

‘That’s Sergeant Donovan to you, you shit,’ she said, and she moved so quickly he didn’t even have time to brace. Next he knew, the coffee mug cracked on the floor, the front of his vest had been seized in her fist, and he had been shoved down into the chair. She stood in front of him, huffing, and pushed the curls away from her face. ‘Who do you work for?’

‘What?’

‘Answer the question!’

‘You, I work for you! For DI Lestrade, Gregson, the Met— What the hell are you doing?’

‘Do you know what is happening down at the Yard right now, right this bloody second?’

‘N-no! Jesus, Sally, what—?’

‘Sergeant Donovan.’

‘Sergeant Donovan, I’m sorry! Christ, tell me what—’

‘We’re flooded, _flooded_, with homeless berks, men and women, with the initials KON. Or KN. Or ON or KO, every Kevin, Kim, and Kendall you’ve ever met, every O’Neill, O’Nolan, and O’Malley—are you sure it wasn’t an M bimbo from Twickenham to Brentwood, all of them convinced that they’re next on the chopping block and seeking police protection. Only four people knew about those initials, Dryers. Only _four of us_ knew what was next: Gregson, Lestrade, me, and you. _Someone_ let the cat out of the bag. It wasn’t the chief superintendent, it wasn’t Lestrade, and it sure as hell wasn’t me. Guess who that leaves.’

‘Oh, come on—!’

‘This is _exactly_ why that information wasn’t made public, why we didn’t tell the other officers. You knew what the consequences would be, didn’t you? So you let it slip, you _flood_ the Yard with more work than we can handle to what, distract us? Keep us busy processing all these potential victims while your buddies go after the real KON? Who is he?’

‘My buddies? What are you saying? I didn’t let anything slip, and let’s get real here. Anyone might have figured out that name pattern by now. But _I_ didn’t say anything!’

‘Anyone might have figured it out, sure. But the timing is awfully suspicious, wouldn’t you agree? John Watson is sent those flowers, and twelve hours later the whole homeless population knows about KON?’

He blinked, putting on a damn good show of confusion. ‘What flowers? I don’t know anything about flowers.’

‘ _I’m not an idiot_, constable. _Stop!_ Keep your arse in that chair. I see what’s been going on, how you’ve been playing your cards all this time.’

‘Honestly, Sal— Sgt Donovan, I don’t know what you’re on about. But . . . Okay.’ He held up his hands, a gesture of goodwill, surrender, placation, she wasn’t sure yet. ‘Come on, let’s talk it through, yeah? I’ve got nothing to hide. I’ve just been doing my job, I swear.’

She scowled. ‘Which job? Are you a new recruit, or were you chummed up with Moriarty from the start?’

‘I . . . I understand what’s going on here. I do. You’ve been burnt before, I get that. You didn’t know who to trust, and those you thought you could count on turned out to be criminals. I get it. But I’m not one of them. I passed all the screenings back in November, right? After you’d dropped all those flies? Haven’t I been helpful since?’

Donovan crossed her arms. ‘Oh yes. Helpful. Well. It’s all just a little too convenient, Dryers, how nicely situated you’ve been since all this began.’

He laughed in disbelief and shook his head, still playing the poor, hapless, bewildered scumbag. She loomed larger.

‘You were the first officer on the scene when Mary Morstan’s body was found. Keeping an eye on things, making sure they unfolded exactly like it had been planned, isn’t that right?’

‘I was on duty.’ His voice was level, but he pleaded with her with his eyes. ‘I got the call. And I phoned Lestrade just as soon as—’

‘Were you in on it with O’Higgins? With Stubbins? Did you know about them, or did they not know about you?’

‘Okay, now you’re just sounding paranoid.’
‘I trusted you, goddammit, I sent you in the ambulance with Watson when we recovered him from the convent. You knew exactly where he was at all times, from kitchen to hospital. Is that how Moran got away, how his trail went cold so quickly, because of you? Is that why no alarms were sounded when Watson left his hospital room, because you had fucked with our security detail? Is that why—?’

‘Sally!’

She was trembling with rage, and when he tried to sit forward on the chair, looking like he was about to take her hands, she shoved him back hard at the shoulders. ‘I’m not finished!’ she said.

‘You were the first to discover the missing evidence, to get us playing this bloody game, and you were assigned to recover it. But did you? No. Not a single lead. That night, at Borough Market. You drew Holmes away from the crime scene, sent him chasing after Watson. A bit eager to be rid of him? What were you afraid he would see? What’s more, you were responsible for compiling the list of OTs, I gave that task to you, but did we save the right one?’

‘Orrin Tippet was on the list!’

‘But we tracked down the wrong ones first! It was you who suggested we search near Stonebridge when the real OT was all the way over by Elephant and Castle. We couldn’t have been farther from the crime scene! You tricked me into trusting you. You lied to me!’

‘I swear, I didn’t. I never lied—’

‘I’ve seen you fake a cover, Dryers. I’ve seen you put on a show. Your overeager helpfulness, your overbearing friendliness, pretending to be on my side when everyone else down at the Yard has been itching to put Holmes away and calling me bitch for defending his sorry arse. Well, I’m calling it now. You’re a phony.’

‘For God’s sake, Donovan, that wasn’t a cover! That was . . . Jesus, that was flirting.’

For half a second, Donovan stared, nonplussed. Then she threw her head back and laughed.

‘What? What? Is it really so hard to imagine? That someone might fancy you?’

‘Nice try. To fall for that, you must think me a real imbecile.’

‘Quite the contrary, though at the moment . . .’

She crossed her arms again and lifted her chin, all humour evaporated. ‘Don’t cross me. You’ve seen what happens to those who cross me.’

Dryers snorted. ‘Anderson. Now there’s one I never really understood. What did you ever see in that guy?’

‘Don’t try to turn this back on me. You’re the one in the hot seat.’

‘My flat isn’t an interrogation room. And I haven’t exactly been arrested, have I? You come waltzing in here, no warrant, no backup, and just expect me to roll over and confess to something I didn’t do? To being someone I’m not? Suddenly, you’re not sounding so confident. Does the DI even know you’re here?’

‘I’m giving you a chance to come clean before I take this to the next level. Save yourself some grief, maybe even spare yourself Stubbins’ fate.’

He spread his hands. ‘I have nothing to give you. Literally nothing. I can’t tell you anything because I don’t know anything. I know less than you!’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘And just what am I supposed to say to that? What can I possibly do to convince you?’

She stared at him hard, not answering. Then: ‘One thing.’

‘Name it. Jesus, Sally, being on this end of your suspicions, even for an innocent man, is the most uncomfortable thing in the world. I’ll do whatever you . . .’ His voice trailed off as she pulled a small black box attached to a strap out of the pocket of her coat. ‘You’re not serious. An ankle monitor?’

‘You know how this works. Extensive battery life, tamper proof, waterproof—you try to remove or destroy it, I’ll know. I want to know where you are, exactly where you are, at every second of the day and night when I’m not dragging you around by your ear.’

‘This isn’t even legal!’

‘Planning to run?’

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‘Fuck’s sake,’ he said, breathing out a shaky sort of laugh. ‘You’re as scary as they come, Donovan. You don’t give a bloke much of a choice on the matter. Gotta say, I’m a little less keen on you at the moment.’

‘You’re breaking my heart.’ She tossed the monitor into his lap. ‘Put it on. Lock it. Then hand over the key.’

***

It was Wednesday. That meant John had another session with Ella. But now it also meant that Sherlock would not be able to accompany him. His community sentence had begun, and the terms of this sentence—as delivered by his assigned offender manager—were non-negotiable. In addition to the non-molestation order (which happily prohibited him from any and all interactions with Anderson), Sherlock was also forbidden from patronising pubs or discos (which offered no temptation), from hiring private transportation like town cars and taxis (this was more of a problem), and from being on the streets past nine o’clock at night (an annoyance, given that he’d not obeyed curfews even as a child). He was additionally required to maintain a single residency (which he expected would soon come in conflict with his impending eviction), to report nightly via phone to the offender manager, and to submit to drug tests every Monday and Friday. The violation of any of these terms would result in further loss of freedom and an additional fifty hours per infraction to his sentence to a maximum of three hundred hours, and any infractions beyond that would convert his punishment into a custodial sentence to the tune of six-to-twelve months.

He had no intention of pushing things so far. So when the offender officer informed him that he would serve his time between the hours of two o’clock and five o’clock every Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday for the next sixteen weeks, he put up no fuss, only signed his name to the agreement form and set up a new count-down clock in his head.

While The Guardian was busy reporting Kitty Riley’s arrest, Scott Anderson’s termination, and the speculations regarding the details of an inquest into their supposed collusion, other papers in the city concerned themselves with continued editorials on the validity of the Bruhl girl’s testimony and Sherlock Holmes’ criminal history, though the latter was now meeting with some backlash from readers and demands for proof. Either way public opinion swung, Sherlock Holmes was a hot topic grown hotter, so it was little surprise when the paparazzi, driven away from Baker Street by the police, flocked like pigeons to the hard shoulders of the M1 to snap photos of him in a reflective orange jacket, spearing rubbish—empty bottles, cigarette cartons, fast-food wrappers—with a stick. Within twenty-four hours, these photographs would appear on television, online, and in printed tabloids all over the city; BBC News, however, would use those photos in their story of how paparazzi presence on the motorway caused severe traffic delays and a three-car prang.

After an hour’s spectacle, the probationary officer was so infuriated by the ‘celebrity’ attention that he pulled all eight criminal offenders—including Holmes—off the motorway and assigned them to sorting recyclables indoors: ‘Just today, don’t be gettin’ too cosy indoors.’ The men were grateful to be out of the cold, if only for a day, and they jogged with Sherlock Holmes, that inscrutable detective-turned-crook, that his arrest was the best thing that could have happened to them. But the man didn’t seem much for conversation. He shut up, did his work, and waited for those three hours to expire.

And so John went to Kilburn alone. He left Baker Street early and took a bus, even though the Central Line would have been quicker. Though he was feeling calm and in control (a steady two on the scale), he did not want to provoke feelings of entrapment by sitting in an enclosed steel carriage beneath the earth, like he had before. And he took other precautions: he took his pills, he texted Lestrade at every juncture (leaving the flat, boarding the bus, leaving the bus, and so forth), and in a deep pocket of his coat he kept his fingers curled around Sherlock’s BK&T combat knife, sheathed, but sharpened. For the entirety of the ride, he was on high alert—eyes, ears, and soldier’s intuition—and he reached Dr Thompson’s office without incident.

They talked about Mary. They talked about the child that would never be. He had done it in writing already, so it was easier, somehow, this time. They talked about Sherlock. About what John had said to him.

‘You once called him your best friend.’

‘I did, didn’t I? Feels like a long time ago now.’

‘Is it still true?’

John thought. In the end, all he could answer was, ‘It’s the wrong word, isn’t it?’

When he left, he felt lighter, but his leg was aching, and the cold wasn’t helping. He texted Lestrade:

Heading home. Still a mess down there?

A moment later:

It’s Occupy Scotland Yard, apparently. Want to give me an excuse to disappear?

John was tempted to say yes. He knew how eager Lestrade was to help, but he felt funny asking it from anyone but Sherlock, and probably because he rarely ever had to. Ask, that was. Sherlock seemed to intuit his needs, sometimes before even John did, and next he knew, he had a glass of water in his hands, or the telly clipped on to distract him, or an additional light came on to dispel the shadows. Lestrade, on the other hand, was a man who waited for permission. He was grateful for that, too.
But today, he was feeling . . . stronger.

I’m going to take a cab.

The response was quick.

Are you sure?

Yes. I’ll text you the cab number. Just to be safe.

When the black taxi rolled to the kerb, he quickly sent off the number plate JS07 UYT to Lestrade, reminded himself to breathe, and pulled open the back door.

‘Baker Street, please,’ he said, and when his voice came out a little too soft, he cleared his throat and said more boldly, ‘Quick as you can.’

Then he settled back into the warm leather bench and forced his muscles—all except those of the tightly curled hand in his pocket—to relax. Fifteen minutes to home, he coached himself as he stared out of the window, marking the path of the taxi as it made the first right turn onto Western Avenue, going east. So far, so good. His fingers rubbed the hilt of the combat knife like a good luck charm. Of all he had confessed to Ella, he had kept that detail to himself. They could address that particular paranoia later.

Right about the time Western Avenue became Westway, John pulled his eyes from the side window and found the cabbie watching him in the rearview mirror. His heart tripped, and he started a little in his seat. His grip tightened, and all his muscles went from lax to taut in half a second. But the cabbie’s eyes fell away, and he thought that maybe he had been mistaken. He was overreacting, seeing things as he imagined they might be, not as they were. The man was probably just checking the traffic. The cool logic of it, though, didn’t stop his heart from racing.

And then his mouth went dry when he noticed the man staring at him again.

Bad idea, terrible idea, he thought frantically. He snapped his head to the side window, and suddenly the city looked foreign. Was this even Westway? Were they travelling in the right direction? Mistake, mistake! In his other pocket, his thumb slipped across the screen on his phone.

His brain screamed instructions: Text Sherlock. Call Lestrade. Demand that the cabbie pull over and get out. If he refuses, show him the knife. Use it.

John licked his dry lips, took a breath to speak, but before he could make a sound, the cabbie spoke first:

‘Sorry, sir, I’m staring,’ he said. ‘But you’re Mr Watson, ain’t ya? Sherlock Holmes’ mate?’

Get out! He knew what he would do—in two ticks, he could have the knife unsheathed and buried in the man’s neck, severing the carotid artery with one clean motion. Let the taxi careen off the side of the road, let it smash into another car, he would bear it. It would be better than the alternative: a new hideout, the same enemy, and this time nothing to confess. Kill him now. Deftly, his finger flicked the button on the sheath and his muscles poised for action.

‘Don’t mean to be a rude,’ the man continued on placidly. ‘Just thought I recognised you. From the papers, you know? Started reading them a bit more diligently I did, after I met him. Well, I say “met”, but it wasn’t real proper. It was me what dropped him off home a couple weeks back when he was in a bad way. Doin’ all right though now, innit?’

John stared at the mirror and the man’s eyes, now on the road, but when they flicked back again to see him, John nodded. He swallowed the dryness in his throat, ran a thumb lightly down the blade and felt it split his skin. ‘He’s fine,’ he said carefully.

‘Glad to hear it. Seems an all right chap.’

They continued toward Baker Street at an unhurried pace. The fear was beginning to recede, but his guard was still raised to heaven.

‘What’s your name?’ John asked, his tone interrogatory.

‘Me? Julian. Julian Smalls. Name’s on the plate back there, if you follow me.’

‘How long have you been a cab driver, Julian Smalls?’

‘Oh now, let’s see . . .’ Smalls flicked his small finger against the indicator and merged right, pulling ahead of slower vehicles. ‘Thirty-two years now, innit? Getting to be an old-timer.’

‘Did you know Anton Willoughby?’ He checked the street again. They were still going in the right direction. He felt the warm blood sliding down his thumb and pressed the cut into his palm.

‘Personally? Nah. Heard he been arrested’s all. None of us quite know why though. Something to do with drugs, maybe. Word was he had a side business. What else could it have been but drugs? You read about that one in the papers?’

‘What about Jeff Hope?’

Smalls chuckled a bit. ‘Lord, that was a while back. Two thousand . . .’

‘Ten.’

‘Yeah, s’right. Turns out, man was a real nutter. Jesus, whenever we cabbies are in the news, it’s only for something dodgy, innit? You must think we’re all right nutters.’

John watched the Thameslink, red, white, and blue, trundle by on his right. ‘So it was you who
found Sherlock, that night.'

The man laughed. ‘Nearly ran him over, I did. Man stumbles out into the middle of the road, no shoes, no coat, and it being cold as an ice box. Could barely talk, the poor bloke. Thought he should’ve gone to A&E, but he wouldn’t let me take him there.’

‘Why did you do it? Bring him home, I mean.’

Julian Smalls’ eyebrows rose in the rearview mirror as he shot another glance back at John. ‘Why wouldn’t I?’

There was no more conversation for the rest of the journey, not until the cabbie took a left onto Baker Street and pulled to a stop in front of 221. John hastened out of the taxi, just to feel his own two feet beneath him again on unmoving ground, to feel the cold, clear air in his lungs. He was shaky, hands to knees, but he was home. Leaning the cane against the side of the vehicle, he unzipped the top of his coat, reached inside for his wallet, and approached the driver’s window, giving himself an arm’s-length buffer zone. He sucked his thumb quickly, tasting the bitterness of the blood on his tongue.

‘Nineteen pounds eighty,’ said Smalls.

John fingered a twenty-pound note. ‘And how much do I owe you for that night? I know Sherlock couldn’t pay you.’

‘Not a penny. Thank you, Mr Watson, but that was just one human being helping out another. I couldn’t charge you that.’

John handed him twenty-five pounds. ‘Thank you.’

Julian Smalls took the bills and exchanged it with a small business card. ‘My number,’ he said pointedly. ‘If either of you ever need a lift, yeah?’

‘Right. Thank you.’ He slipped the card into his wallet.

It wasn’t until he was back inside and standing at the kitchen sink to clean his thumb that it struck him, in the act of extracting the knife from his pocket, what he had been prepared to do. The victory—however small it had been—of taking a cab home on his own like a normal, unbroken adult, sank below the weight of knowing how close he had come to driving that blade into the throat of an innocent man, how right and necessary the action had felt, in the moment. What was wrong with him!

He dropped the knife into the sink and bent over the edge of it, weight resting on forearms as he gagged, his stomach writhing and knees shaking, and his thumb dripped red against the stainless steel basin.

When the nausea passed, he turned around and slid down to the floor, breathing hard. He wiped his sweat-beaded forehead with a sleeve and the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand.

There he stayed, caught in a stupor as five minutes passed, ten minutes, until his mobile sounded and he flinched back to life.

‘How’s traffic?’ Lestrade asked casually, but there was a note of worry in his voice. John should have texted.

‘Just got home,’ he said, though less steadily than he would have liked.

‘Everything all right?’

At last, he caved. Sherlock wouldn’t be home for another hour, maybe longer, and he didn’t trust himself to be alone inside his own mind. Not at the moment. ‘Yeah. I am, but, um. If you’re still looking for that escape . . .’

‘You bet I am.’

‘Okay. Yeah. And, um, I’ve got a name for you. Someone to look into.’

‘. . . All right. Yeah, sure thing. I’ll be over in ten.’

Ten minutes. That was enough time to pull himself together. He would take care of the thumb, put the knife away, upstairs in his bedroom where he wouldn’t have such ready access, and figure out what he would say to Lestrade. The man was in therapy himself. He would understand.

Thursday, March 5, 2015

As Wednesday wore itself out and slogged into Thursday, the Yard dealt with the KON fiasco piece by piece, hoping to keep the situation under control and as uninteresting to the press as possible while at the same time hoping they had found and protected the intended victim. To no one’s surprise, the endeavour to keep things hushed failed, and by evening, the reporters had gathered enough information to identify the unifying factor and how the initials fit with the rest of the Slash Man slayings. S-H-E-R-L-O-C-K and J-O’H-N-W-A-T-S-O’N.

There was an uproar. How dare the police keep this information from the public! How dare they let KONs walk around unprotected, not to mentions the CSs, OTs, and all of them! How dare they treat Sherlock Holmes as a hapless victim when he was clearly at the centre of it all! And then the speculation: Scott Anderson and the reporter for The Sun had figured out the pattern and were planning on going public. That’s why he had been sacked and she arrested—for some reason, the Yard was willing to let the massacre play out. The public and the press stormed the Yard, demanding answers.

For the second day in a row, Thomas Dryers called in sick. ‘Flu,’ he said. Then, to add a bit of colour, ‘Can’t keep anything down.’ Human resources told him to drink plenty of fluids.
Sally Donovan, meanwhile, was handed a thick file from IT in both print and electronic forms, pages and pages of data from Dryers’ personal electronics devices. She began to comb through it, looking for suspicious patterns, untraceable numbers, midnight phone calls, hot words, and so on, and so forth, and on, and on.

Because Sherlock was once again obliged to the city of London for a three-hour block not including travel time, John relied on Molly and Lestrade to get to Bart’s for his next PT appointment. Molly picked him up from Baker Street (she and Lestrade had recently begun sharing the car) to bring him in with her to work, and Lestrade took him home after his late lunch hour, at which point they talked briefly about the unlikely possibility of having found the right KGN.

‘Moran wouldn’t be so sloppy,’ said John. He stared straight ahead, through the windscreen, and rubbed the top of his burn leg absentely.

Lestrade nodded. ‘I agree. We were bound to have picked up on the pattern by now. He would know it. So it won’t be quite as simple as finding someone who fits the victim profile. Not this time. There’s something we’re not seeing.’

‘It’s something to do with the flowers. Has to be.’

‘We’re not making a lot of headway there,’ said Lestrade, scrubbing a hand across his chin. ‘There are only so many ways to analyse a flower, and we’ve exhausted them all. Nothing seems to be serving as an arrow in the right direction. We did track down the man who ordered the bouquet from Rosemary and Thyme, based on the description. Like we suspected—ignorant homeless man in want of an easy pound. Says he was approached on a street corner, given the list of instructions and a fistful of dosh, and promised two hundred pounds for successful delivery.’

‘Who approached him?’

Lestrade snorted. ‘Tosser was sloshed when it happened, and still rat arsed when we talked to him next day. He lacked the wits to describe his own mother.’

‘A deliberate choice then. A lush.’

‘Yeah, probably.’

‘Chances are,’ John continued, and now his hand was just a solid grip at the knee, ‘we are still missing an essential clue. With Orrin Tippet, we didn’t get the pilsner until just hours before he was left on the tracks.’

‘We can’t just sit around and wait, I hate that.’

‘I know.’ They lapsed momentarily into silence. ‘But if there’s still something to come, it’ll come to Sherlock. Like before. They’re playing this game with him, after all. And he’ll be the one to figure it out.’

‘Speaking of the old dab hand in the brains department,’ said Lestrade, treading carefully, ’how’s he been?’

John shook his head, fixating more determinedly on the road beyond the windscreen, but he answered. ‘Good and bad. But more bad, lately, than good. Spends more and more time locked away inside his head, and coaxing him out . . . Sometimes it’s not so easy.’

Lestrade frowned.

‘We both need this to be over, Greg.’

‘I know. I’m trying to find a way to end it.’

‘We all are.’

As for Sherlock, he was back out in the cold, this time in Battersea Park, shovelling snow from walkways, scrubbing graffiti off the war memorials, and cleaning up the rubbish. Uninformed, the press did not rush to photograph him like they had the day before, but this time, after ninety minutes’ work, word spread among the homeless men and women who occupied the park, and they began to tail him. They kept their distance at first, but when they got bolder, they began whistling at him and calling out nasty invectives. Those who braved passing nearer either spit at him, cursed at him under their breaths, or dared to ask him who he aimed to slaughter next. One man even tried to egg him on, show what he was made of, and he’d give him what-for. Sherlock resolutely ignored them all as if they were nothing more than pigeons, but the probationary officer was getting hot and bothered at having to shout vague threats at the pests to move along or be run off. Then he rounded on Sherlock.

‘Dammit, Holmes! Is this what it’s always going to be like with you on the end of my leash? Sixteen weeks of this? Jesus.’

Sherlock didn’t answer. The man was just another pigeon. Meanwhile, the other offenders just sniggered and kept on working. After all, they found the whole thing rather amusing.

It wasn’t until gangs of teenage boys began hurling balls of slush and ice at Sherlock’s head that the officer finally lost his temper and, like the day before, pulled them all off outdoor detail and back indoors to sweep out loos.

‘Wipe that smug smile off your face, Moodie. This keeps up, I’ll have you all working sewage, and you’ll have Mr Holmes here to thank.’

Friday, March 6, 2015

In the hour before Lestrade was to hold a press conference to address head-on the allegations of
wrongful termination in the case of former Yard employee Scott Anderson (Waste of time, he thought ruefully), he found himself at the end of another session with Dr Quinton.

‘Well, detective inspector, I believe that’s it then,’ said Dr Quinton, making one final note in biro before setting the clipboard aside and folding his hands together over one knee.

‘Right,’ said Lestrade. Then a close-lipped grin. ‘Seemed a quicker hour than most. Good thing, I suppose. Plenty to be getting on with.’ He stood and closed the top button of his suit coat. ‘Same time next week, then.’

‘Only if you like.’

‘What’s that?’ He stopped his feet from moving toward the door.

‘You can come by any time you like, Greg. But officially, I’m giving my recommendation that you be taken off probationary status and fully reinstated.’

‘Really?’

‘The chief superintendent will be happy to hear it, I’m sure.’

‘So I’m . . . what, I’m fine now?’

‘Well, fine isn’t a word we use. What you are is better equipped to handle your own distress, guilt, and grief with success. You have acknowledged the negative thoughts and emotions you have repressed and have dealt honestly with yourself in examining them. You have given voice to your fears and lessened their power over you by confronting them. And you have accepted that there are things outside your control. I won’t say you’re absolutely free of the things you’ve been wrestling with—none of us are, that’s being human—but you have the tools now not only to cope but to overcome them.’

‘Oh. Well. That’s a good thing, I guess.’

‘That doesn’t mean you can’t still come in and talk about them, when you need to. You’re just not obligated anymore.’

‘Right.’ He rubbed the back of his neck, let out a little laugh, and then extended a hand. ‘Well, thanks a lot, doc. This has . . . you know. Been good.’

‘Take care of yourself, Greg.’

‘Will do.’

‘And that girl of yours. We all need a strong support system, and she’s been your third leg.’

He laughed again. ‘Yeah, she has. Don’t worry. I’ll not let her come to harm.’

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For Friday’s sentence, the probationary officer had a clever idea, if he did say so himself. At two o’clock, he collected the mobile phones from the offenders (as always) and piled the men into two matching transit vans and drove them south, beyond the city limits, to Honor Oak and the Camberwell Cemeteries. There, he divided the group, one going with the other probationary officer into Old Cemetery, and the other following him into New Cemetery, where he set them to work clearing away dead brush, maintaining clear walkways, and picking up whatever rubbish the wind swept in.

‘Let’s show a little respect, eh, gentlemen? Make this a nice place to be dead in.’

It was quiet in the graveyard, but for the occasional winter songbird. The trees stood like sentinels under a smoke-white mid-afternoon sky, and each grave rose out of the earth like stone flowers searching for sunlight.

Sherlock carried a rake and dragged a rubbish bin on wheels, stopping here to pick up a sopping page of newspaper, pausing there to rake long-dead leaves into a small pile to discard. As far as he could, he ignored the graves, the names, the dates, and the memory this place stirred of the last time he had stood in a cemetery, not too far from this one.

A long, cold hour passed, and the men were quiet, working as they were meant to, until something captured Sherlock’s notice, something bright red against the cold winter-grey world: a single, long-stem rose in half-bloom set atop a short, dark-grey headstone. This time of year, there were few visitors to cemeteries and so few flowers, only those placed at new graves or for anniversaries, and usually set at the foot of the headstone, often in a plastic vase. Different, he thought, but not odd, not notable, and he was on the verge of dismissing the flower as entirely inconsequential when his eyes fell to the words carved into the face of the stone: Ewan Nichols, November 22, 1984 – January 16, 2015.

For a moment, it felt as though he had gone deaf or the world had fallen utterly silent—no wind swept past his ears, no whistling birds, no scraping rakes. Perhaps it was the penetrating reality of the once-animated bones, including a now-cracked spine, lying six feet below his own feet, lying there purely because Sherlock had not acted quickly enough. Or rather, perhaps his sudden deafness was due to the blood draining from his head and pooling at his feet, which now carried him forward to the grave, to the rose. And as he lifted it at the thorny stem, he remembered another long-stem rose, and a note, which had led to a bird, a bird with clipped wings . . .

Between the waking petals, he saw, was tucked a small, brown, striated feather.

He abandoned the rake and bin and made a beeline for the probationary officer.

‘I need my phone,’ he said.
The man’s eyebrows rose incredulously. ‘Behold, it speaks!’

‘It’s urgent. My phone. Now.’

‘Shut your trap, Holmes, and get back to work. You’re on my time. And that means no phone calls.’

‘This can’t wait. I need to speak to DI Lestrade.’

‘Not happening.’

‘Give. Me. My. Phone.’

‘Watch it there, son. You threaten me, and I’ll consider that an infraction. You really want another fifty hours added onto your time? I sure as hell don’t. But I’ll do it.’

‘You really want a dead body on your conscience? A man is about to die.’

‘And just how the hell would you know that?’

‘You couldn’t possibly understand. Two minutes.’

‘I’ll tell you this just once more: I’ll give you your phone so you can call up your detective friend. Then I’m calling it an infraction. Fifty hours? Five more weeks of this on top of the fifteen you have still to go? Is that worth it to you?’

Sherlock’s mouth twisted in anger, and from behind gritted teeth he said, ‘Fine. Now give it to me.’

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Lestrade’s phone vibrated in his pocket.

He would have to ignore it, for now. He was in the middle of a sentence, after all, and in front of a roomful of press, cameras, and microphones. Whatever and whoever it was would simply have to wait.

The phone stopped vibrating, and another reporter stood to ask a question. Then another phone vibrated.

From the corner of his eye, he watched Donovan, who sat on his left, slip her mobile out of her pocket and check the screen; then she angled it so he could see the caller ID: Holmes.

Distracted, he missed the last half of the question. ‘Uh,’ he said, trying to recall any buzzwords. ‘Yes, yes, he did. Once Anderson stopped denying the charges, we took what else he had to say as confession. That’s procedure . . .’

Donovan stood and excused herself from the room.

Out in the hallway, she put the phone to her ear. ‘This is Donovan.’

‘Someone left a single rose and a feather from a wren on the gravestone of Ewan Nichols.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Camberwell Cemetery.’

‘What are you doing there?’

‘Did you hear what I just said?’

‘Yes yes, all right, a rose and feather. What does it mean?’

‘It means tonight’s the night. Cut the press conference short and get your people out there. You need to check all the graves, everyone who was a victim of the Slash Man.’

‘Three bodies were cremated.’

‘Which?’

‘Simpkins, Tippet, and Winters. We never found Tippet’s family, so cremation was the default action. Winters’ mother couldn’t afford burial, and Simpkins . . . well, he was halfway there already. The family didn’t see the point in a casket.’

There was a long pause on the other end, and Donovan thought maybe her phone had dropped the call. ‘Holmes? You still there?’

‘What? Uh, yeah. Yes, of course. Look, you’ll need to visit Ms Winters and the Simpkins family, too. Find out if they’ve received anonymous flowers recently, or cards, that sort of thing. But check the graves first.’

‘We will. Meanwhile, you should get yourself out of that cemetery.’

He ignored that. ‘And someone should see to John. Make sure he’s safe.’

‘I’m sending a unit to pick you up.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Like hell you are. You’re not playing the martyr or having a psychotic break on my watch. Unit’s on its way. And Holmes. Matters of the Met are of somewhat higher priority than a community sentence, which I’ll happily inform your offender manager if he gives you gaff.’
‘I . . .’ Again, she wondered if the call had dropped. Then, ‘Right then. I’m in the New Cemetery.’

‘Cheers, Holmes.’

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It was a game of divide and conquer.

The bodies of the Slash Man’s dead were scattered. Ewan Nichols had been buried in Southwark and Lynette Avery in New Southgate Cemetery of the London Borough of Barnet, but the others were outside of the London altogether. Holden O’Harris was buried in a family plot in Alperton Cemetery in Wembley; even further out, Sam Jefferies had been interred in Easthampstead Park Cemetery in Wokingham. Cleona Winters lived in Caldwell of northwest London, but Mr and Mrs Simpkins were of Dartford.

In the interest of expediency, Lestrade enlisted the help of local police in Wembley, Wokingham, and Dartford, telling them where to go and what to look for and to report back to him immediately. He sent Donovan to Caldwell to talk to Mrs Winters and went himself to the London Borough of Barnet.

With half a dozen glaring eyes on his back, Sherlock was picked up by Donovan’s promised unit. He left Camberwell Cemetery with the rose and feather in hand and was transported directly to New Scotland Yard. Lestrade and Donovan had already left, but John was there waiting for him, having been requisitioned early from Dr Thompson’s office.

‘What’s happening?’ asked John, hurrying up to him the moment they saw one another from opposite ends of the corridor. It was almost as if the limp was no bother at all. ‘No one’s told me anything.’

‘This way, Mr Holmes, Dr Watson,’ said one of the officers escorting Sherlock, and they were led around a corner.

Sherlock said to John, ‘Someone left me a message.’

‘What message? Where’s Lestrade?’

‘Following up on leads in the field. You and I are being held here as analysts.’

‘From here? Why? What was the message?’

They were shepherded into a conference room. Chief Superintendent Gregson was on his feet on the other side of the long table, cleared but for a speakerphone, legal pads, pens, and two laptops; four others were in the room and swivelled in their chairs as Sherlock and John walked in.

‘Mr Holmes,’ said Gregson with a grave nod. Then he offered a cursory one to John, though no greeting. ‘Our boys in the field will be calling this phone’—he indicated with a hand toward the speakerphone—‘to relay what they find from their various locations. From here, we’ll compile the data and see what we make of it. Your insights may be useful.’

Sherlock’s back had locked into a solid line, and he held his hands behind his back. ‘My sight is most useful when I can see the data for myself.’

‘But you’ll appreciate, I’m sure, that time does not permit us the luxury of sending you to each scene. And I don’t care about your opinion of my officers. I have every confidence in them. If you would prefer, of course, you can wait in holding.’

‘Holding?’ said John.

‘For your own safety, the pair of you. I can’t have you rushing off like you did the night Orrin Tippet was murdered. I just can’t have that. Which will it be?’

Sherlock glared, but his response was measured. ‘We’ll stay.’

The first call came in from Lestrade.

‘There’s a rose on the grave,’ he announced to the room through the speakerphone.

Sherlock splayed two hands on the table and leant in, as though by getting closer to the phone he would be able to pierce it and see what Lestrade could see. ‘Describe it,’ he said urgently.

‘Well, it’s a rose. Single rose. Red.’

‘No, describe it, Lestrade.’

‘What, do you want me to count up the petals?’

Sherlock huffed angrily. ‘If you thought it would help, yes. I need to know everything—what is its orientation, how has it been placed on the grave, is the flower in full bloom or closed, is it long-stemmed, have the thorns been removed, is it dark red or softer in tone, are there signs it has been sitting there for mere hours or multiple days, you see, this is exactly why I should be out there, seeing it all for myself!’

‘Sherlock—’ John said in a low voice.

‘Keep it together, we’re taking photographs,’ Lestrade said tightly.

‘What am I supposed to do with photographs?’

‘They helped you before.’
Sherlock cast a quick, penitent glance at John, and his next words were ones of concession. ‘Don’t touch anything until you’ve taken them then,’ said Sherlock. ‘Every angle, light and shadow—’

‘Mr Holmes, please,’ Gregson said in a warning tone.

From Donovan came the next report: ‘Mrs Winters was stopped on the street about an hour ago by a street girl who says she knew her son. Girl handed her a rose.’

The calls kept coming in, and what Sherlock had suspected from the start proved true: a single red rose had been left at every grave or at the front door of every home, save Mrs Winters’. Not one had been accompanied by a note or other marker to suggest what might happen next. Only Ewan Nichol’s grave had seen the presence of a small brown feather.

Sherlock paced, steepled fingers to his lips and eyes far away while the others examined the photographs being sent from the various sites and analysed the information, which was, admittedly, very little. All anyone could determine was that the flowers served as a reminder of a growing garden of the dead. Beyond that, they presumably had no meaning. The hour was passing, the daylight outside the windows was fading, and they had not moved anywhere, as fixed as a grave marker in the ground.

Lestrade called the teams off; he and Donovan headed back to the Yard.

‘If you boys want to head home,’ said Gregson, ‘I’ll have a car take you—’

That’s when John’s phone sounded in his pocket. His eyes jumped to Sherlock’s as he reached inside the pocket of his coat, which he had thrown over a chair, and checked the screen.

‘I don’t know this number,’ he said warily.

‘Put it on speaker,’ said Gregson.

‘Just watch it be a reminder for a long overdue dental check-up,’ said John with wry humour as he set the mobile face up on the table.

He paused to draw a breath. Then, ‘Hello?’ But his voice came out weakly.

‘Sorry, hello, is someone there? Am I speaking with John Watson?’

John looked up from the phone. American, Gregson mouthed, but Sherlock rapidly shook his head no and mouthed, Canadian.

‘Yes, this is John Watson.’

‘Mr Watson, my name is Sergeant Warren Shuster of the Calgary RCMP. Less than an hour ago, I received a call from a woman named Samantha Hillock. Tell me, sir, do you know Mrs Hillock?’

John looked stunned. ‘Y-yes. Yes, I do. I mean, we’ve met only once in person, but—’

‘Mr Watson, when is the last time you were in communication with Mrs Hillock?’

‘Um.’ John gripped the back of bent neck and balled his opposite hand into a fist; Sherlock read these as signs of impending distress and edged closer. ‘A couple of weeks ago, I guess. She . . . she sent me an email, and . . . May I ask what this is about?’

‘Sir, is it true that you sent Mrs Hillock a string of harassing emails over the past four months regarding the recent death of her sister?’

‘What? No. No. It wasn’t like that . . . ’ His face was reddening and his head shook where it hung.

‘Harassment is a serious offence, Mr Watson, and international statutes notwithstanding—’

‘Pardon me, but I recognise an intimidation tactic when I hear it,’ said Gregson, suddenly and loudly.

‘Who is that?’ said Sergeant Warren.


‘Is this a joke?’

‘Not remotely. We are currently in the middle of a very important investigation, sergeant, for which Doctor Watson here is serving a vital role as a consultant. So let’s get straight to it the heart of the matter, shall we? What incident prompted this call?’

There was a pause on the other end, during which Sherlock imagined the sergeant from the Calgary RCMP to be pulling himself together. ‘Mrs Hillock has made a formal complaint against Mr— sorry, Dr Watson regarding his repeated attempts to bully her into handing over certain of her late sister’s possessions, an act stemming from Dr Watson’s growing obsession with the dead girl, she says . . .’

‘Jesus,’ said John, turning away from the table and the others and toward Sherlock, who gripped his shoulder to steady him.

‘. . . and tonight, she received what can only be perceived as a threat.’

‘What was the threat?’ asked Gregson.

‘A dead bird in a paper bag, left on her front stoop. The bag was labelled From John.’

‘Jesus, Jesus.’
Sherlock’s grip tightened. ‘What kind of bird?’ he asked over the top of John’s head.

‘Who’s that?’ asked Shuster.

‘Answer the question, sergeant,’ said Gregson.

‘Common blackbird, it looks like.’

‘Was there a flower?’

‘No,’ said Shuster, sounding confused. ‘Why would there be a flower?’

‘Sergeant Shuster, you may want to send a couple of officers to Mrs Hillock’s home to watch after her and her family, as a precautionary measure. Meanwhile, I suggest you check the gravesite of her sister, Mary Morstan, and get back to me with what you find.’

‘Why? What will I find? What’s going on?’

‘We’ll talk soon, sergeant.’ And Gregson reached across the table and ended the call.

‘She wasn’t one of his,’ John said to Sherlock, a constriction in his throat. ‘Daz didn’t kill her, it wasn’t him. It was Moran. Moran killed her.’

‘Chief superintendent,’ said Sherlock, ‘we have not checked the graves of the others.’

‘Whose graves?’

‘Those whose deaths are on the head of Sebastian Moran.’

‘Who do you mean? Frank Vander Maten and Hugh Freemont?’

‘And Tony Pitts, and Peter Caldwell, and Alexander Slough. This is Moran’s garden, not the Slash Man’s. Darren Hirsch has only ever been a trowel in Moran’s hand.’

They called their people in the field and sent them to new graves.

Within the hour, the reports came in: single roses laid upon the headstones, and not a trace of evidence more.

Gregson was pacing now as he spoke on the phone with officers from police departments outside of London, in places like Crawley and Harlow, and the analysts argued which details were significant and which unimportant. John stood leaning on his cane, staring blankly at a spot on the table, his thoughts inaccessible. It had now been hours since he was pulled away from his session with Ella, so that meant hours more since he’d had a proper meal or medication. Surreptitiously, Sherlock slipped his phone from his pocket to check the time. That’s when he noticed that, at some point during the commotion of phone calls and reports to the speakerphone, he had missed the alert of an incoming text. But when he went to retrieve it, his finger froze as he noted the number of the sender. Though untraceable in location, John’s old number still had not changed.

Something cold filled him, racing from heart to fingertips, but on the surface he was as placid as a cloudless sky, so it was without a trace of reaction that he opened the text.

_Not my garden, Mr Holmes._

_Yours._

Head locked in place, his eyes only shot around the room: to Gregson on his phone, to the silent speakerphone, to the arguing analysts. And to John, who stood at his side. Not wanting to draw attention, he carefully lifted the toe of his shoe and swivelled his foot at the heel so it knocked gently against John’s foot.

John picked up on the subtly of his gesture at once, and indicated so by a small turn of his head. Sherlock lowered the phone and tilted it casually so John could read the screen. After three ticks of the clock, John said to the room, ‘Sorry, is there a loo nearby?’

‘End of the corridor near the lifts,’ said an analyst, gesturing.

‘Ta.’

Sherlock made no pretences, simply followed after.

Down the deserted corridor, they walked speedily until they reached the lifts, where John punched the down arrow, and they waited. But they were absolutely silent until the lift doors closed behind them and they were secreted away inside.

‘Who was it?’ John asked without inflection. ‘Which of them—?’

‘I don’t know. But the whole operation has been compromised. The sooner we’re out of the building the better.’

‘We need to call Lestrade.’

‘Soon. I need to think.’

No one tried to stop them leaving the building. It had gone dark, and it was cold. In their haste to leave sans suspicion, both men had left their coats behind.

‘Have you any cash on you?’

‘I have my wallet,’ answered John.

They got inside a cab, and when asked where to, Sherlock said, ‘Just drive.’
John shivered.

‘By now he’ll know we’ve left the room,’ said Sherlock, looking through the rear glass as the lights from New Scotland Yard disappeared behind them. ‘They’ll be searching for us soon, so that doesn’t give him a very wide window. He’s going to act.’

‘Then he’s already got KON.’

‘I have no doubt of it.’

‘But where?’

Sherlock flinched as his pocket vibrated again. He hastily retrieved the phone. ‘We’re about to find out.’

Again, from John’s old number, came another text.

One hour. Then you plant another rose in an empty flowerbed.

They read it together, looked up at one another. Sherlock shook his head, mouthing empty, but then John gasped. He gripped the back of the driver’s seat to pull himself forward to the edge of his own and commanded, ‘Newport Cemetery, Buckinghamshire. Quickly.’

***

The graveyard had closed at dusk, but the moon was bright in a sky mottled with untextured clouds. The given hour was nearly expired by the time they arrived at the closed gate. In haste, they skimmed along the outer perimeter, searching for a feasible entry point. In the end, they worked together to hoist and drag one another over an ice-cold, wrought-iron fence.

‘Lestrade will have an easier time of it,’ said John, landing hard and falling over into the snow. Sherlock grabbed his arm to pull him back to his feet, and while John dusted the snow from his trousers, Sherlock retrieved the cane. ‘I expect he’ll just break down the gate.’

Sherlock had waited a full thirty minutes before answering Lestrade’s unrelenting phone calls. Only then did he announce that they were well without the city, that Lestrade’s house was filled with vermin, and that perhaps it would be wise if someone trustworthy would follow after them.

Their shadows cut through stretching rows of white and black stones, deeper and deeper into the cemetery, past alabaster angels and marble shepherds and looming trees, feet dragging long paths through the snow as they made their way toward the little brick church with its single high turret lying at the heart of the graves, and then beyond. Sherlock did not turn his head when they passed within mere metres from his mother’s grave, and he had erased from memory where he could find his father’s. But when his own came within sight, that single slab of black granite that had yet to be removed, he and John both slowed, each of their own accord but in perfect synchronisation with the other, for each had his own reasons for needing to approach the grave of Sherlock Holmes with reticence.

‘I’ve not been back here,’ said John with a tone of confession, ‘not since . . .’

‘Nor have I,’ said Sherlock, giving John permission not to finish. He couldn’t tell John how many times he had heard John voice that regret from behind the veil of a dream. ‘I should not have wanted to return. Nor should you have done.’

‘No, I should have—’

‘Keep your eyes peeled and your ears sharp. And keep close. They’ll be looking for a chance to separate us.’

‘Sherlock, look. The flowers.’

But it was impossible not to see them, laid against the snow that had fallen deeper here than in London. The clouds rolled over the moon, but their colour did not fade; and as the two men drew nearer, they saw a cluster of bright red flowers ringed by a crown of blue.

Slowly, Sherlock crouched before his own grave and plucked a small blue flower from the ring. The stem rolled between his forefinger and thumb, and each of its five delicate petals turned like the gown of a ballerina en pointe. ‘Forget-me-nots,’ he said, ‘his breath rising like fog. And poppies.’

‘Flowers for the fallen soldier,’ said John standing just behind him, exactly where he had stood over three years ago.

The clouds rolled away, and when the moonlight struck the surface of the headstone, Sherlock saw his own name illuminated. But his was no longer the only one. Below it, but above the dates that marked the years of his life, were scratched the words John H Watson.

His heart felt squeezed as he dropped the flower back to the snow and stretched his hand to the cold stone to touch the J. His hand trembled a little and came away with dust.

‘It’s freshly cut,’ he said. ‘Observe, he commanded himself, even as a kind of blackness threatened to overtake him. Use your senses. Think. But crudely. The wind and elements have yet to clear away the dust. And look there—the dust still rests on the surface of the snow. The snow is soft, so given many hours more the stone dust would have sunk deeper. This was cut within the last hour, once the cemetery had closed and nobody could see. A hammer and chisel. Ten millimetres, I’d say, given the . . . um . . .—don’t crash, don’t crash, keep it online—. . . the depth and, er, the width of these letters.’ His fingers skimmed through the W. ‘Inexpertly done. Obviously. Intended as a threat, designed to unnerve . . .’ But his voice was thickening, his throat closing off, and he
couldn’t keep on, but nor could he tear his eyes away from the horror that was that name on the grave.

John’s hand found his shoulder and rested there. ‘It’s not real,’ he said. ‘Come on, Sherlock. It’s not—’

In the distance, toward the tree line dividing one section of the cemetery from another, they heard a rustle and a snap. Their heads came up as one. Save for the moonlight, they might have missed it but saw it as it happened: a body, just a silhouette against a background of snow, falling out of the higher branches of a tree, sideways at first, until a rope around its neck jerked it vertical, and there, several feet above the earth, it hung.

‘Oh my God,’ said John, and he took off toward the trees.

‘John!’ Sherlock cried out. He scrambled to put his feet beneath him, then kicked up snow until he reached John’s side. He seized his arm and pulled him back. ‘Wait! We can barely see, we don’t know who’s out there—’

‘That man’s alive!’ John argued. He stabbed a finger at the dark trees, and then Sherlock saw it, too: the twist of legs bound at the ankles, the jolting shoulders, and hands joined at the wrists—a live fish caught on a line. And John was running again.

They were moving so quickly that when they at last arrived at the tree line, John tried to stop too quickly and lost his footing, nearly dragging Sherlock down with him, but together they stayed upright. John cast aside his cane and reached for the swinging man’s naked, twitching legs, which hung in the air just above his head.

‘I don’t have a knife, I don’t have a knife,’ John said, his voice pitched high and frantic as he tried to lift the man’s weight off the rope. But the kicking legs bent at the knee and would not keep straight. ‘God, Sherlock, we need to save him! He won’t last!’

But nor could they reach his neck. The naked man’s head was bagged, and the tightened noose cinched the black cloth firmly in place. Sherlock took a couple of steps back, the better to see, and traced the rope high into the branches where it twisted around a limb six or seven metres high. His eyes jumped to the trunk. He would have to climb.

His hands were numbing with cold as he gripped the first low branch and pulled himself onto the tree, feet scraping for purchase. Someone had secured the rope, so he knew there had to be a pathway up the tree; furthermore, he was an able climber. As he ascended in the dark, he heard John huffing below him, trying to get the man to keep his knees locked that he might heft him, but his words had no effect on the struggling, strangling man.

‘Sherlock, we’re losing him! We’re losing him!’

He climbed faster, and though once or twice he nearly lost his way or his footing, he kept on until he reached the branch from which the dying man hung. It was then that he saw just how many times the rope looped the branch, the wetness of the rope, and the firmness of the knot. With no instrument, he would never be able to release the hanged man from the rope.

‘He’s not moving, he’s not moving.’ John’s voice rose up through the lower branches, desperate and despairing, still grappling with the man’s naked feet. Indeed, the body had stilled but for its swaying like a weight on the end of a string.

Sherlock estimated quickly. This branch—judging by its diameter, length, and quality—was not like the horse chestnut. This branch would not support the weight of two full-grown men. Apply the right amount of pressure, in the right place . . . it would fall.

Using a higher branch as balance, he edged out on the slick tree limb until he had passed over the rope and the branch sagged a little below his weight. ‘Stand back, John! The branch is coming down!’ And he bounced it once. Twice.

‘Sherlock, you’ll fall!’

‘Pull the man back!’ He bounced it a third time and heard the splitting of wood. ‘This tree’s coming straight down!’

‘Damn it,’ he heard John curse from below and watched him seize the man’s ankles and pull him aside.

With one final downward thrust, the branch broke away from the tree, and Sherlock fell through the air with it. It crashed to the earth with a boom that shook the nearest graves, and he landed beside it on his feet, though he fell over as the pain resonated through his bones.

‘Sherlock?’

‘I’m fine,’ he said through a wince.

‘Sherlock, help me.’ The panic had not left his voice.

John had used himself to break the man’s fall, but then he had rolled the body off and onto his back. Now, he was kneeling beside the still body, hands fumbling at the noose, unable to break its choking hold. ‘I don’t have a knife, I left it, I left it,’ he kept repeating. Sherlock crawled closer on hands and knees. In the dark, he could scarcely see the noose, but he knew how a noose knot worked. He pulled John’s hands away and felt for the seven turns of the rope himself. He wedged a finger between the last two turns to loosen the hold on the bight; then he jerked on the opposite end nearer the man’s throat and felt it give. He jerked it again until the noose was widened enough to slip off, and he pulled the bag away with it, only to see the face of a man who appeared dead.

Meanwhile, John was fighting the shoelace binding the man’s blood-swollen hands, and when his fingernails proved ineffectual, he used his teeth, biting and chewing and yanking until he had
enough slack to pull one hand through and free it from its prison. When he saw Sherlock had also released him from the noose, John pushed him back so he could get closer. ‘Sir? Sir, can you hear me?’ he said over the body, his hand rubbing the man’s sternum. No response. John took the man’s head in hand and tilted his jaw up, opening up the airway, and inclined an ear to listen, hovering just inches from the man’s mouth and holding that position for what to Sherlock felt far too long. But he held himself back, waiting for instruction, if any were to come. Finally, John lifted his head. He pinched the man’s nose closed and sealed his lips over the other’s, and breathed. Sherlock watched the shadow of the man’s chest rise. John released, took a breath, and breathed again into the man’s mouth, slowly, and the chest rose again. Once more, John checked the pulse of the carotid artery. ‘Damn it,’ John whispered. And he rose up on his knees, locked one hand over the other against the sternum, and began chest compressions.

‘John.’

‘Shut up, Sherlock.’

‘John, someone’s coming.’

John cast a glance over his shoulder. In the distance, coming from the direction of the church, they both saw the beams of torches bouncing across the graves. John turned back to the man and continued the compressions.

‘I’ll phone for an ambulance,’ said Sherlock, fumbling for his mobile and rising to his feet.

It was at that moment that the man gasped; his eyes flew open, reflecting moonlight, and he began to cough. Trembling, moaning, coughing, he tried to move, his hands scraping the snow.

Sherlock didn’t know where John’s sudden calm and control came from, but next moment he had laid a hand on the man’s bare chest and spoke in a tone of assurance and authority. ‘Sir, I need you to stay still,’ he said. ‘You’re going to be all right.’ He looked up at Sherlock. ‘Tell me I’m not lying to him this time.’

Sherlock counted the beams of light. Six, and more bodies than that. And he recognised the man running in the lead. He lifted his own mobile high above his head, waving it so that its glow might be seen. ‘It’s Lestrade,’ he said. ‘This man’s going to live.’

‘Thank God.’ John returned to the man. ‘Help is on the way, sir. Do you understand? Can you tell me your . . .’

When he heard John’s voice die away, Sherlock looked back down at John and saw him and the man staring at each other, both sets of eyes widened with shock. The first beams of light had fallen on them, illuminating their faces. Then the man lifted a shaking hand, slowly, and moved to touch John’s face.

‘You . . .’ the man rasped. ‘. . . Death . . . stalker?’

To Sherlock’s bewilderment, John nodded, a slow and amazed bob of the head. The astonishment never left his face, but he whispered back, ‘Yes.’

At that, the man faded again into unconsciousness.
HELMAND PROVINCE, JUST NORTH OF MUSA QALA, SUMMER 2009

The siege had been an impulsive decision. That morning, intelligence indicated that a small troop of British soldiers was abandoning an isolated combat outpost to the north to relocate somewhere nearer Lashkar Gah. Believing the roads clear, they would be travelling in broad daylight, passing unashamedly through humble villages of the valley, the very villages the Taliban had recently secured for its own cause.

Destroy the infidels, came the order, and so they readied their guns and their rockets and their grenades and lay in wait for the convoy of army trucks to wander straight into an ambush.

Everything happened so quickly. One moment, the trucks were trundling along and the village was quiet, serene, quotidian. Karim kept his head down and his back pressed against the dusty concrete wall, just out of sight of the main road. In his hands, he clutched the Kalashnikov assault rifle he had been trained on the year before, when they told him that building computers was sinful and he needed to know what it was to spill blood for their cause. That is, to destroy the enemies of Allah.

But next moment, all was chaos. When the first shots fired, Karim froze. The training hadn’t prepared him for the noise of it all, for the heat of exploded air, for the ground shaking his very bones. He reacted like a spooked animal, throwing himself to the ground and shielding his head until the others screamed at him to shoot shoot shoot. And with blood pounding in his ears, he entered the battle. When he ran, his fuel was fear and adrenaline. When he crouched behind a barrier to hide himself, he prayed. And when he fired his weapon, he closed his eyes to pull the trigger, hoping it would all be over quickly.

Bullet hail and rocket fire, screams and eerie silences. Dust and smoke choked the air, and he pulled his scarf up over his nose, but his eyes were streaming and blinded. Stooping low to the ground, he hurried into a deserted building and peered through the square holes serving as windows. How many had they taken out? How many of their own had they lost? Was it finished? Could he flee now, assume victory and return to—

A sudden explosion took out the floor beneath his feet. The building, constructed of concrete blocks and dry mortar, was blasted apart, and Karim fell. He hit the floor of an underground hollow, landing hard, sand and gravel raining down on him, and he flung hands around his head to protect himself. When the sounds of tumbling rock settled, he opened his eyes to darkness. Disoriented, queasy, and in pain from head to foot, he pushed himself up into a seated position and waited for his eyes to adjust to what light was coming through splits in what was now a cracked and crumbling ceiling above him.

Before they could adjust completely, however, he heard a sound not too far from where he lay, and he opened his mouth to call to his fellows, to ask if they were badly hurt. But before he could utter a sound, a voice muttered words both incomprehensible and strange to the ear. English. Panicking, he scrambled for his weapon, which was half buried, just like he did. Instead, he spotted a pistol at the soldier’s side and a knife in his belt. Other than that, the only gear he carried included a heavy pack strapped around his shoulders and a helmet.

The figure spun around, just as surprised as he to find himself sequestered with the enemy. Empty hands flew into the air above his head, and Karim saw that the man did not carry an assault rifle, like he did. Instead, he spotted a pistol at the soldier’s side and a knife in his belt. Other than that, the only gear he carried included a heavy pack strapped around his shoulders and a helmet.

It was an easy shot. His vision was sharpening in the dim light, and despite being grounded, he knew he had the upper hand. He couldiddle the man with enough bullets to take out a dozen men before he even hit the ground, and he knew he should. This man, this British soldier—he was the enemy. An infidel. It was his moral duty to kill him, and if he didn’t, surely he would be the one to die. It wouldn’t take long for the soldier to go for his weapons, given the chance. But Karim couldn’t will his finger to squeeze the trigger. His whole body shook with fear and pain, but the finger was inflexible. He had never killed at close range before, from a place where he could see the shine in the enemy’s eyes.

For his part, the man appeared strangely calm. He didn’t move, didn’t speak, barely blinked, just kept his hands raised and his feet planted.

Karim’s eyes raked the crumbling roof. He could see neither stairs nor ladder, and it was too high for him to hoist himself out, even if he weren’t injured. And he doubted that the British soldier could manage it either. He didn’t look especially tall, not like some of them. Rather small, actually. Neither of them were getting out of there, not without help. If Karim’s people arrived first, he couldn’t show them a live enemy. And if not Karim’s people . . .

It was that simple: If he did not kill this man, he was dead. There were no two ways about it.

Still, he didn’t shoot.

Minutes passed. Nothing happened. Once, the British soldier began to lower his hands, but Karim shouted at him, shook the rifle in threat, and the hands came back up. More time dragged by, and the sounds from above were beginning to quiet. What if no one came at all? What if they were all dead or fled, and the only ones left were Karim and an enemy soldier, stuck in a hole in the desert? Karim’s eyes, mouth, nose, and beard felt heavy with dust, and his joints and muscles flared with the pain of his position, holding the rifle steady while one leg remained uncomfortably wedged and possibly broken beneath cement debris.

To give himself some relief, he slowly lowered the rifle into his lap, though keeping his finger on
the trigger. The man remained still, an acknowledgement that he, Karim, was still in control.

The unseen sun moved slowly across the sky. Karim watched the shadows move.

In one instant, everything changed for Karim and the British soldier. Where he rested his hands in his lap over the rifle, Karim felt a light but noticeable pressure on the back of his left hand in the split second before a fierce pain shot through it. Reflexively, he gasped, dropped his hold on the rifle with the one hand, and shook it violently. But the scorpion, one as long as his thumb and so pale as to appear translucent, landed on his leg instead, and with its venomous tail stabbed him again. He cried out, in fear as much as in pain, and brushed the creature off with his offended hand before crushing it with the butt of his rifle. His eyes welled with tears. The dreaded yellow desert scorpion, one of the most venomous scorpions on the planet, had just stung him—twice—and the pain was already excruciating. One sting, he may have been able to withstand and survive. But two? He was a dead man. It hardly mattered, now, whether he killed the British soldier after all.

He noticed, then, that the soldier had shucked the pack from his back and was riffling through it.

‘What are you doing?’ he cried. ‘What are you doing!’

He tried to lift the rifle and level it again, but with only one good hand, he couldn’t bear its weight, and it slumped in his grip, nose pointing into the rubble.

The man said something in his confounded tongue, held up a hand as though to tell him to wait, and seconds later produced a small green box bearing a red cross. It was then that Karim noticed the same symbol on the man’s left sleeve. The man was some sort of medic.

Karim stared in amazement as the soldier unclipped his gun and set it aside, then did the same with the knife. Unarmed, and still baring a hand while the other held the box, he slowly came toward Karim. He spoke something else, nodded at Karim’s gun, and calmly gestured that he be put aside. His face was open, his voice warm, his stance neither imposing nor intimidating. Slowly, Karim found himself setting the rifle to one side while the British soldier settled himself on the other.

He carried antivenin. Two vials. Antiseptic, cotton balls, syringes, plasters. The soldier took Karim’s infected hand and administered to the sting cleanly and efficiently, speaking to him words he didn’t understand, but there was a calming quality in his tone and manner, and Karim wasn’t afraid anymore. Not of this man. The enemy was saving his life, and . . . Saving his life? It was an incomprehensible thought. As the doctor-soldier worked, Karim stared at him in wonder, memorising the studious pale eyes, the solemn line of his mouth that tended toward a smile when he spoke, and the skilled hands that relieved his pain. Maybe he wasn’t a man at all, but a messenger of God.

When he was finished dressing the stings in both hand and leg, the soldier stood to lift the rubble off of Karim’s leg, and he treated that as well. He prodded the leg and indicated that it was not broken (somehow, Karim understood), then he cleaned it, wrapped it, and administered painkillers. Then he gave him water to drink before packing his kit and retreating to his place on the other side of the hollow. He didn’t retrieve his weapons. Neither did Karim.

Hours more passed in quiet. Karim’s hand ached, but dully, and he knew that the antivenin was doing its work. Still, he would need continued treatment, if he ever got out of there. Keeping his distance, the soldier searched for a way out (and Karim let him) but without success. Each maintained a vigilant eye on the other, but any hostility had run dry. At one point, the soldier sat to eat something from his pack, then drink water from his canteen. When he lifted the canteen in a gesture of goodwill and held it out to Karim, Karim hesitated only briefly before accepting, and he drank only enough to slake his thirst before passing it back. He wished there was something he could give the soldier in return.

The light was beginning to orange and darken in the hollow in the earth. Karim, despite his hurts, was feeling sleepy. The soldier was busy stacking rocks and rubble beneath one of the holes in the ceiling, hoping to create a hill tall enough to reach up and pull himself out, though Karim doubted the stability of the upper floor altogether. He wanted to communicate this to the soldier, but he didn’t know how.

It was while he was watching the soldier work and contemplate an escape that he heard them—men above, speaking in his own Pashto. The soldier heard it too and backed away quickly from Karim. He spoke something else, nodded at Karim’s gun, and calmly gestured that it be put aside. The man said something in his confounded tongue, held up a hand as though to tell him to wait, and seconds later produced a small green box bearing a red cross. It was then that Karim noticed the same symbol on the man’s left sleeve. The man was some sort of medic.

He noticed, then, that the soldier had shucked the pack from his back and was riffling through it.

‘Who is it? Who is there?’ The sound of feet above them, voices travelling down through the cracks.

He locked eyes with the British soldier. Then in earnest, he waved him away, back toward the shadows, until he was certain that the man could not be seen. There, the soldier crouched low, making himself as small as possible.

‘It is I!’ he shouted. ‘Karim Omid Niazi!’

‘It is Karim,’ they said to one another, then shouted back: ‘Are you hurt?’

‘I am a little hurt, yes.’ He rose to his feet and hobbled toward the opening, climbing onto the soldier’s steady pile of rocks and looking up. ‘But I am alive. Please. Help me out.’

‘We’re bringing a ladder, Karim. Are you alone? Is there anyone else down there?’

In the dark, Karim caught the eyes of the British soldier one last time, then turned to his fellows. ‘I am alone.’

***
For years, Karim wondered whatever became of the British soldier. The others of his unit were dead or fled, leaving him in inhospitable territory. Chances were, he had not made it out alive. For that, Karim was sorry.

At the risk of being punished for letting one of the enemy live, he never told anyone of what had really happened during his day underground, not until he met another British man, someone who promised to help him escape from the Taliban, from the war and Afghanistan, and start a new life in the British Isles—for a price. And though the years passed, the scorpion scar on his hand never faded. It was his daily reminder of the man who had saved his life.

Karim thought about him often. He didn’t know the man’s name and could barely remember his face, but for those foreigner-blue eyes, pale as water. He never expected that he would ever see those eyes again, nor hear that voice: calm as a breeze, steady as rocks. The British soldier had become, in his memory, a thing of myth and mystery. And if it weren’t for the scar, he might have doubted his memory, or the man’s existence at all.

Deathstalker. That’s what the English called the desert scorpion. A predator that brings death to its victims. So what did they call one who didn’t bring death, but sought it out to destroy it? A doctor, perhaps. But, in his rudimentary understanding of the English language, he thought that deathstalker was a more suitable description. One who stalks death, and defeats it.

So it was that when he saw that man again, five years on, and after five days of terrifying captivity, darkness, and torture, and having been once again delivered from a mortal end, Karim Niazi knew the man was indeed a Messenger sent from God, a man who escaped from dark prisons and outlasted wars, and a man who crushed death in his wake.

Seeing him again, and despite his many hurts, for the first time in what felt like a very long time indeed, Karim was not afraid.

Friday, March 6, 2015

The unnamed man was in intensive care at the hospital in Aylesbury. When they brought him in, he was dehydrated and suffering from exposure to the elements, which was to say nothing of his injuries sustained while being held in captivity or while hanging by his neck from a tree. How many days he had been held, the doctors and police could only speculate, for the man, fully conscious now, wasn’t talking. Only when he was in a state of half-delirium did a nurse hear him whispering to himself in what sounded to her to be a foreign language. Arabic, maybe, she said.

While a team of officers continued to comb Newport Cemetery for evidence, snap photographs of Sherlock Holmes’ decorated grave, and follow the tracks cut through the snow, Detective Inspector Lestrade, from the waiting room in the ICU wing of the hospital, sent for one of the Yard’s most proficient interpreters of Middle Eastern languages.

Meanwhile, in that same hospital, though two floors below, Sherlock and John were being interrogated separately regarding their joint disappearance from the Yard. But neither would talk to Gregson, and Gregson wouldn’t let them talk to Lestrade. So he sent in Sally Donovan, who returned to report:

‘Their stories match up,’ she said. ‘Nothing suspicious. I’ve let them out.’

Gregson stared at her, owl-eyed, and Lestrade hid a smirk. ‘You did? Why?’

‘Sir, they’ve done nothing more illegal than trespassing, and I’m not about to arrest them for that. They saved a man’s life, for god’s sake.’

‘Right,’ said Gregson, ‘when they should have been working with the police, not trying to outrun us. And I’m still not clear on how it is they knew to go to Newport Cemetery to begin with! We need answers, Donovan. We can’t be the ones in the dark on this. And you just let them go?’

‘They’re not going anywhere, sir. They’re just as interested in the man they saved as we are, and they’re sticking around for answers. Besides, Holmes needs seeing to. He took a hard fall. Walking with a bit of limp himself now. Ankles, is my guess.’

‘Those two idiots.’ Gregson scrubbed a hand across his face. ‘Did they tell you how they knew to go to Newport in the first place?’

Donovan inhaled just slowly enough that Lestrade knew she was going to lie. ‘Holmes was working on a hunch.’

‘A hunch.’ Gregson eyed her sceptically.

‘You know how impulsive he can be.’

‘Sir, the interpreter just arrived,’ Lestrade cut in, gesturing with his phone to indicate he had just got word.

Gregson sighed. ‘Fine, good. Donovan, check in with our people still in the field. Lestrade, you’re with me.’

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They put Sherlock’s right foot in a medical boot. He scowled and fussed, and when one of the nurses suggested he might want to think about a crutch to ease some of the pressure off the foot, he snapped at her that he didn’t need a damn crutch and returned to the waiting room where John sat alone with a stack of untouched magazines, his own cane lying across the central coffee table. Sherlock did his best not to hobble or look bothered, but John crooked an eyebrow.

‘No fun, is it?’ said John gently.

‘It’s fine. It’s temporary.’ He winced and shook his head. ‘Yours is too.’
‘Sure.’

‘Any word from . . . ?’

‘No. Sit down. Worst you can do to a fracture is keep applying unnecessary pressure, boot or no boot.’

It was an empty room, but Sherlock took the chair right beside John, letting out a groan of pain as he eased down into it.

‘Foot’s not the only thing hurting, is it?’

Sherlock straightened out his face to erase the wince-lines. ‘No, but they got me pumped full of painkillers, so there’s that.’ He threw a devil-may-care sort of smile to the side. ‘Besides, this fall wasn’t nearly as bad as the last one.’

John looked away.

‘I meant . . . ’ If Sherlock could have kicked himself in the head with this own booted foot, he would have. ‘The fall from the tracks. That’s what I meant.’

John tried to laugh, to show he understood his misinterpretation and wasn’t bothered, but it was insincere and short-lived. So he made to change the subject instead. ‘Well. All told, then, it was a good day.’ He sat straighter in the chair. ‘No one died.’

‘That’s what we’re calling a good day now, is it?’

‘It’s an improvement. They didn’t get this one. That man is going to live.’

‘John.’ Sherlock shifted in his seat, the better to face him. ‘Who is he?’

‘I don’t know his name.’

‘But you recognised him. I saw that plainly. And he knew . . .’

John let out a shaky breath. ‘Yeah.’

‘From Afghanistan?’

John rubbed his leg and nodded. ‘Feels like a long time ago now. Another man’s life.’ He frowned, and he licked his dried lips worriedly. ‘Is it possible that it’s only a coincidence? That they chose a man who I once . . . I mean, how could they even know? All the others have been strangers. Jeffries, O’Harris, all of them. Even Ewan Nichols, who you knew, seemed like a coincidence of naming.’

‘I don’t trust that any of this is coincidental. It has all been carefully planned and executed, even though tonight, those plans failed. As you said, the man lived. But they must know that you and he once knew each other.’

‘It wasn’t like that.’

‘Tell me.’

John raised his eyes, and they held one another’s gaze for a long time, both feeling the immensity of that gap, the unspoken history of a time before they had ever met and new lives had begun. Other men’s lives indeed. Even back then, before the fall, John had spoken very little of Afghanistan and the war, and Sherlock had never inquired. What he did know, he had deduced or supposed, based on the evidences of John’s evasive speech, ineradicable mannerisms, and, more recently, revealing dreams. But it wasn’t enough. He realised that now. Now, he was overflowing with questions, questions that should have been asked and answered years before, and maybe would have been, had he but broached the topic. Or maybe not. Whenever the subject arose, however innocently, John always steered him away. Sherlock wondered if he would now.

‘He called you deathstalker,’ said Sherlock, a gentle prod.

‘He didn’t mean . . . ’ John flexed his left hand and adjusted himself in the chair. ‘Ah hell. Damn thing won’t let me forget any of it.’ He smiled tightly, just lips; his eyes were dimmed. At last, he cleared his throat.

But at that moment, Lestrade and Gregson rounded the corner and stepped into the waiting room. John and Sherlock rose to their feet now, however unsteady those feet were; between the two of them, they had one good leg, and it wasn’t Sherlock’s. Before Lestrade could insert a buffer comment, Gregson said, ‘Mr Holmes, a word, if you please.’

Lestrade’s shoulders fell in a sigh, and he gestured for John to join him in the hallway, leaving the chief superintendent and consulting detective to themselves in the waiting room.

‘Please, take a seat,’ said Gregson, gesturing.

In any other condition, Sherlock would have made silent protest and stood rigid and defiant. As it was, he was grateful for the chance to sit back down, but he made himself as rigid and defiant in the chair as possible.

‘I’ll make this short,’ Gregson said, sitting across from him. ‘What you and Dr Watson did tonight, running off like that, was foolhardy and dangerous. You had your reasons, I know, and frankly, you knew things we didn’t, somehow, and if you hadn’t gone off . . . well, let’s just say it. We may have lost another one. So I can hardly begrudge you taking action. What am I trying to say? Look, Mr Holmes. I know you don’t trust me. God knows you have every reason, what with Pitts being who he was, Stubbins’ duplicity, and all those others, and the way our boys down at the Yard have treated you and Dr Watson . . . I get it. I do. And I’m not likely to change your opinion.
of me in a night or a fortnight or month of Sundays. But it's my job to protect the citizens of London, and that includes you and Watson both. So I don't care whether you like me or trust me or any of that—I still mean to do my job. So I'm sending you home. Lestrade will take you, because I know you trust him, and we'll set up a security detail on your flat, just to be safe.'

'No, chief.'

'Pardon?'

'I said no. John and I are not going home. Not yet. In these last thirty seconds, two things have become very clear to me.'

'Oh? What might those be?'

'One: You are not a turncoat.'

'Oh. Well then, cheers. I didn't think I was. And two?'

'Were you aware, Mr Gregson, that someone was listening in on every word we spoke tonight in the conference room at the Yard?'

Gregson's eyes narrowed. 'Who?'

'Quite possibly, Sebastian Moran. At least, I believe it was Moran. Could have been someone working for him, but I tend to doubt that.'

'Moran was last spotted in Belarus.'

'He's back.'

'Hold on—how do you know this? How was he listening in?'

'Go back to the Yard and look for a bug in the phone. It might be planted elsewhere—under the table, on a chair, in a laptop—but my guess is, it's in the phone, and if I were a betting man I would put money on it. Did a technology specialist set up the room?'

'Yes, they always—'

'Find out which. On that note, no security detail. If they can get into the Yard, they can get into the flat. Set up cameras if you must, outside only, but no one goes into the flat.'

Meanwhile, as they waited, Lestrade and John walked slowly side by side down the hallway.

'He's not saying much,' Lestrade said, not hesitating to fill him in on what the police had learnt.

'We believe he is from Afghanistan, though. Nurse said she thought she heard him speaking Arabic, so we brought in our interpreter, who spoke to him for a little while and discovered that he's fluent in three Middle Eastern languages: Pashto is his native tongue, Dari and Arabic are second. English is pretty poor though.'

John nodded. He would have guessed as much.

'He's obviously wary of police. Chances are, he's here illegally and fears deportation. We told him we're not with immigration, that we want to help him, and arrest those who hurt him, but he won't answer our questions. Won't even tell us his name. He's going to be all right, physically, but he's traumatised. Of course he is.'

'Let me speak with him,' said John.

'Lestrade controlled a wince. 'Probably not a good idea. He's hurt, but more than that, he's scared, John. They may have threatened him, warned him to keep quiet or else.'

'You don't threaten a man you're planning to kill,' said John. 'Not like that. There's no point. Look, I believe he'll talk with me. We . . . share a history.'

Lestrade stopped walking. Hands deep in the pockets of his trousers, he stared at his feet and thought.

John pressed him. 'This one survived, Greg. He wasn't supposed to. And he'll have seen their faces, he'll know where they kept him. We need to know what he knows. He may not want to talk to police, but to me? If anyone knows what that man has just gone through, I do.'

'The red tape . . .'

'I'm still a consultant, remember? You've not revoked my clearance.'

'Technically, that's true.'

'Seeing Lestrade was on the cusp or relenting, John acted as though it were a decision already made. 'I'll need an interpreter, of course.'

'If I agree to this—if Gregson and I agree—we'll of course send our man with you.'

'No, not him,' John took a deep breath. 'There are things I may need to say . . . things I can't'—he swallowed, wondering why every time, every time, this was so damn difficult—'I can't say certain things in front of a stranger.'

'Our man's a professional. He has a code of confidentiality. When all is said and done, it will be like he wasn't even in the room.'

'I can't, Greg.'
'Then who—?'

‘You said the man is fluent in Arabic.’

‘Yes.’

‘So is Sherlock.’

‘Sherlock? Since when?’

‘He picked it up during his sixteen months in the Libyan prison.’

Lestrade blinked in surprise. ‘The what now?’

‘Oh. Sorry, I figured he’d told you about that one.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

‘He may not be a trained interpreter, but he’s the only person . . .’ He looked down at the floor, feeling his eyes tingling and throat thickening. He swallowed it down, blinked rapidly, and tried again. ‘He’s exactly who I need.’

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The backlash to John’s plan was both sensible and predictable, but Lestrade argued on his behalf anyway, displaying confidence in John’s reasoning he had not demonstrated to John himself. But that was Lestrade’s way—though reticent and circumspect, once he was converted to an idea, he defended it with vigour.

That’s how, twenty minutes later, Gregson, Lestrade, John, and Sherlock could be found walking two by two toward intensive care. Strangely, it was only Sherlock, now, voicing any misgivings.

‘My Arabic is rudimentary at best,’ he said to John out of the corner of his mouth. He was hardly going to say no, not when he would get a chance to hear this man’s story for himself, and surely not when John himself asked it of him. But he claimed no confidence in himself.

‘You think anything less than masterful to be rudimentary,’ John retorted, displaying not a hint of concern.

Not that Sherlock didn’t appreciate John’s faith in him, but in this particular instance, he thought it misplaced. It had not been an exceeding amount of time since his last verbal exchanges in Cairo, but it felt like a lifetime had since passed. Clunking along in his plastic boot, he fell backwards in time, struggling to resurrect the miserable man from that wretched life and to recall the placement of the tongue, the shape of the lips, the taste of the language. With effort, bread-and-butter lexical items arose in his mind to be slotted into familiar but unnatural grammatical constructions.

Before the double doors leading into intensive care stood a tall counter, behind which sat a nurse at a desk. Seeing them approach and recognising the officers, she arose and placed a plastic box on top of the counter. ‘Phones, please,’ she said. ‘And sign your names to the ledger.’

‘Hospital policy,’ said Lestrade, and both he and Gregson surrendered their mobiles. Sherlock and John followed suit, signing their names below Lestrade’s and Gregson’s.

Gregson dismissed the two officers standing guard at the doors, telling them to take a thirty-minute break. Then, once inside, the chief superintendent handed John a manila folder and gestured to the back of the long room. ‘He’s down at the end,’ he said. ‘And remember, he’s hurt and he’s scared, but the sooner we get his statement, the quicker our chances of tracking these guys down.’

‘I’d like to be able to promise him protection,’ said John. ‘If he knows he’s not going to be deported, he’ll be more likely to open up.’

‘The police don’t have the power to make those promises,’ said Gregson. ‘But I know people at Home Office. I’ll talk to them, tell them the situation. They can help him apply for asylum.’

‘Thank you.’

‘We’ll wait here,’ said Lestrade.

The only privacy provided to the man at the end of the room was a thin blue curtain, which John slowly parted. Behind him, Sherlock peered over the top of his head and saw the man in the hospital bed, reclined forty-five degrees, and a nurse replacing an IV bag. The man looked over, and when he saw John, his dark eyes brightened and he gasped. The nurse jumped a little and turned.

‘Sorry,’ said John. ‘I’m . . . My name is Dr Watson. My colleague, Mr Holmes. We’re with the police. We need to speak with this man, if you could give us a moment.’

The man looked anxious, eager, and he shifted himself up in the bed, wincing as unspoken pain flared up at this movement.

‘Of course, doctor,’ said the nurse, excusing herself.

John and Sherlock stepped past the curtain, and Sherlock drew it closed. Then he watched with interest as John stepped to the man’s side and drew up a rolling stool.

‘As-salaam alaikum,’ John said tentatively.

‘Wa alaikum assalaam,’ the man replied, his voice scratching. Sherlock noted the gauze gently wrapped around the man’s neck, hiding the bruising and abrasions from the rope. Then the man coughed.
John poured water from a plastic pitcher into a clear cup and extended it to the man. ‘I imagine you’re thirsty.’

‘I . . . thank you,’ said the man. He moved to accept the water, but his hands trembled and couldn’t hold it, so John assisted, placing the rim at his lips and holding the back of his head, tipping water into his mouth in increments. The man swallowed loudly, but even as he drank from the cup, he couldn’t pull his eyes away from the one who proffered it. Meanwhile, Sherlock catalogued his visible head wounds and chaffed wrists. ‘You are saved me;’ he said, once he had had his fill. ‘You are saved me . . . two’—he held up two fingers—‘two . . .’

Two times, Sherlock supplied in his head. He practised translating it into Arabic.

Touching his chest, John said, ‘My name is John.’

The man tried it out: ‘John.’

‘And this is my friend. Sherlock Holmes. He’s going to interpret for me. Sherlock?’

Sherlock nodded, and in his best Arabic, he said, ‘John needs to ask you some questions, and he has asked me to interpret.’

From the corner of his eye, he noticed John looking at him in unabashed wonder. Though John had always known that he had some skill with languages, he had seldom heard Sherlock speak them. Sherlock found the open admiration bolstering.

The man looked between them. In his own tongue, he said, ‘You are police?’

Sherlock translated.

‘We are helping the police,’ John said. ‘They are looking for the people who attacked you, but they need your help.’ When a look of fear entered the man’s eyes and he shook his head, John continued, ‘And they promise your protection. They will make sure you stay safe.’ There was no reply, just uncertainty. ‘Will you tell us your name?’

But the man didn’t answer. With urgency in his voice and desperation in his eyes, he reached for John, saying, ‘You remember me? Do you know my face? ’ He sought out John’s arm to pull him closer. ‘It was dark, and many years have passed, but do you remember?’

John waited for Sherlock to finish translating, but before he could, the man let go of John and twisted his hand around for John to see. ‘Do you see? The scar? Here is where the . . .’

Encountering the unfamiliar word, Sherlock fumbled on the translation. ‘Uh,’ he said, listening hard as the man continued on in earnest, and he struggled to catch up; the translation became paraphrase. ‘He says he was stung, something poisonous. You fixed him up.’

‘I do remember you,’ said John. He took the man’s hand and examined the scar with hands Sherlock knew to be the hands of a healer. ‘And the deathstalker.’ He looked to Sherlock. ‘It’s a kind of Middle Eastern scorpion.’

Sherlock nodded and pathetically mimed a stinger. But the man smiled, eyes beginning to glisten. He provided the word in Arabic: ‘Akrab.’ Sherlock nodded, understanding, and said to him, ‘He remembers the scorpion.’

‘You saved my life.’

‘And you saved mine.’

‘Tonight. You saved my life again. I believed I was a dead man, the moment they took me. I believed I was dead. But you . . . you . . .’ He began to tremble, lips, hands, shoulders. ‘It’s all right, sir, you’re safe now,’ said John by way of Sherlock. ‘Can you tell me your name?’

Tears slipped down the man’s cheeks and into his beard as he answered. ‘Karim. Karim Omid Niazi.’

‘I’m pleased to meet you properly, Karim. Though I am sorry it is not under better circumstances.’

Wiping at his cheeks with hands wrapped in bandaging, Karim Niazi tried to straighten out his face, clearly embarrassed by his emotional display.

‘Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?’

‘I cannot help you, sayyid. I am sorry, I know nothing.’

‘Anything at all you remember could be helpful. If you could only confirm the identification of those who attacked you,’ said John, and he opened the manila folder, withdrawing an enlarged photograph of Darren Hirsch; Sherlock noticed that John studiously avoided looking directly at the photograph himself.

Seeing what John was doing, Karim Niazi sat more rigidly in the bed. ‘Waqafa,’ he said under his breath, and before Sherlock could translate his plea for John to stop, he put out a hand as though to block the photograph from his sight. ‘I am a bad man. I know this. A very bad man. I am being punished for the things I have done. I hurt women and children, and Allah sent a scorpion. I abandoned my people for the West, and Allah sent . . .’ His throat constricted, and he sobbed once and covered his eyes.

‘No, Karim—’ John began.

‘But you, sayyid. He sends me you, too. Are you His angel?’

John shifted uncomfortably in the chair, holding his cane between his legs. Karim Niazi’s eyes
by the time Lestrade returned Sherlock and John to Baker Street, it had gone two in the morning.

‘But you are hurt. From the war? From when I left you?’

Silence followed, and for a moment, Sherlock thought John hadn’t even heard him, or that he did not wish to answer. Perhaps, he thought, he should explain to Karim that John wouldn’t be talking about himself tonight and to please not ask personal questions again. Then John said, ‘The same men who hurt you—they hurt me, too.’

Karim frowned and looked at Sherlock, as though accusing him of a false interpretation.

‘They’ve hurt a lot of people. Most of them have died.’

‘Not you, sayyid. John. They didn’t do to you what they did to me. They wouldn’t… not you… That man, he—he—’ He looked away, distressed and ashamed.

John closed the folder and set it aside. ‘Did one of those men…? ’ He was having difficulty saying it, and just as Sherlock was on the cusp of offering to spare him the utterance and translate what was implied, John said, ‘Did he molest you?’

Sherlock scrolled quickly through his acquired vocabulary, coming first upon words like nog and bother and trouble. Wrong sense, wrong meaning. At last, he settled on a word akin to trespass or infringe. But Karim seemed to gather the sense of what he was being asked. His lips pursed in an effort to keep them from trembling.

‘Because that’s what he did to me,’ said John. His left hand clenched in his lap; the other gripped the cane. He cleared his throat, lifted his chin, and looked Karim in the eye. Then he took a stuttering breath before saying, softly but clearly, ‘I was raped.’

Dutifully, Sherlock’s lips parted to translate—finding a word that meant violate or invade—but as he formed John’s own words and heard them stutter from his own mouth, he felt an ache, raw and real, squeezing the blood from his heart, pressing the air from his lungs, as if uttering those words, even in a foreign tongue, was an act of claiming the experience he had no business claiming. He wanted to reach out to John, touch him, feel him, and somehow reify their presence in that hospital room, not in underground prisons. There they stood on their own two feet, shaken but breathing, battered but whole, and not yet defeated. He wanted to reassure them both.

‘Nine times,’ John said, quieter still, ‘that I recall.’

Sherlock’s voice caught on the number. He couldn’t speak. John lifted his head to him. Gently, as though to comfort Sherlock, he said, ‘You don’t need to translate that last part.’ And Sherlock knew John had been able to voice it at last only because, in that private space, when his words could be spoken by two mouths and shared in two lives, he could.

Witnessing the solemn but tender exchange, Karim said, addressing Sherlock, ‘You, You are his friend?’

And rather than translate the question, Sherlock responded affirmatively in Arabic, ‘I am his friend. I am also a detective. I am going to find the men who hurt him, and you. It is they who will be punished. Not you.’

Karim nodded and wiped away fresh tears. ‘Please. Ask me your questions.’

‘He’s ready to see the photograph,’ Sherlock told John, and John nodded, opening the manila folder once more and turning the picture for Karim to see.

‘Is this the man who attacked you?’ he asked.

‘I never saw his face,’ Karim said. ‘But I’ll tell you what I know.’

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There had been others, Karim Niazi said—men who had grabbed him off the street, men who assisted in getting him up the tree. But during the five days he had been held in captivity, there had been only one: Darren Hirsch, the Slash Man.

For five days, he had been held in a small, lightless room and fed through a slot in the door: packets of crisps, tinned peaches, and bottled water. He didn’t know why he had been kidnapped, why he was being held prisoner, nor what would happen to him at the end. But no one spoke to him. No one touched him. All he heard from his captor was a whistling in the dark, a sweet and sorrowful tune he couldn’t name but now would never forget. Then, on the fifth day, that giant of a man returned, his face cast in shadow. He had opened the door, pulled Karim out of the cupboard, and abused him in ways too terrible to detail. Just the once. Then came the noose.

He couldn’t identify the other men. He did not recognise the photograph of Sebastian Moran.

And he couldn’t say where he’d been. There were no windows, and the floor had been made of packed earth. While in the cupboard, he could hear pipes and smell damp. Outside the cupboard, in the light of a single bulb hanging from the ceiling, he briefly saw that the walls, too, were made of packed earth with random holes large enough for . . .

‘Wine bottles,’ Sherlock told Lestrade and Gregson, after. ‘He was kept in a cellar, probably in the country near Buckinghamshire. He says the ride from London in the back of the van lasted for hours, but his perception of time was likely skewed owing to a heightened state of anxiety. I estimate he was kept somewhere in the vicinity of Newport Cemetery, probably in a country home where the nearest neighbours could neither hear screams nor see suspicious comings and goings. His head was bagged going in and out of the house, but he’s given a description of the van, so it’s a place to start.’

By the time Lestrade returned Sherlock and John to Baker Street, it had gone two in the morning.
He showed them where the cameras had been set up across the road and in the back alley to monitor all possible entrances and exits. Then he left them to return to his own home.

Exhausted from the day’s events, they readied for sleep in silence, intent on reaching their beds as quickly as possible. Or rather, for Sherlock to find his and for John the sofa. Sherlock did notice how John’s eyes lingered a moment on the staircase leading to the second storey, and he suspected that John was contemplating reclaiming his bed, something he still had not done during the midnight hours since his return. But in the end, he situated the pillows and lay down on the sofa, drawing the blanket up around him.

‘We can still switch bedrooms,’ said Sherlock, reviving an old argument. ‘If you prefer this floor. Fewer stairs. Closer to the bathroom. Frankly more comfortable.’

‘Go to bed, Sherlock,’ said John, eyes already closing, body only seconds away from sinking into sleep.

Sherlock retreated then, eager to put all the cemeteries more comfortably into yesterday. He should have known, he should have anticipated, that as greatly as they were wearing on his own mind—the flowers, the chase, the man hanging from a tree—they were wearing on John’s. Perhaps he thought that John’s daytime calm would somehow translate into night-time restfulness. But he fell asleep quickly without considering that there would be another nightmare.

Nevertheless, his body was now trained to respond.

The noise startled him into consciousness. An odd thumping, rattling glass, and splitting wood sounded from the sitting room. A newly forged habit, his body awoke before his mind did. He tossed aside the blankets and hurried from his bedroom, one foot bare, the other booted and pounding along. He halted just as soon as he came within view of John on his feet at the windows, prying away the long wooden boards with his bare hands. They were not giving easily.

‘John?’

When he didn’t answer, only kept yanking on the edge of a board with an intensity of focus, Sherlock knew he was sleepwalking. He approached cautiously.

The board came loose and clattered to the floor, just missing John’s socked feet. Immediately, he started tugging at the next.

Sherlock had long mastered that first impulse—to seize him and pull him away from the window—but he knew he needed to re-secure the wooden board. At the same time, he had to be delicate.

‘John,’ he said conversationally, ‘what are you doing?’

‘She needs to see.’ John explained, voice husky with sleep. He clawed at the space between boards, trying to get a better grip. Sherlock saw that his fingers were splinter-scratched and red.

_She_ could mean so many people, but in John’s dreams, there was usually only one.

‘Do you mean Mary?’ he asked.

‘Mary’s dead, Sherlock,’ said John sharply.

‘I know,’ he replied. ‘John, come over here. We’ll worry about the windows in the morning.’

‘But she can’t see us.’

‘Who?’

‘Mrs Hudson.’ Another board clattered atop the first.

Sherlock was standing at John’s side now. He peered through the window and onto the damp street, cast in orange streetlights. The street was empty. ‘Mrs Hudson is not down there, John. She’s living with her niece. For now. She’s safe there. But she’ll come home soon, I promise.’

But as ever, John was encased in a world with a logic all its own. ‘She’ll see the names on the grave. She won’t understand. She needs to see us. If she can’t see us, she’ll never find her way home. Agh!’

The board, loose on one side and secured on the other, snapped back against the wall, trapping John’s finger between two lengths of wood. He pulled it free, but not without crying out, ‘Lestrade!’

Sherlock jumped back a little at the shout. John bent at the waist, cradling his offended finger close to his stomach, face twisted in pain. ‘What happened, where are you?’ Sherlock asked urgently.

‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I had to fess up, they were going to break them all!’

His fingers. It was when they had broken his fingers. That’s all it had taken—one minute, John was in 221B, anxious about Mrs Hudson’s prolonged absence and addressing Sherlock by name; the next, at one flash of pain, he was back in the basement of the convent, and Sherlock was dead.

Keeping his hand tucked close to his body, John extended the other to keep Sherlock at bay. ‘I’m sorry, Greg. They know about you now. Please, just stay away, keep back, or they’ll hurt you, too.’ He was edging along the windowed wall as though searching for an exit, but instead he came to the corner where the wall met the bookshelves and knocked against a standing lamp. It teetered dangerously but didn’t fall.

‘It’s all right, John.’ At the sound of his voice, John stilled. ‘Lestrade isn’t here. He’s safe. Do you know where you are?’
‘A basement kitchen. I don’t know where. No one can find me here.’

‘That’s not true,’ Sherlock said forcefully. ‘Someone did find you. You’re not there anymore. You’re at home. Baker Street. With me.’ He wanted so desperately to break down those barriers in John’s subconscious that so easily convinced him he had never really left the convent. It wasn’t enough to do so in the daylight. He needed to prove it in the darkness. He just didn’t know how.

‘Do you know who I am?’ he asked next.

John shook his head and answered breathlessly. ‘You sound like someone I once knew.’

‘I’m Sherlock. Sherlock Holmes.’

‘But he’s—’

‘Not dead. He’s— I’m alive. I know it feels like it, for both of us, but I was never dead. I’m right here, John, and I’m not going anywhere ever again. Do you understand?’

Rather than look convinced, John appeared perplexed. He kept cricking his neck to one side, as though trying to remember something important or wake himself from a deep sleep, but he could manage neither. Sherlock sighed, weary but compassionate. ‘Come sit down. I’ll look at your finger.’

John didn’t move, not until Sherlock took his elbow to guide him to his armchair and lower him into it. Then, sitting across from him on the edge of his own chair, Sherlock took his hands, examined them perfunctorily, and said, ‘See, it’s not so bad. It’ll heal quickly.’

‘Did Pete break them all?’ John asked; his eyes were glazed over, staring sightlessly at the rug between his knees.

‘Not a one. You just banged it up a bit. But I’m not going to get you ice for it until you wake up.’

‘. . . Am I sleeping?’

‘You’re sleeping, John. But you don’t have to be asleep anymore. It’s time to wake up now.’

With more calming words, Sherlock coaxed him awake and watched as the light slowly returned to John’s eyes. He blinked rapidly, his breathing changed, and his head lifted. When his eyes cleared, they focused on Sherlock’s. His fists tightened into balls in Sherlock’s hands.

‘What happened?’ he asked, startled to find himself upright in his chair. He glanced over to the sofa where his blankets were piled on the floor. Then he saw the light from the streetlamps pushing past the windows where there was a large gap in the boards. Returning to look at Sherlock, he said, ‘I was sleepwalking again, wasn’t I?’

Sherlock nodded slowly. So John knew after all. But he didn’t seem upset so much as embarrassed. ‘Yes,’ said Sherlock. ‘It wasn’t so bad.’

‘Did I . . . say anything?’

‘What do you remember?’

‘Pete. He was . . .’ He pulled one hand away from Sherlock and splayed his fingers as though to verify that they were whole. The trapped finger was slightly red, probably throbbing, but minimally damaged. ‘Moran was laughing.’ He let out a shaky breath and readjusted to grip Sherlock’s hands while looking away. ‘Do I do this kind of thing a lot?’

‘No,’ said Sherlock. He shrugged and said casually, ‘One day in every five-point-four.’

Sherlock nodded slowly. John knew after all. But he didn’t seem upset so much as embarrassed. ‘Yes,’ said Sherlock. ‘It wasn’t so bad.’

‘Did I . . . say anything?’

‘What do you remember?’

‘Pete. He was . . .’ He pulled one hand away from Sherlock and splayed his fingers as though to verify that they were whole. The trapped finger was slightly red, probably throbbing, but minimally damaged. ‘Moran was laughing.’ He let out a shaky breath and readjusted to grip Sherlock’s hands while looking away. ‘Do I do this kind of thing a lot?’

‘No,’ said Sherlock. He shrugged and said casually, ‘One day in every five-point-four.’

John laughed now, to hide his embarrassment, but he couldn’t sustain it. ‘Shit,’ he said. ‘And here I thought I was, you know, getting better.’

‘Of course you are. You get better every day. You must see that. What you did tonight—you couldn’t have done that a month ago. Ordinary people, they couldn’t do what you did even on their best days. You’re extraordinary, John.’

Unconvinced, John shook his head slowly from side to side. ‘But look at me. I couldn’t handle it after all, could I? Everything went right tonight, as right as it could go, and I’m still dying in my dreams.’

‘Fighting,’ Sherlock amended. He pressed his thumbs into John’s palms, a reassuring squeeze. ‘From what I’ve observed, you’re always fighting. Because that’s what John Watson does.’

***

Sally Donovan pounded on the door with the heel of her hand. When it didn’t open within three seconds, she pounded again.

‘Oi, give a man a break,’ said Thomas Dryers, blinking out at her through the crack in the door. ‘It’s only half five in the morning.’ When he made out who stood on his stoop, he added, ‘Bloody hell,’ and let the door yawn wider, expecting her to charge across the threshold.

Instead, she chucked the small key to his ankle monitor at him from where she stood. ‘Take it off,’ she said. ‘And get dressed. You’re needed down at the Yard.’ Then she turned on a heel and began to stride away.

‘Hang on!’ he shouted, stepping one bare foot out into the cold while trying to keep the other leg inside where it was warm. She sighed and turned, and the glare she gave him dared him to continue. He dared. ‘So what is this?’

‘Your sick leave is expired. Get back to work.’
He grinned. ‘I passed the Sally Donovan test, did I?’

Her jaw was set tighter than a vice. She spun around and began to stalk away. ‘Sally!’ he called after her, but it was obvious she would not be turning back. Having exhausted all other avenues, Thomas Dryers had been her number one suspect and last lead. But following that, too, had led her only to a dead end. She no longer knew where to look.

Wednesday, December 24, 2014

Outside, the bells of St Paul’s called the faithful to midnight Mass. Inside the Two Stone Giants, a live band tried to drown them out with electrical guitars and violins, drums and keyboard, and vocals to scare the hair off a cat. Edward Stallman sat alone and hunched at the bar, already on his third lager. Violet would kill him when he got home. First would come the icy silence, but given enough time to stoke the ire, that ice would crack. Explode. He heard her voice scraping the insides of his ears already. It’s Christmas, Eddie, it’s Christmas! she would say, and The children, Eddie, the children! As if the day of year or doe-eyed five-year-old twins had any bearing on money lenders or court repossession orders. The-powers-that-be were already skimming plenty from his monthly wages, and they were threatening to send bailiffs next to collect his possessions. Before long, he’d lose the flat. Then what would they do? Christmas or no Christmas, children or no children, he and Violet would be on the streets and the kids would be in the care of the state.

Nothing he did, nothing he could do, would stop it. So tonight, with the twenty quid he’d won off Ingalls wagering on a game of snooker, he was going to sit right here and drink.

At the stroke of midnight, an old man with a white beard slid into the vacant seat next to him and gave him a nod. ‘Happy sodding Christmas, mate,’ said Eddie, returning the nod; his speech slurred only a little. ‘May your days be merry and all that rubbish.’

‘A merry Christmas to you, too,’ said the stranger. Then, to the barman, ‘Another lager for my new friend, and one for me.’

‘Cheers,’ said Eddie, finishing off his glass to await the next.

‘Nowhere to be tonight?’

‘Nowhere I care to be. You?’

‘Right where I mean to be.’

They chuckled together, the two strangers. When the lagers came, they both drank long and deep, and Eddie, pleased with the newfound company, extended a hand. ‘Edward. Ed, Eddie, Ediot, whatever you like,’ he said.

‘Nice to meet you, Eddie.’ Pissed as he was already, Eddie Stallman didn’t notice that the man didn’t offer his own name in return. ‘And a nice place to warm the blood, I reckon.’

‘Pff. The misses’ll have my blood tonight, that’s for sure. Might as well keep it warm for her.’

‘A hard-won bird, is she?’

‘You might say that.’ He took a long drink. ‘But I gotta credit her some. It’s not easy being married to a down-and-out dickend.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you’re being too hard on yourself, Eddie. What’s it you do?’

‘I’m a caretaker. Glorified mop-pusher and bin-emptier, that’s what I am. Impressed?’

‘And where do you care-take?’

‘New Scotland-fucking-Yard. You’d think London’s finest’d pay a man who’s been on the job fifteen years a touch more than the boy who sweeps out the corner shop.’ He shrugged. ‘You’d be wrong.’

‘Rough times.’

‘Shit times.’

‘What would you say to making a little extra then, eh, Eddie?’ asked the stranger. ‘Put a little padding in the bank?’

‘I’d say Father Christmas must have put me on the nice list by mistake.’ He chortled into his drink and sucked the liquid noisily into his mouth. ‘Still. It’d make for a nice change.’

‘Ten thousand pounds can change a lot of things.’

Eddie Stallman stopped sacking and slowly lowered the nonic glass back down to the counter.

‘You would only have to do one thing. One very small thing.’

‘For ten thousand pounds?’

‘For ten thousand pounds.’

‘Are you having me on?’

‘Do you want to find out?’

Eddie shook his head and laughed again. ‘You’re having me on.’ He threw back the rest of the glass.

‘You work at New Scotland Yard. You push mops and empty bins. You probably dust and
hoover and scrub urinals, too, am I right? You work a shift that ends at eleven at night, and you’re often the only living soul on the third floor when you’re finishing up. It’s steady work, but thing is, you’re in debt up to your eyeballs. Not a happy place to be. But ten thousand pounds . . .’ He shrugged and lifted his glass. ‘Could make a difference.’ He drank.

‘Who are you?’

‘Tell me you’re interested, and we’ll keep talking.’

‘I’m interested. Holy hell, yes, I’m interested. What do I have to do?’

‘Easiest thing in the world, Eddie.’ The stranger reached for the inside pocket of his jacket. He placed a small silver key on the bar and slid it over. ‘In three days, Friday night, half an hour before your shift is over, you’re going to unlock the drawer of a desk on the third floor and walk away. Return in thirty minutes, lock it back up, and go home.’

‘That’s all?’

‘That’s all. Drop the key in the sewer. Go home. If you do that and only that, you’ll wake up in the new year with ten thousand pounds credited to your bank account.’

‘And this isn’t a trick? Because if I’m found messing with any property belonging to the Yard—’

‘Not a trick. Only one catch: you tell someone, anyone, and the money disappears. Ten thousand quid, gone, and then some.’

‘Who would I tell?’

‘Then we have a deal?’

‘Hell yeah.’ Eddie laughed again, raised his glass to the barman indicating his need for another, and wiped a hand across his mouth. ‘You are Father Christmas.’ The barman set another glass in front of him. ‘So? Which desk is it?’

‘Desk of a woman named Sally Donovan.’

Friday, December 26, 2014

‘It’s simple,’ said the black-haired stranger to George Yarrow, a newly hired caretaker at the Yard. ‘Tomorrow night, you’ll leave your duties on the second floor at precisely 10.35. Take the stairs. Walk to the corner desk with the nameplate Sally Donovan on, and open the drawer. It won’t be locked. Inside, you’ll find a set of three keys. Press each one into this pad of putty so it leaves a distinct mark. Put the keys back, exactly as you found them. Close the drawer, and go back to work. Leave the tin of putty in the men’s loo, third stall. Someone will pick it up.’

‘That’s all?’

‘That’s all.’

‘And if I do this,’ said George Yarrow, ‘you’ll pay me five grand.’

‘Someone will. But only if you never speak of it again.’

Sunday, December 28, 2014

Randall Kensington didn’t ask questions. They (whoever they meant) weren’t paying him two thousand pounds to ask questions. He strolled into the hardware shop and up to the counter. ‘Can you make a key from an imprint?’ he asked, pulling out a flat square tin filled with hard putty. He lifted the lid and showed the imprints.

‘Sure,’ said the man behind the counter. ‘Have ’er ready in an hour or so.’

‘I’ll be back.’

Tuesday, December 30, 2014

The face of Mitch Jenkins’ wristwatch read 22.42 and his sweaty fingers pinched the keys in his pocket. It was now or never, and if he meant to pay back his brother-in-law the money he owed plus interest without either of their wives ever knowing, it was now.

He rounded the corner and slipped behind the desk that blocked the door to the evidence lockers. Easiest thing in the world, he repeated in his head. Easy money. He removed a disposable tissue and placed it on the door handle and tested. It was locked, just as it should be. Then he tested the first of the three keys. It didn’t budge. But the second did. The clipping of the lock seemed to fill the entire room.

But Jenkins didn’t open the door. That wasn’t his job. He just left it. He would return in twenty minutes to lock it again, before dropping the keys in a far-away sewer. Easy money.

***

Heidi Ringwald didn’t know what was in the boxes. It wasn’t her job to know. Her job was to maintain the midnight cafeteria so that Yarders working through the night could have a hot cup of leek soup or an egg salad that wasn’t twelve-hours old. That, and memorise three simple numbers —catalogue numbers—so when she found herself in that little room on a floor she never visited, she would be able to find the corresponding boxes on the appropriate shelves, zip them into her unassuming and oversized tote bag, and slip out of the room and back to the cafeteria where she would stow the bag in the walk-in refrigerator. And it was that job, that one-off easy-money job, that would ensure that her teen daughters could continue attending the London Ballet Academy and see their dreams come true.
and see their dreams come true.

Trusting that the boxes would be gone next she checked, Heidi Ringwald left the bag where she had promised and returned to the other ladies, to whom she had said she was only going to the loo. Her heart was still pounding as she pulled a batch of Chorley cakes from the oven, twenty minutes later.

**Wednesday, December 31, 2014**

In the morning, three small parcels of varying size, dimension, and weight, all wrapped in brown paper and addressed to three different Royal Mail PO Boxes outside of London, left three separate outboxes in three different departments on three different floors, only to find themselves all together again in the mail room at New Scotland Yard, part of the outgoing mail.

The mail coming into the Yard was x-rayed, subjected to black light, and tested for anthrax.

The mail going out underwent no inspections whatsoever.

**Thursday, January 1, 2015**

‘So let me get this straight,’ said June Zalud. ‘I walk into the shop, buy a big ol’ bottle of sodium hypochlorite—’

‘The size is irrelevant.’

‘—pay for it in cash, and leave it at the’—she made air quotes—’drop site, and you give me two hundred quid.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Why am I doing this?’

The twenty-something white boy shrugged. ‘I dunno. All I know is, I’m getting paid an awful lot to get you to do it.’

‘Yeah? Who asked you?’

‘She didn’t give me her name. But she was sexy as hell.’

June Zalud laughed at the stranger. ‘You lot are so predictable. Fine. Two hundred pounds is worth it to me, even if she promised you five hundred and you’re planning to pocket the rest. Sodium hypochlorite, is it? I don’t even know what the hell that is.’

The kid shrugged in return. ‘They use it in swimming pools, apparently.’

**Friday, January 16, 2015**

The text from a blocked number came in at 9.42 in the morning:

*Lunch is cancelled.*

It was code, one Sean Lawrence had been nervously anticipating for more than a week. Today was the day.

As the IT specialist responsible for technology in the briefing rooms, he had been specially chosen. As an adult male with a sex-club habit to fund, he had been in no position to turn down the proffered twelve thousand pounds. So he had been tasked with upsetting the technology just before the briefing so they would have to call him in to fix it. Then, as per his venal contract, while he fiddled with cables and desktop applications on the pretence of correcting the technical difficulty, he was to activate a hidden camera that he had already installed: while the room was watching the images projected on a screen, the camera would be watching the room.

His last job, when it was all over, would be to dismantle and destroy the camera, and never to tell anyone, especially anyone at the Yard, what he, a simple IT guy with bottom-level security clearance, had done.

**Monday, February 16, 2015**

They scrabbled beneath the bridge and deposited their bounty into a central pile. On their knees in the huddled ring, they pawed through the coat pockets and dumped the contents of the wallet, filching notes and cards and shoving them into their own trouser pockets. The woman was already exchanging her shoes for the ones she had claimed at the riverbank.

‘Shit, Ellie, you know they’re too big fer your goddamn feet.’

‘I’ll stuff’m with newspaper and they’ll suit me fine,’ she returned with a sneer.

One of them was exchanging a length of rope tied around his waist with the black leather belt, and another man was looping the dark-blue scarf around his neck, chortling to himself. Another still was slipping the suit coat over the denim jacket he already wore. No one noticed or cared that one among them, the tallest and strongest, had taken the keys, empty wallet, and phone. But when he grabbed the Belfast coat and stood up, someone grabbed the hem and held on.

‘Oi, mate, just where do you think you’re going with *that*?’

‘This one’s mine.’

‘Like hell.’

‘Yeah, who says you get the coat?’ said another.

‘I do.’ And with that, he smashed a boot in the grasping man’s face, turned, and ran into the night,
the coat bundled in his arms like baby.

**Thursday, March 5, 2015**

Strictly speaking, Cyrus Coggins wasn’t supposed to talk about the details of his work. It was something to do with ‘respecting the privacy of the offenders’ or some such twaddle, which had never made any sense to him. After all, those men (sometimes women, but let’s get real here) were **public offenders** publicly convicted, and **now** they deserved privacy?

But get a few drinks in him, and Coggins’ mouth became a well-greased gossip engine.

‘Tell it again, Cy. Lowell was taking a shit. Tell us again ’bout the snowballs.’

Coggins drained another glass. ‘Two days,’ he said, looking around bleary-eyed at the boys of the pub. He leant on an elbow and held up two fingers as a prop. ‘Two days, and the pampered prat has already been able to wheedle his way into cosy indoor work. Probably never done a day’s labour his whole coddled-n-crusty life, know what I mean? Man’s fin’lly gonna learn what it is, working so hard your crotch sweats buckets and your pits run like rivers, feelin’ that deep-muscle ache from an honest days’ work, **man’s work.**’ He snorted into his glass. ‘Bloke prob’ly goes home and soaks in bubble bath.’

‘The snowballs, Cy!’

‘Right, so get this.’ Half the pub was listening in, amused by the stories Coggins had been relating about the convicted Sherlock Holmes for the last forty minutes, everything from how ridiculous he looked in the reflective orange jacket to how he had tried to hide his phone that first day and not turn it over, resulting in a necessary and rather intimate pat-down. ‘So I’ve got the boys working in Battersea Park this afternoon, right?’

He continued his tale with all the flourishes and embellishments necessary to get the boys laughing—he did love a receptive audience—and built steadily toward the moment he saw the kids scooping ice and slush into their hands. He had known what would happen, knew exactly what, but he had wanted to see it anyway.

‘Smacked right here,’ he indicated with a hand, ‘in the back of the neck. Good aim. And you know what he does? Nothing. Man’s a robot. It’s like he didn’t even feel the first one. Or the second. Third one, though. Whoof, right in the schnozz. Knew then I should, you know, call the kids off.’ He chuckled noisily, phlegm sticking in his throat. The others laughed with him.

‘Know what you could do?’ said one of the pub boys, a fella who’d been there from the start.

‘Yeah, what’s that?’

‘Cousin of mine got into some trouble a while back up in Yorkshire. Community sentence, fine, all that. And they made him scrub headstones and mow lawns in a cemetery. Quiet, private. It was summer then, but surely there’s winter work, just the same. Seein’s how this winter ain’t never gonna end.’

‘Cemetery, eh?’ said Coggins. He scratched his chin.

‘Sure, a cemetery like Camberwell. Big ol’ place, that. I’m sure there’d be plenty work to do.’ The man lifted a glass, gave a wink, and said, ‘Cheers.’ Then he drank it down.

**Friday, March 6, 2015**

Eva Almaraz wasn’t supposed to leave the desk unattended, not for anything. So when the phone rang and she heard the code words spoken by a digitised voice through the receiver—*St Camillus de Lellis is on leave*—she hesitated. She drummed her fingers. She stood up, and sat back down.

She swivelled nervously in her chair. She eyed the hospital security camera hanging above her head, wondering if it had been turned off, as promised.

Finally, as she set her watch, she reasoned with herself: the patients were safe. There were two officers of the law just beyond those doors, after all. She would be gone only seven minutes. Not much could go wrong in only seven minutes. And in the end, she really did need three thousand pounds.

For now, the hallway was empty. Eva hit the timer on her watch and stepped away on the pretence of going to the loo.

When she returned, seven minutes later, everything looked exactly the same. She was left to wonder if anyone had been there at all.

**Sunday, March 8, 2015**

They were calling it one of the longest, coldest winters London had seen since the Big Freeze of 1963, although this one hadn’t quite broken any records. It was March, a month when temperatures should have been climbing, but another winter storm was on its way.

Because they were no longer inviting anyone to the flat, not even the delivery boy for Thai takeaway, Sherlock stepped out onto Baker Street at about seven o’clock to fetch that night’s supper. A strong sweep of wind, mixed with snow, nearly stole the flat cap right off his head. The elementary disguise, just to throw off those who followed the news closely enough to recognise his curly head, was hardly needed, however. The streets were well deserted; sensible people were staying in tonight.

The nearest Thai places would no longer serve him, and he wouldn’t deign to eat low-quality Thai, so he took an eastbound bus for a ten-minute ride to the Lotus Thai Restaurant on Cleveland Street. If he timed it right, he could be on the westbound bus within five minutes of drop-off and
be back in the flat with his gai yang and John’s pad kхing still hot.

It was as he was disembarking, however, that his mobile sounded. He hurried to stand with his back against a building for some protection from the wind before pulling the phone from his pocket and reading the text:

*The boys found something you’re going to want to see. How fast can you get to the City Mill River near High Street?*

GL

Sherlock pulled a glove off with his teeth, the better to type.

*Forty minutes by bus.*

SH

*Take a cab. Hurry.*

GL

Sherlock could practically feel Lestrade’s urgency through the phone, and he felt the contagion ignite the blood in his veins. Knowing the wind would interfere with the sound quality of a phone call, he shot a rapid text off to John:

*Lestrade’s found something. He wants me to go to City Mill River. Can you come?*

While he waited for the response, he breathed hot air onto his hands and looked circumspectly up and down the street, trying to spot the taxis. Here and there, a solitary car, but no bodies to be seen. The snow was slowly accumulating on the ground, a single layer, fine as dust.

*You go. I’d like a night in.*

Sherlock stepped into the street and hailed a taxi.

***

*City Mill River near High Street. Get here quick as you can.*

GL

All day, Donovan had been trying to track down a transit van that matched Karim Niazi’s description, but with little success. On top of the unresolved issue of infiltration and the incident with Dryers, she was feeling the sting of incompetence and self-doubt. Lately, she had begun to question her own judgement, second-guess her every move, and dwell on her failures of the week, large and small. So when she returned home at night to her empty flat, she didn’t pass through the mechanical routine of readying for bed but sat on the sofa and stared at a muted TV, turning the case over and over again, wishing she had someone with whom she could talk it through, until exhaustion took her and she fell asleep across the cushions without so much as a blanket before a new day began too early and called her back into the field. She needed a break in the case. She needed a break. But she would never ask for one.

But now, it seemed as though the break in the case had happened elsewhere.

*On my way.*

***

Lestrade sat alone in a small café, a stone’s throw from New Scotland Yard, reviewing for the twentieth time Niazi’s testimony. Sherlock and John had been thorough in their interview, with which even Gregson was pleased. On a separate pad of legal paper, he made notes, comprised of new details, old patterns, and unresolved questions.

He was deep in thought when a sudden text shook him back to himself. His phone was at his elbow: incoming text from Sherlock.

*I need your help.*

SH

His heart skipped a beat, and his fingers flew to respond.

*What happened? Are you all right?*

GL

*Fine. But you need to come here right now. City Mill River. Just you.*

SH

*I’ll be there in twenty minutes.*

GL

He stacked his notes, tucked them under his arm, and threw a fiver on the table before hurrying out the door.
Memento Mori

SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2015

From high above, she watched London fade white beneath the haze of snow, watched the rivers blacken and the lights wink themselves out all through the city. Her limbs, sinewy, curving, aglow with red light like from a beating heart, set the world below her feeling uncentred, unstable, unsettled. But cathedral-like, she drew all gazes and demanded reverence. Some said she looked like a flower, a thing of beauty, regal and feminine and divine; others called her a monstrosity and a blight on the city. Whatever she was, loved or despised, she was there to stay. Nevertheless, she ensnared men and imbued one with the sensation that he was about to fall.

Sherlock had never been so close to the ArcelorMittal Orbit before, having been dead for much of its erection and its later unveiling and tourist spectacle. No, not dead, he reminded himself, still trying to eradicate such skewed semantics from his lexicon. Gone, Now, as he strode purposefully through the empty stretch of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park between the City Mill and WaterWorks Rivers, he refused to look at it. There were more important matters. The few people milling about were only tourists who had poorly timed their holiday and who hadn’t sense enough to return to the hotel before the winter storm slowed traffic even more. The small spattering of men and women stood gawking at the towering structure and bemoaning its closed sign. Sherlock didn’t even look up; but he couldn’t escape the Orbit’s long shadow.

Leaving it behind, he stepped onto the footpath leading down to the City Mill River, which ran north and south, slightly less than a mile long. He went south, toward High Street. Here the path was empty, and no one had passed there recently enough to leave tracks in the newly fallen snow.

Then he saw her, coming from the opposite direction; she saw him too. They each cut a recognisable figure against the bright snow. Sally Donovan picked up her feet and jogged closer, gingerly though, and minding the slickness of the ground. Sherlock came more slowly, his medical boot something of a hindrance.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked. ‘You should be resting.’

‘The devil doesn’t rest. Where’s Lestrade?’

‘He’s supposed to be here already.’

The river was crusted over with patches of ice. On their nearer side ran a sloping embankment leading to the higher paths in the park. The lower footpath passed beneath bridges for trains and traffic. All were in the shadow of the Olympic Stadium, quiet now.

‘Bloody cold,’ Donovan muttered, hugging herself around the middle.

‘You should wear a hat,’ Sherlock told her, clipping his tongue on the t.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Despite the—his splayed hand gestured in a broad circle—hair, your head is the most exposed part of your body right now. Body heat is lost through convection as cold wind comes in contact with your skin. Basic physics.’

‘I know how convection works.’

‘And yet, here you stand. Hatless.’ He pulled on the brim of his flat cap.

‘You’re one to talk. The only hat I’ve ever seen you in was that ridiculous deerstalker.’

‘And such a thoughtful gift that was. I never did thank you and Anderson for treating me like a circus exhibition.’

Donovan scowled. ‘It wasn’t like that. It was a joke.’

‘Always a riot, Sally.’

‘Never a chore, Holmes,’ she bit back.

He shivered, then tautened himself against the cold wind. ‘Walking also helps. Back to High Street.’

‘I just came from there. There was no one—’

‘You obviously missed something.’ He began walking, and she quickly, if not begrudgingly, fell in line.

‘So what’s this all about, sergeant? What did your people find?’

‘Search me. Lestrade said come, so I came.’

‘Clearly.’
‘I’m surprised you’re here, though. We’re meant to minimise your involvement, not encourage it.’ She sniffed. ‘Not that that’s ever stopped you.’ Donovan looked over her shoulder, anxiously searching for any sign of Lestrade. She huffed, said, ‘This is ridiculous, he knows I hate texting,’ and pulled out her mobile and dialled.

As she did, Sherlock, too, looked over his shoulder, and when he did, he began to slow. Their two sets of tracks cut a long path through the snow—hers, clean and even outlines of the bottoms of her boots; his, sloppy and broad. But it was in the broad, scraping tracks left behind by his medical boot that he saw, revealed upon the wet pavement, a splash of red.

He fell back, approaching the mark on the ground with bracing anticipation as much as curiosity. Then he crouched down and brushed the slush away completely, revealing a symbol a little larger than a dinner plate painted onto the pavement: the letter I, apple red and highlighted with a white starburst at its base and black drop shadow, behind which were large, dark wings, unfurling.

‘He’s not answering,’ said Donovan. Only when she pulled the phone away from her ear did she realise she was walking alone. She stopped and turned. ‘Holmes?’

‘Try him again,’ said Sherlock, touching the symbol with cold fingers.

‘What are you seeing?’ Then, stepping to his side to examine the symbol, she said, ‘Oh, one of those! Those things used to be all over the city a few summers ago. A new gang or something, but they must not have gained much traction. Died off pretty quickly, and most of these faded or got painted over. I’m surprised to see it here, though. They usually keep this place pretty clean of graffiti and rubbish.’

‘A few summers ago,’ Sherlock repeated. ‘That would have been two thousand and eleven, wouldn’t it?’

She thought a moment, ‘I suppose so, yeah . . . Oh. Oh.’

‘This paint is fresh, Sally. Very fresh. It might have been put here this morning.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘It’s one of a set.’ He braced himself on a knee and pushed himself upright. ‘This must be what Lestrade found. The snow wouldn’t have obscured this half an hour ago. Why did he think to come here?’

‘One of a set,’ Donovan murmured to herself. ‘You mean . . . IOU. Like the carvings on Watson’s back. You’re saying that was all connected with James Moriarty back in 2011?’ She rotated where she stood, looking up and down the path. ‘And just how are we supposed to find the others? With all the snow—’

‘It’ll be along this path. Toward High Street. That’s what Lestrade said.’

‘But I just told you, I didn’t see him! I just came from there!’

‘Then get him on the phone, now.’

While she punched his name again into her phone and pressed it to her ear, blocking the other with the flat of her hand to hear better, Sherlock continued down the path, brushing wide arches with his stronger foot in a frantic search for the next symbol.

‘Something must be wrong, he’s still not answering. I’m calling it in.’

‘Yes, good, don’t stop until you—aha!’ For he had just come upon the second symbol, the anticipated red O, whose dark wings were spread even wider, the painted feathers splayed ostentatiously. He marked the distance from the I to the O, some fifty feet, then made a leap of logic in supposing that the third painting would be of equal distance further along the pavement. He and Donovan picked up their feet and ran ahead, finding themselves just on the edge of being under a bridge where the snow still fell. There, they found, after clearing away the snow, the final letter, a U, against large black wings, spread wide in flight.

‘Now what?’ Donovan asked, slightly out of breath and hugging herself for warmth.

‘Now this,’ said Sherlock, pointing, for also beneath the bridge, they saw a circular metal grate built into the wall of concrete. One-and-a-half metres in diameter and made of thick iron bars, it stood just slightly ajar. He locked fingers into the slots, and pulled. The grate swung forward heavily, its hinges grinding. Examining the inside surface, he saw scratches where it would have been chained and locked. Locked from the inside, he thought, to keep people out. Something, or someone, was in there. Sherlock bent his neck and stepped one foot inside.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Donovan said, grabbing him by the shoulder and pulling him back into open air.

‘I thought it obvious. I’m going in.’

‘The hell you are. Something’s not right here, and I can’t be the only one here who knows it. Lestrade’s phone keeps going to voicemail. Until he shows, we do nothing. I’m calling it in, see if someone can track him.’

‘Go on then. Get your people out here, immediately. Because something’s not right, Lestrade calls us both here but now he’s nowhere to be found and won’t answer his phone? Of course that’s suspicious. Tell me this: did he call you, or send you a text?’

She frowned. ‘A text.’
'So you didn’t speak to him directly.'

'No . . .'

'And you didn’t even question it, did you?'

'. . . No, I—'

'Neither did I. That makes two idiots. So the question has to be this: Was it really Lestrade who texted?'

Donovan stared at her phone, chest heaving.

'If it was, then something happened, because he’s not answering his phone now. If it wasn’t, then something definitely happened, because that means someone else has his phone. They’ve played this game before, Sally. They commandeered John’s phone and used it to send Lestrade messages and photographs. Either way, you and I were led to this very spot, and we found access to a tunnel. If Lestrade found this same tunnel on his own, he might be in there even now, Or he might have been coerced to enter. The point is, they might have him. But he’s not really who they want, is he?'

But when he tried to recommence entering the tunnel, she snatched his arm and fiercely pulled him back again.

'Sally,' he said.

'So it’s a trap, and we’re just going to let them lure us in? Go in there and get ambushed, maybe killed?'

'Not us. Me. You are staying here to keep watch, and keep this gate from locking behind me. Get your people here as quickly as you can. But if they’re hurting him . . . I’m not waiting another minute.’

'Holmes.' She let out a cry of frustration. 'You’re smarter than this!'

'The thing is, Sally’—he took her by the shoulders and pierced her with resolute eyes—'I’m not.’

He made one final go of escaping past the grate but halted when she shouted, ‘Stop!’ and her voice echoed down the long tunnel. She gritted her teeth, dug into her pockets, and pushed a small torch into his hands; then she unclipped a small stun gun from her belt and passed that over, too.

He looked at her, amazed. ‘Giving me police-issued weaponry? Surely not, Sgt Donovan.’

‘Eighty-thousand volts,’ she said. ‘It’ll drop a man of any size. You better pray there’s only one. Two minutes, Sherlock Holmes. You walk sixty seconds in, look, listen, and sniff the air like the bloodhound you are, and then come back and report. If I don’t hear from you in two minutes, I’m coming in after you myself, backup or no backup. And you just took my weapon, so don’t make me do that.’

‘I’d rather you keep it,’ he said, holding the gun out for her to take back.

‘Take it,’ she said, ‘or you’re not going in there.’

He nodded. ‘Two minutes then.’

‘I’m counting.’

***

A single rose petal caught in the beam from the torch. Sherlock paused, but only briefly, and threw the light further up ahead. He knew Donovan was watching his back retreat, could hear the echo of her muttering to herself and into her phone, ‘Pickup-pickup-pickup, yes, this is Sgt Sally Donovan, requesting immediate backup . . .’ He pressed on, keeping his ears peeled and eyes sharp. If they had hurt Lestrade, in any way, if they had killed him . . . He would tear them limb from limb.

The initial pass was long, some twenty metres, but then he came to a T-junction; to the right, another grate, beyond which he could hear running water—sewage, perhaps, or pipelines. The grate was secured, so he went left.

Another ten metres. Then the torchlight found shadow: an aperture to his left, wider than the opening of another tunnel. He approached warily and saw that the space opened up into a small cavern or room. What he saw there stilled the blood in his heart.

It was a bunker, and a hoard. In the far corner were stacked two flat and dirty mattresses, one on top of the other, and a red sleeping bag bunched against the wall. Empty tins littered the floor—peas, beans, soups, cherries, tuna—as well as dozens and dozens of wads of tissue or toilet paper. But Sherlock didn’t need to step closer to investigate what they were: his nostrils were assaulted with the stench of stale semen, like rotting fish. His stomach turned, and before the sudden nausea could intensify, he pressed his nose into the crook of his elbow. Then he raised the beam on his torch and saw, tacked to the wall above the mattresses, a sprawling collage of photographs.

There they were, all eight of them: Sam Jefferies, Holden O’Harris, Ewan Nichols, Ralston Winters, Lynette Avery, Orrin Tipple, Colin Simpkins, and Karim Omid Niazi. They were shots taken from a distance, while Jefferies stood in a soup line or O’Harris stretched his arm into a bin in the park. There was Ewan, walking down the street with some of his mates, and Ralston and Nette sleeping together under a blanket of newspapers. Tipple sat on a park bench and Simpkins fed the pigeons. And Karim, holding a sign, asking for help and praising God in the same breath. They were being scouted, hunted, and none of them had the slightest of suspicions how it would all end.
But there was more. Alongside the scouting shots were photographs taken of the victims while in their captivity, from inside small, dark places or in isolated stretches of field or on a dark railroad track. They were each stripped naked, hands bound, bent over on their knees, and lapping at a red dog dish. Close-up shots of faces both blindfolded and with streaming eyes. Horrified, Sherlock stepped slowly into the room, his eyes jumping from face to tortured face, knowing that this wall, everything on this wall, had happened because of him. These people had suffered and died because of him.

He had to look away, to stop the roaring in his head, so he let the light drop, and when it fell upon the top of the mattress, he saw, just barely sticking out of the mouth of the sleeping bag, a pair of grey underwear. A jolt passed through him, as if he had electrocuted himself with the stun gun. He didn’t need to touch it to know what it was, didn’t need to see it in its entirety, but nor could he stop himself from this verification. Trembling, he reached down and tugged, and out they came, grey pants, stained with old blood, an item stolen from police evidence lockers. He whirled around, heart pumping madly in an aching chest as he observed again the crumpled tissues at his feet. This time, he had to fight hard to stop himself from retching.

Here it was, the Slash Man’s secret hideaway. Here was where he came to glory in his conquests, to appease his lingering lusts or excite his carnal desires. Did he come here to stimulate his twisted passions in the hours before claiming another victim? Or did he return here to tuck another photograph to the wall, to revel in his debauchery, to recall in memory and in body the contemptible violations he had performed on others? Whichever was true, it seemed that the grey underwear was his catalyst, his most prized possession. The sickness of this man Sherlock had known all along, but seeing it displayed so starkly . . .

Sherlock turned his back on the wall altogether, the torch fallen to his side to point at the floor. As he did, he felt something land against the side of his face, and he flinched away before he realised it was a cord dangling from the ceiling. His hand sought it out, seized it, and he yanked. A bulb above his head burst into light. He squinted against the sudden brightness, but he forced his eyes to remain open, and when the flashing stars began to clear, he found himself staring at the wall opposite the mattresses, a wall within perfect view of a man reposed and pleasing himself.

And there was John. Photographs, large and small, cut and cropped, covering every inch of wall, floor to ceiling. A hundred, two hundred, maybe more, he didn’t know, he couldn’t estimate to any degree of certainty. Maybe three hundred or five. Sherlock’s heart burned as each horrifying image seared into his eidetic memory: photographs of John from the basement of the convent, naked and laid out against the orange tiles; photographs of John, coated in his own blood, on elbows and splayed knees; photographs of John with a naked man between his thighs and hands around his throat; photographs of John’s face, close up, smeared with semen, or twisted in pain, or caught in an open-mouthed scream of anguish. They were photographs of John being raped over and over. Nine times, he had said, counting only those he recalled, but it seemed like a thousand for the terrible abundance of photographs taken, dozens and dozens per attack, now papering the walls in this subterranean hole.

The lair of the Slash Man. He had turned it into a shrine to his grandest obsession.

Sherlock’s knees buckled, and he crashed. The stun gun hit the floor. As he landed hard on his knees, he cried out, ‘Don’t look at it, John! God, don’t look!’ The torch rolled away from him. On hands and knees now, he crawled forward, and when he reached the wall, he began tearing the photographs off with both hands, bandaged and free alike, until his fingernails scraped the concrete and he shuffled left, still tearing, still scraping, and repeating, ‘Don’t look, John, don’t look. Go back!’

His mind was raging like a storm, beyond his power to control. Noise like a gale filled his eardrums; his vision narrowed to pinpoint precision. So he didn’t hear the footsteps from down the tunnel, reaching at a rapid pace, nor see the shadow enter the room. But he felt the hands laid upon his shoulders, wrenching him away from the wall, and in his fear, he seized the stun gun, twisted around, and jammed it into the stomach of the man who had found him in this lair. He squeezed the trigger.

With a shout of pain, Greg Lestrade dropped to the ground, head smacking the concrete with a dull thump.

***

Lestrade was out of breath by the time he spotted her, pacing below the bridge.

‘There you are!’ she cried out, dropping her phone from her ear. ‘Why the hell aren’t you answering your phone?’

‘If it would ring, I’d answer,’ he said, clutching a stitch in his side. ‘Have you seen Sherlock?’

She jerked her head. ‘Berk went in the tunnel. He went after him, figured you were in trouble. And I believed him!’

‘What? He tested, said he needed help.’

‘He does now.’

‘I don’t understand. Why would he think—?’

‘Because we both got texts from you, telling us to get ourselves down here, that something had happened.’

‘Shit. Oh shit. Have you called for backup?’

‘I think the weather’s slowing them, or they’d be here by now.’
Lestrade extracted a torch from the pocket of his coat. ‘How long’s he been in there?’

‘Two minutes.’

‘Right, I’m going in.’

‘I thought you might. And nothing I can say will make you wait for backup, eh?’

‘No. Is Sherlock armed?’

‘He has my stun gun.’

‘Then you’ll need this.’ He passed her his Glock 17. ‘Your certifications up to date?’

‘Who do you think you’re talking to? Of course they’re up to date. But if you think you’re going in there without me—’

‘Can’t risk getting trapped in there. You’re my best bet of keeping a clear passage. Fire if you’re threatened, Sally, and that’s an order.’

With that, he clicked on his torch, turned into the tunnel, and began to run at a crouch.

At the end of the tunnel he came upon the T, and the light emanating from what appeared to be a small alcove to his left made his decision. Heart racing, he approached with the stealth of his training, back to the wall, prepared to retreat, even though he knew that at one sign of Sherlock, he’d continue into the mouth of hell itself.

When he entered, he gasped, for there he was, fallen upon his knees, clawing at photographs tacked to a wall of cement in what appeared to be a fit of madness. Lestrade didn’t have time to register the images; he simply acted. He lunged forward, grabbed Sherlock by the shoulders, and wrested him away. Single-minded on the task of controlling him, Lestrade wasn’t prepared for Sherlock to react like a wild animal.

A jolt of electricity seized him. He’d been punched in the gut, and for a half a second thought he’d been shot. But as his muscles locked and he collapsed backwards, he remembered the awful sensation from weapons training. It wasn’t the first time he’d been stunned. But having once been shot, he could now appreciate the similarities in the sensation.

His head struck the ground. His limbs, useless in bracing for the impact, flopped beside him, registering pain and cold. And then he was straddled across the middle. Through gritted teeth, he managed to push out a single syllable, ‘Sher—!’, but was struck soundly across the face. Sherlock had a punch like iron: he felt like his face had broken, and as his head lolled to the side, Sherlock struck him again.

He cried out in pain.

The room stilled. Above his head, he heard rapid breathing, then a whispered, ‘Oh my god.’ Suddenly, the pressure lifted off his chest. Sherlock knelt at his side instead, lifting his head off the hard ground, practically cradling it in his large hands. ‘Lestrade. Lestrade? My god, I thought . . . I thought . . .’

‘My head,’ said Lestrade. It was all he could think to say.

‘I never meant . . . I would never . . . Not you, Lestrade.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Lestrade, patting his arm.

‘Can you sit up?’

Wincing, Lestrade grabbed his shoulder, and Sherlock pulled him upright, saying at top speed, ‘Two compressed nitrogen charges emitting eighty thousand volts designed to simulate strong but involuntary muscle contractions and incite sharp but temporary pains in the abdominal region are nevertheless not harmful and seldom lethal, and multiple studies reveal no long-lasting effects unless repeated charges are executed in a short space of—’

‘Shut up, Sherlock.’ He was sitting upright now, full control already being restored to his body. He wiped his bloody nose and blenched at the pain there. ‘What is this place?’

‘The snow outside can serve as a temporary ice pack until we can get you to—’

‘Sod that for now, yeah? I’ll be fine. Where are we? Why are we here, Sherlock?’

Sherlock grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet, but strangely, he didn’t answer the question. Turning slowly, three-hundred and sixty degrees, Lestrade took it all in for himself. ‘Oh sweet Mother of God,’ he said.

‘I have to take it down, all of it, down,’ said Sherlock, returning to the wall, pulling another photo down and crushing it into a ball.

‘Stop, just stop. You can’t do that, That’s evidence, Sherlock. My people will take care of it, but you need to leave it just as it is.’

‘They can’t see this! It’s not right, it’s not fair. John, I’m sorry, he’s not listening!’

Lestrade’s eyes widened in concern. ‘Hey now. Sherlock? Where’s John? Is he down here?’

Sherlock was turning in circles, one fist clutching his hair hard enough to tear it from his scalp if he was of a mind to. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll get rid of it. This is my fault, so let me get rid of it. No one will see, John, I promise.’

‘Hey!’ He took Sherlock by the shoulders to stop him from turning. Sherlock started and gasped,
but when he saw it was Lestrade who held him in place, he seemed to return to himself. Lestrade asked again: ‘Where’s John?’

‘Home,’ said Sherlock. ‘Safe at home.’

‘Good. Now Sherlock, listen to me. We need to get out, right now. Do you see what’s going on here? I didn’t tell you to come to City Mill River. That wasn’t me. It was them. They wanted you to find this place—now you have to ask yourself why.’

‘To . . . to show me what they’ve done.’

‘You know what they’ve done. This!—he cast an arm around the room—’is nothing new! It’s sick, it’s revolting, but it’s nothing new! There’s nothing here that’s not already been done!’

Sherlock pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, as though to blot out the images, or maybe to ease the pressure of a throbbing mind. Frustrated, he let out a shout and dropped his hands. ‘It’s the space that is new. It’s where he comes to . . . to remember, to plan, to . . . hoard.’ He turned now to the third wall, bare, but against which stood a long, narrow table covered with junk: tins of food and bottles of water and cleaning solutions, plastic cutlery, newspapers, jars, aerosol containers, latex gloves, even an old, boxy television set. He stepped nearer the table.

‘I really think we ought to leave, Sherlock. Sally, she’s waiting for us.’

If Sherlock heard, he gave no sign. From among the detritus, he narrowed in on a single mug, upon which was set a folded square of cardstock paper. What attracted him to it, Lestrade had no idea, but he watched as Sherlock picked it up, opened it, and read it, lips moving but no sound coming out. Lestrade took the note from him to see it for himself:

I know the locksmith.

‘What is this? What does it mean?’

But Sherlock continued on as though he stood alone in the room. He lifted the mug; Lestrade heard the sound of something metal, coins maybe, shifting inside. But then Sherlock pulled out a silver key.

‘Looks like . . . a house key?’ Lestrade felt his already racing heart begin to beat even faster. ‘Sherlock, you changed your locks. You told me you did.’

‘I did.’ He turned the key to examine the ridge of teeth. ‘This isn’t mine. It’s yours.’

Lestrade took a step nearer. ‘What?’

Setting the key aside, Sherlock plucked another from the mug, examined it, put it aside, plucked another, examined it, put it aside, plucked another. ‘They’re identical. All of them. Copies of copies of copies of your house key.’ He overturned the mug, and the silver keys, twenty-five at least, spilled across the table and onto the floor. ‘Yours, Lestrade. All yours. I remember the cut.’ Alarmed, he locked eyes with Lestrade. ‘I had a copy of your key on my ring. When they stole my keys, I changed my locks. But you . . . You didn’t change yours.’

‘Oh my god. Oh my god.’

‘Where’s Molly? Where?’

Lestrade was fumbling for his phone, trying to keep his thoughts from whiting out. ‘She’s, uh, working. She’s working late. I told her I’d pick her up from Bart’s at midnight.’

‘Get her on the phone, now. Tell her to stay put, don’t go home, keep in a public place, we’re going to get her right now.’

‘I’ve no signal in here!’

‘It doesn’t matter, we’re leaving.’ He set the mug back on the table, and that’s when he noticed another note written in the same cream cardstock, folded, on top of the television set. Sherlock snatched it up and read aloud in a clear voice: ‘That is, I know what he likes.’

‘The hell?’ said Lestrade. ‘Sherlock, please, we have to go!’

Sherlock punched the ‘on’ button at the bottom of the television set, and that’s when Lestrade noticed the cable running across the table and into the wall just as the TV popped and hummed to life.

They couldn’t see anything at first, and Lestrade thought it must be white-out or static, but as the picture sharpened, he saw that it was snow. Veils of snow, sheeting down the screen, obscuring almost entirely the image of a snow-covered street, and a black door beneath an arch of stone.

‘That’s 221,’ said Sherlock breathlessly. ‘The security camera your people set up. That’s the shot from across the street.’

‘The feed . . . he’s been watching the feed from here,’ said Lestrade.

‘That means he saw me leave. Forty-five minutes ago. Just . . . me.’

And at that moment, a dark figure entered the frame, striding confidently to the front door where it paused, turned to face the camera, and lifted a hand bearing a key for them to see. The sheeting snow obscured his face, but not his actions, as he turned back to the door, slid the key into the lock, and pulled the handle.

‘God no,’ whispered Sherlock. ‘No, God, no.’

The Slash Man let himself inside.
Outside, where the visibility was narrowing to nothing, Sally Donovan’s mobile announced an incoming text. She checked the screen from beneath the bridge, which provided her shelter from everything but the wind and cold. The sender was one she had not programmed into her phone herself: Mother Goose.

Donovan was not one whose sentiments made room for trepidation, but she felt it now. Gripping the Glock 17 in one hand and the mobile in the other, she stepped nearer the tunnel’s mouth, checking once more for torchlights, listening carefully for voices; but it was dark and quiet. She held her breath and opened the text.

*Three blind mice.
See how they RUN!*  

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John checked the clock. Twenty minutes, Sherlock had said, or twenty-five at a push. It had now gone forty-five. *Slow service,* he reasoned. *Bad weather.* But he couldn’t keep his eyes from the clock. He had been hungry, properly hungry, but any craving was being replaced with a mounting anxiety. Until, that was, Sherlock sent him a text:

*On my way. SH*

He relaxed, and the hunger returned. Then, to occupy himself, he set out two dishes and two glasses and two sets of chopsticks on the table in the sitting room, the kitchen table having been taken over, once again, by books, samples, and experiments.

Five minutes later, he received a second text:

*Almost there. SH*

John poured water into the glasses and set the kettle to boil.

He was rinsing out the teapot at the sink when he thought he heard, from below, the front door close. That couldn’t be right though, he reasoned, because Sherlock always, *always,* rang the bell to announce himself. *Always. He must have been mistaken,* that he had heard anything at all. Nevertheless, he left the pot and returned to the sitting room where he lowered the volume on the telly, and listened.

Nothing. The flat was still, quiet. Then his phone sounded again, and he flinched. Chiding himself a little, and shaking off his jumpiness, he retrieved Sherlock’s third text:

*I’m here, pet.*

John stared at the screen in disbelief, a lump hardening in his throat and his mouth going dry. Slowly, he reached for his cane, which leant against his armchair, and as he touched it, he heard a loud *snap!*, and the power was killed. The white noise of the telly died away, and John was cast into darkness.

And from below, a creak on the stair, and someone began to whistle.

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They came running out of the tunnel, and Sgt Donovan, frantic and still waiting for backup, screamed at them while brandishing her mobile, ‘What does this mean? What does this mean?’

Into the blizzard, they kept on, and she raced after them. ‘What’s happening!’

‘He’s got John!’ Sherlock cried.

They were racing back in the direction of High Street where Lestrade and Donovan had both left their vehicles. The snow was loose but deepening, hitting their ankles with each step, and they slipped and slid but kept on running, even as they pressed phones to their ears and shouted at each other to run, run, run! But Molly wasn’t answering, and neither was John.

When they reached the end of the path, Lestrade took Donovan by the shoulders and said, ‘You and Sherlock—Baker Street! Now! Get on the radio, call for units, they’ll get there before you, but you have to go now!’

‘What about you!’

She had never seen him so fearful. He took his Glock out of her hands and choked as he said, ‘I have to get to Molly. Sherlock, I’m sorry . . . but I have to find Molly!’

‘Go!’ said Sherlock, who was already limping toward Donovan’s car.

They parted ways.

But when Sherlock and Donovan reached the car, they saw that the window on the passenger’s side had been smashed in.

‘Holy God,’ said Donovan.

‘Does it drive? Does it drive?’ Sherlock shouted manically, pulling open the door and sitting
himself in the snowy, glass-strewn seat. Donovan jumped in on the other side, jammed the key in the ignition, and the engine roared to life. ‘Then go!’

The tyres spun. Cursing everything from the weather to the engineering, Donovan rocked the car back and forth before the tyres finally gripped asphalt, and she pushed forward and onto the empty A118, the lights on the dash of her unmarked car flashing and siren screaming. In the seat beside her, Sherlock pulled the collar of his coat higher, his only defence against the wind and snow rushing through the open window. She grabbed the radio and said, ‘This is Sgt Sally Donovan, requesting immediate deployment of AFO units to 221 Baker Street. Do you copy? Over.’

There was silence on the radio. Even the static seemed to have gone out. She clicked and clicked, every button at her disposal, but nothing. ‘Come on, come on, this is Sgt Donovan, is anyone there? Over.’

While she shouted into the radio, Sherlock pulled a loose panel off the dashboard. There, they both saw the bundle of severed wires.

‘Dammit!’

‘You have to go faster. Faster, Sally.’ He was fumbling with his phone, staring at it like he didn’t know what it was.

‘I can barely see, and the roads are shite. If I go any faster, we’ll never make it, understand?’

‘Please, please,’ he said.

She gritted her teeth and pressed down on the accelerator.

***

Molly had good news. That evening, Dr Torrence called her into his office to inform her that St Bart’s was no longer being held responsible for the falsified medical certificates of death for Sherlock Holmes or the wrongful identification of James Moriarty. ‘They’re naming us as victims now, not perpetrators. All pending charges have been dropped,’ he said, ‘and all accused parties exonerated. You included.’

She was relieved, naturally, but uncertain as to why. When she asked what he knew, Dr Torrence merely shrugged and said, ‘Best not to question good news. Police are sorting through things, it seems, and pinning the blame where it belongs, and that’s not here. I’m lifting the sanctions against you—I want you back in the morgue, Molly.’

‘Thank y—’

‘But I hope it’s clear that there really can’t be anymore allowances, any special favours for friends. You know what I’m saying. That was some pretty hot water you got yourself in.’

‘I understand. Completely.’

‘Look, it’s pretty slow around here right now, and they say there’s a pretty nasty storm coming in. Why don’t you take off early, stay ahead of the weather? See you back here tomorrow, then, eh? We’ll have some bodies waiting for you.’

She laughed. ‘I look forward to it.’

For the briefest moment, she thought she would call Greg, let him know she was off early, and perhaps they could have dinner. But it wasn’t sensible. He would be working late, she knew, dealing with this most recent near-slaying. With the victim surviving, they had living testimony, something real, and they were all working overtime to catch these people. He was optimistic, but still stressed, and she didn’t want to intrude on his focus.

So instead, she texted:

Off early. I’ll take a bus home. Let me know when to expect you.

When she boarded the bus, though, just as the snow was beginning to fall, she had to fumble for her Oyster Card and so slipped the phone into her purse to free her hands. On the way to the back of the bus, she ran into a fellow technician, who urged her to sit and chat. And by the time they reached her colleague’s stop, she had forgotten to check whether Lestrade had replied, and so was not bothered with the question of why he had not.

The bus dropped her off two streets away from the front door. It had been a long ride, not only for the distance but also for the snow, and she stepped onto a white, wet pavement. Hugging herself around the middle, she pushed home against the wind. As she neared the front door, she fished for her keys in her purse, and when she entered the house, she bolted it closed behind her. It was only then that she pulled out the phone to check for messages and found none. Odd. She dropped her coat and purse on a chair in the front room and headed for the kitchen, beginning a new text.

She never finished. For when she passed the stair and through the open door to the kitchen, a large hand clapped across her mouth, and another took her by the throat. Molly screamed soundlessly, and her mobile hit the floor.

***

Sherlock’s hands were completely numb as he scrolled through his address book, found John’s number, and opened the file.

It was as he suspected: someone had inputted an alternative number. Two numbers were now
listed, mobile and home, a primary and secondary, and it was the number now occupying the primary position that he had been dialling over and over again to no effect. The digits corresponded to John’s old phone—he recognised them as easily now as knowing a man’s face. For the last hour, he had been corresponding with them.

But the actual, current number was still there. And just as he was in the act of dialling the new, his phone lit up with an incoming call from the old.

‘Is that Lestrade?’ Donovan asked, trying to control the panic in her voice. Sherlock wasn’t familiar with the tone, not from Sally Donovan.

Sherlock’s muscles tensed and he could hardly breathe. But he pressed his frozen thumb to the green circle and raised the phone to his ear. ‘Who is this?’

For a long and terrible three seconds, he heard nothing, not even breathing. He covered his other ear to block the howl of wind. Then came a sound he had never wished to hear again. ‘Good evening, Mr Holmes.’ Her voice, sultry and cool all at once, sank into the recesses of his head like a needle injecting a deadly poison. ‘Have you seen the forecast tonight? Ghastly.’

‘What have you done?’ His voice hoarse and lacking breath.

‘Not even a hello? I’m hurt.’

‘What have you done!’

‘I am making good on a promise. Sebastian and I—we have an understanding. He’s been so helpful, so patient, that it’s time I rewarded him. After tonight, though, all my thoughts are on you. You owe me a dinner, Mr Holmes. Long overdue.’

‘If you . . . hurt him . . . When I find him and see that you’ve merely touched him—’

‘Find him? That’s an old game. And yes, you won that one, I’ll grant you. This game is about pain, nothing more, nothing less, and after tonight, I think you’ll agree that I’m winning.’

‘Holmes, hang up the phone,’ said Donovan, hands locked on the wheel.

‘I will kill you if you hurt him, do you hear me?’

‘Sherlock Holmes, hang up!’

‘One day, Mr Holmes, you’ll have to explain it to me—the allure of John Watson. I don’t see it myself. But you. You, and Sebastian, and dear old Daz—you all would do anything to have him, wouldn’t you?’

‘What do you want! Take it! Have me! But please—!’

Donovan snatched the phone from his hands and threw it at his feet. ‘Don’t!’ she said.

‘Agh!’ Sherlock seized his hair in his fists and curled over his knees, screaming.

‘We’ll be there soon, we’ll reach him.’

‘Too late, it’ll be too late! Run, John, god please, run!’

‘That phone call,’ she said, ‘it was an attack on your mind, a way to throw you off balance, that is all! That’s what they’ve been doing for nine weeks! Your brain is your greatest weapon, Sherlock Holmes, so use it!’

Something inside his head flashed like white-hot lightning, and for the thinnest of moments, his darkness was illuminated. ‘Mycroft!’ Sherlock dove for the phone at his feet. He started typing his brother’s name into the phonebook—M Y C—but nothing was coming up. Rubbing at his eyes to clear them, he scrolled manually, alphabetically, through the short list of names, but when he got to the Ms, he saw only Molly and Mrs Hudson.

Mycroft had been deleted.

***

He told her to be still and she was. He told her to shut up and she did. But she couldn’t keep herself from crying, even when he warned her to stop, said he’d punch her in the face if she carried on, and he did. Then he proceeded to pull off her shoes and socks, her jacket and blouse and trousers, and with the laces of her shoes he tied her wrists together.

‘Any funny business,’ he said, his face close to hers and a warning finger pointed between her eyes, ‘and I’ll break your jaw. Understand?’

Tears rolling down her cheeks, Molly nodded. She was lying flat on the rug in Greg’s sitting room, knees locked together and trembling uncontrollably. Though she tried to hold it in, a sob broke free of her throat. ‘Shut it’, he said, and backhanded her across the face. Then he grabbed her up by the hair of her head until she was on her feet before he slung her over his shoulder to carry her half naked from the room.

Then he turned to climb the stairs, and she jostled limply with each rough step. Her hands hung over her head, her hips dug into his shoulder, and his large, hairy arm locked her in place at the knee. Her terror was absolute. She couldn’t think beyond present pains or the fear of imminent violations, and she kept seeing in her mind’s eye Mary Morstan’s body beneath the white sheet, John Watson in hospital, Sherlock screaming in the morgue, and Lestrade . . . Greg, her Greg, coming home to find that she wasn’t strong enough, that her body broke as easily as glass, that her blood spilt just as red as Mary’s.

At the top of the stair, she kicked backward, her leg bending at the trapped knee, and the heel of
her foot smashed into the stranger’s face.

He hollered and stumbled forward to his knees, and Molly fell, landing firmly on her backside, and in that position, she kicked again, her foot connecting with his nose. As another cry of rage erupted from him, Molly scrambled backwards, burning his bare arms and legs on the rug, and she crawled as fast as she could through the nearest open door, into the guest bedroom, and slammed her weight against the door to close it. Beyond, she heard him charging after her, and just as she set the lock, his body crashed against the door and she fell back. But the door held fast, for now. She knew, though, that he had the power to break through any moment.

But it was in this room, the guest bedroom she had occupied that first night, where she had deposited John Watson’s gun. There, in the top drawer of the bedside table, beneath a short stack of magazines, it waited for her. She ran for it now, John’s words echoing in her head: *When you shoot, Molly, you shoot to kill. You don’t give him a second chance.*

The door splintered open as she pulled open the drawer.

His feet pounded across the room as she dug out the cold weapon, spun, and squeezed the trigger.

But the safety was on. The gun remained cold.

The man wrested it from her hands, and with the grip cracked her across the skull.

*****

Half a city away, John Watson stood paralysed. Old but unforgotten words floated to the surface of his mind like detritus rising from the bottom of a black lake, matching a familiar tune, and he heard Lex’s singing voice as clearly as though those lips were hovering right behind his ear.

*Oh Johnny boy, your legs are spread and bleeding.*

In the other ear, the voice of Ella Thompson: ‘When you know you’re having a hallucination, your goal is to restore normalcy. Turn on the lights. Put on some music. Find someone trustworthy to talk to. Breathe, and count to five.’

This was all in his head. He knew it, it had to be. He’d experienced hallucinations like this before, accompanied now as always by the elevated blood pressure and feverish skin and shortness of breath. Restore normalcy, he coached himself, and he reached for the lamp, but he clicked and clicked and clicked, and the room remained dark.

*You’re black and blue from nose to cock to toe.*

The stair groaned and the whistling grew louder. John swallowed a cry of dismAY and put a closed fist to his mouth. The need to escape flooded him now, overriding his rational mind. *This isn’t real, he’s not here,* he thought, even though he disbelieved himself. *I am in control. I know what I feel isn’t real. I know this will pass.* But his leg flared with pain and the scars on his back twisted and pulled in the skin. As quickly as he could while making as little noise as possible with his shoeless feet, he hurried from the room, through the kitchen, and into the hallway as the stairs continued to creak and the whistling floated up into the flat.

*He’ll hold you down and fuck you while you’re pleading.*

John almost collapsed, his legs uncooperative and his chest aching for want of air. Breathe, breathe! One . . . two . . . three . . . He passed through the open door to Sherlock’s bedroom and went straight to the window leading to the fire escape. But the window was barred, an extra security feature they had installed in the wake of the convent, and removing it would take time, make noise, draw attention. He didn’t dare.

The whistling was in the flat.

*Don’t hold it back, dear Johnny, keen and moan.*

In panic, he hid himself behind the open door, his body pressed to the wall. He clamped a hand across his mouth to silence his ragged breathing and leaned heavily upon the cane. *Not real not real not real.* He thought to close the door, but there was no lock, and any movement, any sound would announce his location. He remained as still as he could, but the harder he tried, the greater his body trembled. He closed his eyes and focused on expanding his lungs, breaths in, breaths out, and he let his teeth sink into his finger to keep himself silent. *Let Sherlock find me here,* he thought. *Let him explain to me about a power outage. Let him explain to me about a power outage.*

Silence. The flat was still, empty. The whistling had faded away, and the footsteps had gone. Slowly, John opened his eyes and stared at the blackness that was the door. He lowered his hand from his mouth, resting it at his throat. Had he done it? He must have done. He was again master of his own mind. A power outage, that’s what it was. The darkness had thrown him into a panic, as it had done before, but he was okay. He would find a torch, light a candle, and when Sherlock got home . . .

But then . . . what about the text? Hadn’t he received that text just before the lights had gone? Or was he confused?

By increments, he turned his head to peer through the narrow space between door and jamb between the hinges, to see the hallway. But his view was blocked. Even in the darkness, he could see a black eye looking back.

Suddenly, John was crushed: a large body had thrown its full weight into the door, slamming him back and against the wall, then again, then again. He grunted as his head rebounded between wall and door, and his cane clattered to the floor. But he was pinned, unable to move, not even to fall, not until the door was wrenched back and thrown into its frame with a resounding crash. Then John fell. He slipped down the wall, dislodged the framed poster of the periodic table, and
collapsed upon his cane. When the frame hit the floor with him, the glass burst.

Two strong hands seized him where he lay, grabbing the back of his shirt and dragging him through the shards before depositing him in the centre of the floor, but not before John had grabbed the cane from under his body. Released, he rolled onto his back, and as the figure looming over reached down to grab him again, he swung the cane with all his might and heard it thwack against a skull. He saw the flinch, but the man made no sound. He swung again, but grounded, he couldn’t get proper leverage, not enough to seriously harm or debilitate or stop the man from getting what he had come for. On the third swing, the man caught the cane in the air and wrenched it from John’s grasp. He watched the cane lift high above the man’s head, and John threw his arms around his head and curled onto his side just as the wood came down against his ribs. He cried aloud at the eruption of pain.

He tried to find his feet, tried to position himself to run or to fight, but before he could even push himself to his knees, another blow fell across his back. He shouted again and fell upon his face. A third crack, as he was beaten with his own cane. Each blow was like fire, threatening to rend the skin and bruise the bone. The stiff, wooden shaft came down a fourth time across his back, a fifth, and on the sixth merciless strike, the cane broke against him, splintering in two. He mounded into the floor.

The pieces of wood clattered beside his head, dropped, and a foot wedged beneath him, rolling him over. When he looked up this time, he saw, in the light of the moon-touched snow emanating through the window, a face that had plagued his memories both asleep and awake for the past one hundred and thirty-five days. Six-foot-six and eighteen stones, with shoulders like an ox and a neck as strong and thick as a keg. The man’s hair was longer and wilder than before, hiding the kink in his ear, but he was shaven, revealing the squareness of his hard chin and an ugly, unsmiling mouth. But those eyes—those dark and ravenous eyes . . . They were hungry eyes, and they looked down at John with the untempered ferocity of an animal too long caged and deprived. It was those eyes that told John he was a dead man.

Wrong! John Watson is a fighter!

He almost gasped as the sound of his sister’s voice resounded clearly in his mind, as though she were in that very room. It filled him, charged him, and he flung himself into action, determined to get away. He kicked so hard at Daz’s shin that the man hissed through his teeth and fell back a step. John began to crawl away, but he wasn’t fast enough. Daz fell upon him now, flipping him once again onto his back, and straddled him across the thighs, effectively trapping him with his weight. Hot blood pumping through his veins, John seized one piece of the broken cane and with a shout rammed the jagged end hard in the giant man’s thigh. Daz made a grunt of annoyance, grasped John’s arm at the wrist, and twisted. John shouted and dropped the stick, yielding his weapon, but the man wasn’t satisfied. He rose up on his knees, loomed over John, and struck him hard across the face with a closed fist.

John’s vision burst into stars, and he knew that the only thing keeping his head from rolling across the room was that it was attached to his neck. He slumped into the floor, only distantly aware that Daz’s hands were at his belt, uncinching, tugging, unthreading, until the leather strap was free in his hands. Just as John’s sight was clearing, he saw Daz feeding the belt into itself, creating a noose.

You’re going to lose your breath, John.

Mike Stamford joined Harry Watson at the side of the room, just beyond the corners of his eyes where he couldn’t see them. He just knew they were there.

Oxygen deprivation will lead to cerebral anoxia which may cause syncope. Give him enough time, and you’re going to faint, and your brain will die. Don’t let him do this.

John placed an arm across his face and locked the other around his head, trying to make it impossible for Daz to slip the belt over his head. But he was already weakening, and Daz was nothing if not a brute. John had no power to stop him from tearing his arms away from his head, striking him again, beating his chest until the breath left his lungs, striking his mouth until his teeth cut his own lips and blood leaked out from both corners, thumping him until he submitted. And submit he did. Only then did he feel the cruel leather strap pull taut against his throat.

He thrashed and kicked and heard the promise of sixty seconds in the strap. Hauled by the neck, his upper body left the floor, and he was dragged nearer the bed. His lungs burnt hotter and hotter as his body floundered without oxygen, and just as he was on the brink of passing out, he was released. His enervated body flopped against the floor. Head foggy and limbs useless, he didn’t notice when Daz removed his socks. He was barely aware that Daz was on top of him again until he felt large hands traveling up the skin of his torso, under his shirt, rough fingers scraping against his chest, and next he knew his shirt and vest had been yanked up above his head and torn from him in a single motion. A blast of cold hit his bare skin, but when he trembled, it was not for the chill but for the vulnerability of naked skin, his hideous scars exposed so blantly and forcefully, and the contact of that monster’s hand upon him.

No no no! he thought desperately, but at his flailing the belt tightened around his throat once again. He grasped Daz’s forearm in a pathetic effort to dislodge his hold, but the man was insentient to his efforts. Instead, he traced the scar over John’s left breast with a light finger. To John, it felt like a white-hot iron against his skin, recalling with perfect clarity the slice of the scalpel. He believed he could feel the hot blood leave his body and drip down his sides. And then, just before the darkness pushed in on him and he was about to lose consciousness, the belt loosened once more, and the air rushed back into his lungs.

Coughing, choking, he gasped for air and curled onto his side, and there Daz left him to lie. John heard the heavy boots stepping away, not leaving the room, just moving around it, pacing from wall to wall. But John kept still. He could barely breathe, let alone move, and he knew there was no point. He would never get to the door, and there was nowhere he could possibly hide . . .
Opening his streaming eyes, he saw the space beneath the bed. If he could get under there, just far enough where Daz could not easily reach him . . . If he could stay away just long enough for someone . . . to come . . .

Though futile, John knew he had to act, buy himself time. He grasped the underside of the box springs and pulled, dragging his body halfway under the bed when a boot came down on his hand. He stifled a whimper as he was dragged back out again and punished for his attempts: another fist in the face and a harsh tug on the belt. And it was in the daze that followed that John’s hands were bound in front of him with a charger cable torn from the wall. He cried and pleaded no no, voice slurred and slurring, as his inside wrists were pressed together and wrapped with the length of Sherlock’s phone charger, then knotted. When he strained against the cord, the struggle only tightened the knot.

Next moment, something wet hit his face in a steady stream. His first impression was that he was being pissed on, but then he smelt it: ammonia. His stomach wriathed as a wave of nausea swept through him, and his eyes burnt. He squeezed them shut, held his breath, and angled his face away, trying to shield it with raised arms. Daz grabbed his arms at the wrist and held them down, straddled him once more, and with his free hand, he pried open John’s mouth, held down his jaw with his fingers, and shoved a mated pair of Sherlock’s socks, sodden in ammonia, into his mouth. John screamed into the gag, but the sound was muted even in his own ears. He twisted violently, trying to expel the wad, to push it out with his tongue, but Daz clamped a hand over his mouth and held his head still to the floor. Then he reached for the bedside table and ripped the cord from a lamp. A bulb shattered as the lamp hit the floor. With the severed cord, Daz secured the gag in place around John’s head. And with every tremble of his jaw, with every tightened muscle in his face, whether from pain or fear, he squeezed the liquid from the soaked socks, and the ammonia filled his mouth and scorched down his throat. Instantly, his stomach tried to rebel, his lungs to ache, and his air passage was defered strictly to his nostrils, but even his nose was swelling with blood.

He knew what was happening. Not only to his body—the physiological damage, the violent reactions and system shut downs—but also, he knew exactly what Daz was doing: he was preparing John, recreating the conditions of the convent, right down to the smell. Daz was going to claim him again, but this time, Moran wasn’t there to hold him back, to say when enough was enough, to recognise when John couldn’t take it anymore and call off the dog. This time, there would be no coming back.

God no, John thought. O God, I don’t want to die.

Daz stood, looked down at his prey, and saw John Watson as he had been, that first time: half-naked, hands bound, choked, and stinking of ammonia and blood. And he smiled, a voracious smile, took hold of his own crotch, and rubbed. John fought against the bile rising in his throat as he tried to hide himself with his joined hands. But Daz wouldn’t take him there. Instead, he grabbed the belt, yanking roughly on the end so that John was lifted, strangled, and Daz seized him at the arms as if he weighed nothing at all to throw him bodily onto Sherlock’s bed. There, he didn’t wait—there was no more waiting. He crawled on top of John, straddled him, pushed one hand into the old war wound of John’s shoulder to pin him down, and with the other popped the top button on his own trousers, then John’s.

Fight him, John! Harry shrieked at him. Don’t you let him take you like this! You can stop this. Fight for your life!

Tears and chemicals stinging his eyes, John screamed loudly into the ballced socks and tried to roll, throw Daz off him, but the weight was too great. Daz let him struggle, even grinned as he watched, as he shoved a hand inside of John’s trousers and squeezed.

John screamed again, arching his back and wriggling like a fish, a helpless creature caught in a net with no chance of escape.

It’s not too late, John, never too late. Don’t give up now, said Mike.

Keeping his hand where it was, Daz wrapped the other around John’s throat, bent his face so close John could smell the stink of his breath, feel its heat, as Daz said gruffly into his ear, ‘Mine first. All mine. He can take you later.’

John shivered and wept.

Then Daz sat back. Still trapping him at the legs, he now excitedly moved to unzip John’s flies. But he was too eager. He grasped both sides of the fabric and wrenched the teeth apart, effectively breaking the zip. Then he lowered his nose into John’s crotch with relish and breathed in deeply. John tensed, and in his tension, he squeezed more ammonia from the gag, and his cry caught in a burning gurgle in his throat. Hearing the wretched noise, Daz laughed.

Gathering all his fear and rage, John balled his hands into fists and swung them mightily against Daz’s face, slamming his jaw closed. John heard an ungodly howl of pain as Daz’s body slackened and he rolled to the side of the bed.

Run, my love! Run, run, run!
It was Mary! With Daz falling one way, John rolled the other. He fell off the bed opposite the door, landing hard on elbows and knees, but he pushed himself to his bare feet, and holding up his broken trousers with blood-swollen hands, he limped to the door, threw it open, and ran. But the Slash Man was in hot pursuit.

***

It wasn’t Donovan’s fault when the car went off the road. In the blizzard, she couldn’t see the turning, and by the time she did, it was too late to slow. The car hit a stretch of ice, the brakes locked, and they slid across two lanes and directly into the path of an oncoming city bus.

The ensuing crash exploded the windscreen and crumpled the driver’s side like paper. When the car finally stopped spinning, Sherlock lifted his head from his chest and looked over at Donovan. She was slumped over in the driver’s seat, head hanging, eyes closed, her hair filled with glass.

‘Sally. Sally.’ He pulled at his seat belt, locked around him, keeping him from moving. When at last he unclipped it, he twisted in his seat and took her face in his hands. ‘Sally, open your eyes.’

She groaned. The skin between her eyes furrowed.

‘Holmes?’ She pried her eyes open, but she was still too disoriented to make sense of him.

‘An ambulance is coming.’

‘Go, Holmes.’

‘You’re hurt.’

‘Damn right. Something is broken. I can’t help you anymore. So go.’

‘Go. Holmes.’

‘My phone. Front pocket, right side. I can’t reach it—my arm . . .’

He reached around her and pulled her mobile from her pocket, placing it in her left hand. ‘I’m sorry—’ he began.

‘I said go. You can still reach him.’

He nodded. Then he shoved his unbooted foot into the side door to open it and bolted into the snowy world. Donovan watched him go.

‘Say, where’s he going?’ said the bus driver, who had observed the strange exchange in bewilderment.

Donovan ignored the question as she opened her phonebook and began to scroll. ‘Any injured in the bus?’ she asked.

‘Weren’t no one inside but two people. Seem okay. Bit startled. It’s you what I’m worried ‘bout, miss.’

‘Paramedics will be here soon,’ she said through clenched teeth. The pain in her elbow was severe, and even though the snow was filling up her lap and icing her hair, she was sweating. Her vision blurred as she scrolled, looking for the word Dryers. When she found it, she took a stuttering breath and dialled.

When he answered, there was a pause. ‘Sergeant?’ he said.

‘Where are you?’

‘Me? At my desk. Why?’

‘Twenty minutes ago, I put in a call for AFO, and I’ve heard nothing. Have those teams been mobilised?’

‘. . . Are you serious? Donovan, this is the first I’m hearing of it.’

She screwed up her face in a mixture of pain and annoyance. ‘I thought as much,’ she said, and this time she couldn’t keep the agony from her voice.

‘What’s happened? Where are you?’

‘Dryers, listen to me very carefully. This is urgent. I need a team of AFOs sent immediately to Baker Street, and a team to the residence of Greg Lestrade. Do you hear me? Immediately. If it doesn’t happen, I swear to God, I will come after you and bury you.’
‘I’m putting in the order right now.’

‘I swear to God . . .’ Her breaths were coming more rapidly now. She was struggling to keep calm, even as the adrenaline coursed through her body. She had no choice in this. Gregson’s phone would have been compromised, like hers and Lestrade’s and Holmes’. Dryers was her last recourse.

‘Donovan, you still with me? Where are you?’

‘Ambulance.’

‘Ambulance? Are you hurt? Where are you?’

‘On its way. I’m told. Shit shit shit.’

‘I’m tracking your location. Stay on the line. We’ll get help to you.’

‘Watson. And Lestrade.’

‘Yes, to them too. Hold tight. You’re with me, right, Sally?’

‘Yes.’

But having done all she could, her arm went slack and she dropped her phone to the car floor. She heard Thomas Dryers’ voice coming through the speaker, repeating: ‘Donovan? Talk to me, Donovan. Units are en route to your location.’ But she was slipping away quickly.

***

He was seven-point-four miles from Baker Street. The snow was coming down in droves. His fingers were numb and the boot on his foot made him feel like he was dragging himself through mud. The ankle pinched with each step. He knew he would never make it, not like this. The police had been compromised. He had no way to phone his brother. So he played the last and only move still available to him. He called Julian Smalls.

***

Lestrade found the front door bolted. The house was dark. But there, in the chair in the entryway, he saw Molly’s coat and purse. He gripped the gun in both hands now and advanced slowly toward the kitchen.

Molly’s phone lay screen-down on the floor. He bit the inside of his lip, checked the gun left and right, and kept going.

Her clothing was strewn about the sitting room. Oh god, oh god.

Then, above his head, he heard a light thump, an abbreviated tussle, and silence again. He quelled the urge to shout for her, to charge up the stairs and burst into the room like a madman. Wildness was met with wildness. He couldn’t risk it. With measured steps and controlled breath, he turned to the stairs and ascended.

The upstairs hallway was dark, but there was a thin line of light at the bottom of the door leading to his bedroom. Furtively, he put his ear to the door. Only the softest of whimpers could be heard, and he knew the voice that made them. Fury and trepidation dangerously roiled together inside of him as he released one hand from the gun to turn the handle of the door. But once opened, he choked the grip with both hands, his left anchoring the weapon and his right adjusting the aim, and he nudged the door with his foot. It swung open slowly and soundlessly, and he stepped into the room.

On the far side of the room near the window, he saw Molly, captive, in the hands of a stranger. But for a bra and underwear, she was naked. She stood on her tiptoes, for the man who held her had one arm around her throat, and with the other, he held a gun to her head. Molly’s hair was loose around her face, and one thick strand of it was red and stuck to the side of her head. He marked shoelace-bound wrists and the bruises on her body—legs and stomach, arms and chest, neck and face—and his blood boiled. She looked at him now, eyes wide and pleading, lips quivering in fear.

Lestrade fixed his weapon between the man’s eyes.

‘Let her go,’ he said. His voice was gravelly but steady.

He watched the man press the barrel more firmly against Molly’s head. She held her breath; Lestrade’s finger twitched on the trigger.

‘Detective inspector,’ said the man. He was a full head taller than Molly and at least double her weight; his hair was dark and his skin ruddy, and though he was firmly muscled, much of his size was just sheer bulk. He would be strong, but not fast. A tattoo of dots to the side of one eye spoke to a prison sentence; another tattoo on the back of his hand, the one carrying the gun, named him ex-military. ‘You’re going to lower your weapon. Release the magazine. Set the gun on the floor. And step away.’ Lestrade didn’t move. The man’s arm pressed more firmly against Molly’s windpipe, and her eyes flew open. ‘Two seconds, detective inspector.’

In his dreams, over and over again, he had watched Mary Morstan die, a woman he had met only once. In the waking world, he had seen the look of a man who had watched his beloved slaughtered in the flesh. John Watson was haunted daily by that memory. Greg Lestrade was filled with fear that he was about to experience the same. There was nothing for it. He couldn’t risk Molly. The best he could hope for was to redirect the man’s attentions to himself. He offered a shallow nod and lowered his arms.

‘Don’t try anything funny,’ the man warned, watching him, hawk-like. Lestrade shook his head
and released the magazine. Then he crouched down to set the gun on one side, the magazine on the other. He knew, though, that there was still a bullet in the chamber. He’d made sure of it before entering the house.

‘Tell me what you mean to do,’ said Lestrade, straightening again. He spoke to the intruder, but his eyes were riveted on Molly. He wanted to tell her that it would all be over soon. He wanted to tell her not to be afraid. He wanted her to know, right now, that he had never loved anyone in the world as much as he loved her.

‘Step away from the gun.’

He complied, stepping right. The man moved too, and Molly with him, circling closer to the gun as Lestrade moved away from it.

‘Now. Is Sherlock Holmes with you?’

Lestrade carefully weighed his response and decided nothing could be gained by lying. ‘No.’

The man nodded. ‘Very well.’

‘What do you want with him?’

‘We weren’t sure,’ said the man, ‘which he’d choose. We strongly suspected, but we weren’t sure: the soldier or the girl. The one he died for, or the one he trusted for three years with his secrets.’

Lestrade resisted the urge to correct and defend. ‘And if he had come?’

‘Then I would have made him watch.’

Molly closed her eyes, and her tears fell down both cheeks.

‘And now?’

‘I’ll still have her. But you die first.’

It happened in an instant: Moran’s man pulled the pistol away from Molly and refocused it on Lestrade. There would be no more talking, no further warnings, and Lestrade knew it, and in the split second before the man pulled the trigger, Lestrade threw himself to the ground. The gun fired in the small room with the noise of an explosion; Molly screamed; and the mirror hanging on the wall behind Lestrade shattered and fell from its hook. In that moment of chaos, Lestrade sprang forward, hands outstretched, and Molly with him, circling closer to the gun as Lestrade moved away from it.

A sudden blast! shook the air. Lestrade flinched and saw blood. It rained down on him, hot and wet, and then the man collapsed. His dead weight trapped Lestrade on the ground and squeezed the air from his lungs. But he was unmoving. Against his chest, Lestrade could feel a circle of warm liquid soaking through his clothing, spreading outward. There was a light gurgling noise by his left ear where the man’s head now hung. Dying. Dead. He’d been shot through the chest.

‘Greg! Greg!’

Molly! She was at his side, tugging at the shoulders of the dead man, and Lestrade, stunned, at last reacted. He pushed with her, and the man rolled off of him. He gasped, regained his breath, and as he rose to his knees, he saw the bullet wound, dead centre in the chest. His sternum had probably fractured in a dozen places. Lungs and heart were probably riddled with bone shrapnel. A kill shot.

He looked up at Molly from the opposite side of yet another dead body that lay between them, a position they knew too well. But she was trembling, a gun in her hands, and he was dripping in the dead man’s blood.

She dropped the gun to the floor.

‘Oh Molly!’ he said, and rushed to her, gathering her up in his arms and pressing her close to his blood-soaked breast. Though her hands were still bound, she flung her arms around his neck and sobbed.

‘Molly, Molly, Molly!’ He buried his face in her neck, held her precious head against his, and began to weep.

She clung to him fiercely, hand and heart, and let herself cry loudly. ‘I love you, Greg,’ she said between gasps, ‘I love you so much.’ Huddled together on the floor, they wept in each other’s arms. Mere minutes later, when police in full protective gear had broken down the front door and swarmed into the house, they discovered the detective inspector and mortuary attendant locked together beside the dead intruder.
He made it to the door just off the kitchen before Daz caught up with him, seized his arm, and swung him around and into the kitchen table. The table jostled. They knocked over beakers and flasks, pushed aside books, and glass exploded on the floor. John was pressed chest down across the table top, and Daz upon him. ‘Li’fuck, li’fuck,’ said the Slash Man in his ear. Something was wrong with his speech. With each syllable, John felt something warm spray the side of his face and dribble down his neck.

His brief escape had infuriated Daz. He was through with his games, his teasing. Now, with John pinned beneath him, he kicked his legs wide and tugged at his trousers, trying to get a hand down. John flailed half way only for a split second; then he thrust his head backwards, smashing it square into Daz’s nose, and he escaped from under the roar of pain and anger only to be snatched again at the sliding doors. Together, they crashed into the glass, and together they hit the floor. John fought ferociously. There was no time to feel the pain of wrenched arms or glass-sliced skin, no space to dwell on juddering bones or a mouth on fire. Instead, with every arrested breath and every beat of his throbbing heart, John fought for his life.

But he was losing energy, and Daz was a tornado. They struggled against one another in the dark, throwing blind punches, landing wayward kicks, and in the confusion, John managed once again to escape. This time, he made it past the door, to the top of the stair, but he had made it only halfway down before Daz came at him from behind, jamming a foot into his back, and he fell forward down the steps. His bound hands could do little to brace him as he crumpled to the landing. Pain surrounded him—his hips and legs and knees flared in agony. He felt utterly stamped, unable to move his legs. Slower now, wheezing through his nose and trembling in every muscle, he rose to his elbows, and like a worm, edged forward, still trying to get down the stairs. Above him, he heard Daz’s heavy footsteps and wet, slapping breaths. The man was still coming for him, step by weighty step. And then his path was blocked.

With hands large enough to encase John’s full head, Daz slowly wrapped fingers around John’s throat, and lifted him at the head. Then, with painstaking determination, he turned back around and hauled John up the first flight of stairs by the neck. John choked, flailed, and fought, but this time, his efforts were in vain. Daz had turned to stone. When they reached the door outside the flat, he paused, still grasping John’s neck. Then he turned to the second flight and continued upward. The ammonia seeping from the gag was shooting up through John’s nose, threatening to drown him. Daz kicked open John’s bedroom door, dropped John to the floor, and slammed the door shut.

For a long moment, nothing happened. John lay still upon the ground, fighting to breathe, while Daz stood over him, as though keeping vigil. It was nearly pitch black, but John closed his eyes, trapped and exhausted. He should have known his efforts were futile. He should have known that, in the end, this was exactly where he would end up. He wanted to scream at the injustice of it all, at a universe that had beaten him into the ground throughout his life, a cruel fate that offered him the most desperate longings of his heart only to snatch them away from him at the last. *I just got him back, he thought sorrowfully. When I lost everything else, I got him back. It’s not real, none of it has been real!*

And then, a gentle whispering in his ear, more breath than sound:

*Sometimes, the dead do come back.*

*And me?* he wondered, opening his eyes. *What about me, Mary? Do I get to come back, too?*

But before she could answer, before he could find her, see her, there was Moran, standing in the shadows of the room, as he had done before, with a finger to his lips, shaking his head: *No.* And he repeated his words from the convent, words whispered in his ear that had echoed through him for one hundred and thirty-seven days: ‘I had no idea. You’re so beautiful like this, like this, so freshly fucked, so thoroughly wrecked.’ Tears sprang to his eyes at their renewed utterance, at the words he believed to be true, words he tried so hard to doubt. ‘You were meant for this, John. All your life, you’ve been waiting for this, for me. It’s destiny, me and you. Me in you.’

John gagged. He looked up at the shadow standing over him. Daz had himself in hand, stroking slowly. When he saw John watching him, he stopped. He was ready.

This time, he did not resist. The Slash Man lowered himself, slipped one hand under John’s knees, the other behind his neck, and lifted him like a child to set him on the bed. Then he turned him over onto his belly, as easy as pulling down the sheets. John was compliant and soon found himself face down in his own pillow. His hands were pinned close to his chest. Daz crawled over him, one leg on either side of his body at first, then he wiggled himself between John’s knees and laid himself out flush against John’s body, penis exposed and erect, and as his weight pressed down against John, he began to rut. He lowered his head, sucking on John’s neck, the meat between neck and shoulder, below the leather noose, biting and sucking and biting. One hand dug into John’s trousers, seeking.

John carefully wriggled his bound hands out from under him, groping for the headboard, sliding open a drawer.

Daz’s breath was becoming a pant. He moved faster. Thick fingers found the waistline of John’s trousers, already shimmed down his hips because of the broken zip. He gave it a yank. John’s grunt of protest caught in his throat. There wasn’t space enough, though, for Daz to pull the trousers and underwear down completely, so he sat back, held John down at the neck, and tugged on the trousers with the other hand.

John’s hand curled around the handle of the BK&T combat knife resting in the drawer. In the dark, and fully occupied by his lusts, Daz did not see.

To get the job done right, Daz needed both hands. He released John’s neck. John felt Daz’s fingers on his hips.

With all the strength left in him, John flipped onto his back beneath Daz’s looming body. He brought his hands down hard over the man’s head, the butt of the knife setting Daz’s skull ringing.
He kicked in, and his knee connected with Daz’s ribs, and he pushed off with the other leg. But Daz had seized hold of him again, and caught in John’s momentum, they rolled together to the edge of the bed. When John found himself on top, he flipped the knife around and, with the weight of his whole body, sank the blade down into Darren Hirsch’s stomach.

The man gasped. His entire body went rigid like a board. For a moment, both men were still, Daz lying on his back with his arms around John, and John straddling Daz, curled over his body and around the knife. Then Daz reacted. He clawed at John’s back, his fingernails dragging long trenches through his skin and tearing through old scars as he twitched, withied, and tried to throw John off. But John was immovable. And each time Daz came close to casting him aside, he thrust the knife again, twisted it in the wound, and forced Daz to be still. He thrust the blade repeatedly, never quite pulling out of the same entry wound, but changing the angle of each stab, the edge of the blade tearing to shred his stomach organ and lower intestines with each plunge, deeper and deeper. He aimed for spleen and pancreas, crucial veins and the aorta, and thrust, thrust, thrust. The blood rushed out, but John pushed deeper still, past the guard, burying even the hilt. And even then, he twisted the blade.

Daz stopped clawing. With one arm still wound round John’s neck, he pulled him close in a warped embrace. John’s teeth sank deep into the meat of John’s right shoulder with a moan. John didn’t even try to pull away. He leant into the bite instead. The room was eerily silent. John’s hands were filled with gore, and his breath was arrested in his chest; Daz’s throat was stopped up with blood.

Then Daz’s jaw relaxed. His head fell back against the bed, and John slowly lifted his head. They stared at one another, victor and defeated, but one felt no triumph, and the other felt nothing at all. With excruciating slowness, John withdrew the blade from its bloody sheath of flesh. He turned it around in his hand. Eyes still locked together, John placed steel edge to Darren Hirsh’s throat, and pulled.

***

Julian Smalls got stuck in the snow turning right onto Baker Street from Marylebone Road. The taxi slid to the kerb and wouldn’t move.

‘I’m so sorry, Mr Holmes,’ said Smalls as he spun the tyres and tried to get out. He had felt Sherlock’s panic and was now himself infused with it. ‘She won’t move!’

But Sherlock was already halfway out the door. ‘Thank you, thank you,’ he said, and he stumbled out into the storm.

He ran. With fractured ankle and brain shrieking like a machine whirring and about to break, he ran through the snow and ice, and as he approached 221B, he squinted through the storm and saw the brake lights of a black transit van matching Karim Niazi’s description, parked just outside the flat. Suddenly, the lights dimmed, and the van began to move.

‘No! No!’ he shouted. He ran faster, screamed louder, but the van was already disappearing beyond the snow. In that moment, his brain whitened out, and right before the door to his home, Sherlock fell, crashing forward to his face. When he came to, just seconds later, he arose on shaky arms and saw dots of blood in the snow, dripping from his own nose. He didn’t care. They had taken him. John. He was gone. She had made good on her word. He was gone.

He clutched at his chest, unable to breathe.

Sherlock, calm down. He looked around, expecting to see Lestrade suddenly near at hand.

Use your brain! Donovan shrieked at him in his head.

Think! Mycroft demanded.

And that’s when he saw the footprints not yet covered in snow, for the angle of the downfall and the position of the building had slowed the accumulation right before the door. One set of footprints, going in. None coming out.

Sherlock rose to his feet. He turned the handle on the door marked 221B—it was unlocked. And he stepped inside.

The lights were out and wouldn’t turn on. The building was silent. Leaving the door to hang open, and letting in whatever light he could, he advanced slowly toward the stair, when to his left he saw, spray painted on the wall, four words in dark paint, the aerosol container set on the floor:

Who Killed Cock Robin?

‘John!’ he cried, and he shot forward toward the stairs, huffing as he climbed, screaming John’s name.

When he entered the dark flat, he tried the lights again. Nothing. Someone had messed with the breakers. He hurried to the desk and pulled open a drawer. There, he found a silver torch, and he clicked it on and cast the beam around the room. He saw that the table had been set. Two sets of plates, glasses, and even chopsticks; John had been waiting for him to come home. But the rug was bunched on one side and a corner flipped, John’s chair had been shifted, and there were shards of glass... He followed the evidence into the kitchen and saw the broken sliding door, the cracked and shattered beakers on the floor, and the upset on the kitchen table where it was clear a body had lain. A trail of blood led him into the hallway. He burst inside his own room, shining the torch around desperately. On the floor, the broken frame and shattered glass from where his poster had hit the floor; his sock drawer hanging open; his lamp cracked beside the bed; John’s cane, broken in two; John’s shirt and vest and socks, cast to the side. And the stink of ammonia. A container rested by the door. Visions of the convent erupted in his mind, and he almost lost himself, sinking in his despair. As he approached the disturbed bed, he saw large spots of blood and in the centre of a dark circle, a thick piece of flesh. He shone the light and covered his mouth,
feeling ill: it was the end of a human tongue, chomped clean through.

But John was nowhere to be seen.

And only one set of footprints, entering the building.

Sherlock whirled around, crying out again, ‘John! John!’ He ran from the room, down the hallway, back into the sitting room, and out through the door to the landing, his eyes taking in more evidence, his brain making sense of it, putting the pieces together in a time line—attack, pursuit, attack, escape—until he found himself following the dots of blood further up to, the second storey, where John’s bedroom door stood closed.

He pounded up the steps as if his ankle had sustained no injury at all, and he heedlessly charged into the room. The beam from his torch fell at once to the bed, and there, drowning in a pool of his own dark blood, Darren Hirsch lay dying. His eyes were opened, staring at the ceiling, and he blinked slowly but did not turn to look at Sherlock. His hands were over his stomach, which appeared to be emptying of gore. The front of his shirt was saturated in blood, and when the Slash Man’s muscles shuddered, Sherlock could see even more butchered up from a wound and spill staining the sheets in a wide pool that dripped to the floor. His trousers were undone, and his penis was exposed and flushed. A deep gash crossing his throat still leaked, but his face and those eyes were as cool and unflinching as stone.

Sherlock felt frozen as he stared at the visage of a violent and agonising death, almost disbelieving the face he saw, a face he had never seen in the light, let alone the flesh. The Slash Man had long existed in his mind as a phantom, a giant of a man fit for legend and shadows, an ever-present but never material threat. Here now, broken and dying, the man was real but his blood was draining, and he was fading once again into lore. And his slayer?

The beam of the torch followed the blood trickling to the floor, the trail leading to a combat knife—his combat knife, the one given him by a soldier in another life—which lay wholly drenched in blood so that not even a sliver of steel shone through. The weapon that had felled the beast. And around the knife, prints of blood on the floorboards, streaks of red, dragged to the dark corner behind the door. He followed the path with torch and eyes.

There was John, sitting with his back to the wall, slumped in the corner, calmly watching the Slash Man die.

‘God! John! John!’

Sherlock dropped to his knees in front of John, the torchlight bouncing from battered head to bare foot. ‘My god, my god,’ he said again and again. ‘Don’t be dead. Please don’t be dead!’

John was blinking, breathing, but it was the evidences of death that registered, not life.

He was bare above the waist and his trousers were undone, broken, and fell off his hips. His shoulders sagged with bite marks and blood, and his sides appeared torn to shreds. His hands lay limp and swollen in his lap, bound together with cable, and a leather belt hung round his neck. And when Sherlock aimed the torch at John’s face to see the gag, John winced as though in slow motion and turned his head away from the light. Sherlock’s voice choked as he said again, ‘My god, my god!’

He needed to get these binds off. The imperative that had seized him in the freezer seized him now, and before all else, he had to free John from the binds. He could save him if only he could free him. After setting the torch on its end, he took John’s hands. Were they bleeding? He couldn’t tell. John’s skin was so red and wet that Sherlock couldn’t believe that the blood was not his own. Perhaps the Slash Man had slit the veins; perhaps he was bleeding out and there was no time—in this weather, no one could be able to reach them in time. He had to stop it, stop it now. But his hands were shaking so badly that they slipped over the blood-slick cord securing John’s wrists together; he could get no grip, but he tried diligently to loosen the knot, and he stained his hands red trying.

Then John, lacking all haste, pulled his hands away from Sherlock. ‘What do I do? What do I do?’ Sherlock queried in panic. John reached up and touched Sherlock’s face, directing his eyes to look at him and only him, and only when their gazes met did Sherlock still, and John indicated what he needed most. He scraped his fingers down the side of his own cheek where a lamp cord circled his head, securing a gag in his mouth. Sherlock nodded, couldn’t stop nodding, couldn’t stop shaking. He touched the cord to feel its tautness, then gently put his hands round the back of John’s head and inclined his neck forward as he felt for the knot. John’s forehead rested against his shoulder, and there he waited, patiently. But it was too dark for Sherlock to see properly, and the knot seemed too fixed. He set John’s head back to the wall and went for the knife. It felt foreign in his hand.

First he unlooped the belt from around John’s neck. In the light of the torch, he could see the terrible chafing, the bruises already forming. His imagination supplied images of what must have happened, and how often, and he had to gulp for air. Then, bracing John’s head with a hand on one side, he slipped the knife between cheek and cord, the edge of the blade angled toward the ear. He couldn’t see it away. He needed to snap it in one motion. And his hand was shaking so much. He feared to hurt John, to slice into his skin, do greater damage than that which had already been done, and so much had been done! Blood was everywhere, touched everything. Was he even alive? So calm, so still and pliant—Was Sherlock touching a corpse and just couldn’t see it? He gasped and panted. And then John touched him again, bloody fingertips against his quaking arm, the one gripping the knife. And there was steadiness in his eyes, a calm Sherlock didn’t understand but could feel. Holding his breath, he sliced the knife through the cord. It snapped and fell away.

John made a slight, almost imperceptible whimper as he tried to open his jaw wide enough to remove the gag, but he couldn’t manage it on his own. With two fingers, Sherlock reached inside John’s mouth and pulled out a pair of mated socks—his socks!—soaked in (he sniffed)—oh god—ammonia. With its removal, John turned his head, gagging and coughing and gasping. He spit,
and a red line of drool reached from his bottom lip to the floor.

‘Milk,’ said Sherlock. ‘We can dilute the poison with milk. We’ve two pints in the fridge. Ammonia is moderately basic with a pH of 11.7, so if we counteract that with something mildly acidic—and milk has a pH of 6.7—we can incite protonation, create a neutral solution, and negate the harmful effects. I can fix this, I can fix this.’

John nodded wearily as he coughed but couldn’t speak. He presented his wrists, now, and Sherlock returned to the knife and cut right through. The arms fell apart at John’s sides. Sherlock seized one hand, then the other, pushing away the blood, seeking out what was surely a gaping wound. His hands were as red as John’s.

‘I can’t find it,’ he said. ‘Need to stop the bleeding. Need to stop, stop, where is it? Where?’

‘Sherlock.’

John’s voice came as a breath.

‘I can stop the bleeding, I promise, create a tourniquet. With my socks and shoelaces— Oh god, I’m sorry. Forgive me, John. Tonight. I should not have left, not for a minute, should have been here—’

John lifted both hands to Sherlock’s face, bracing him on either side, and kept him still.

‘Do you see me?’

Sherlock blinked. Something shifted. The dark didn’t matter—those were John’s eyes. They were red and swollen and glistening with tears, but they were also bright, alert, and familiar, as John looked back at him, searching his face. One of his hands moved to Sherlock’s throat and applied gentle pressure. John was checking his pulse.

‘Do you see me, Sherlock? Can you hear me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m here.’

‘Yes.’

‘Alive.’

‘John.’

‘Say it. Please.’

‘You’re alive.’

John nodded. He smiled. But he couldn’t hold it. He dipped his head and began to cry. His hands clenched around Sherlock’s shoulders. ‘Take me out of here, Sherlock,’ he said. ‘I can’t feel my legs.’
A Few Hours Left of Midnight

MONDAY, MARCH 9, 2015

They remembered him from before as the man who haunted the halls of St Bart’s. So little time had passed, really, since they had seen him floating in a lonely haze from one end of the corridor to the other, eyes greyed and lost, and face drawn pale as sea-washed rocks. After he had gone, they thought they still saw him, sometimes, out of the corners of their eyes, an ever-present spectre of future gloom, full of sorrow and anger. But he was back now, in the flesh, a solitary figure in the lonely waiting room, elbows to knees and face in his hands, and he had never seemed less solid. The nurses of intensive care whispered to one another.

‘What happened? Why is he back?’
‘His friend was attacked again.’
‘You mean partner.’
‘Are they?’
‘Aren’t they?’
‘How bad?’
‘Not good. But the man who attacked him, the one they called the Slash Man—he’s dead.’
‘Is he!’
‘Corpse is in the mortuary.’
‘Do you know what happened?’
‘No one knows.’

Word was, whatever had happened, Dr Watson was not the only victim this time. Beside the Slash Man, another man had died that night. One of Bart’s very own mortuary attendants had been taken to A&E, a detective inspector from NSY had sustained a few nasty blows, and a female copper (some said detective, but no one was really sure) had been brought in unconscious. The police were milling about, keeping guard, waiting for evidence from labs and further instructions from above. And all the while, the man called Sherlock Holmes sat on the edge of a chair of institutional green in the shadows of a dimly lit waiting room, unmoving, unspeaking, and unapproachable.

Until someone came for him.

From the entryway, Mycroft Holmes observed his little brother. His face was buried in hands streaked red-brown from a hasty wiping. He’d not washed properly. The bandages of his right arm were soaked through red and fraying, and both hands bore deep scratches and were freshly bleeding. His hair was longer than he normally kept it and hung in limp, disarrayed curls. Both sleeves of a light blue collared shirt were rolled to the elbows, and they too were stained, as was the front of his shirt. One foot wore a medical boot, and both trouser legs were salt stained to the knees from pushing through snow. They had told him that Sherlock was not hurt, but looking at him now, Mycroft didn’t believe them.

Sherlock didn’t stir as Mycroft softly crossed the room, set aside an umbrella, and sat in the unoccupied seat beside him. There, he leant forward on his elbows, mirroring Sherlock’s pose. For a long while, there was silence. Then:

‘Sherlock.’

He received no answer, not so much as a twitch of the shoulders.

‘Sherlock, has someone seen to you?’ He tried to gentle his voice, and it sounded foreign even in his own ears, like he had never used such a voice before. Or, if he had, it was long, long ago.

Sherlock’s head moved by increments to say no.

Mycroft paused. ‘Has anyone been to talk to you?’

Again, he shook his head.

‘All right. Then let me tell you what’s going on.’ He rested to allow Sherlock an opportunity to insert an objection. He did not, only removed his hands from over his face and balled them together to cover his mouth. ‘Two men are dead. Moriarty’s men. Whatever they were sent to do last night, they failed. Do you hear me? They failed in every respect. They are dead, and your friends are alive.’

He heard Sherlock swallow before talking; it seemed a struggle. ‘They’re hurt.’

‘Yes.’ Mycroft knew that trying to disagree would get them nowhere. ‘But they will be well again.’


‘There’s no sense thinking like that. You were placed in an impossible situation. What could any man have done?’

At last Sherlock turned his head to regard his brother, as though to challenge him, but he lacked
the energy even to glare. ‘I’m not allowed to be any man.’

Mycroft let out a long, remorseful sigh and sat back, hands clasped in front of him. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘You’re not.’

‘Perhaps you should leave.’ He spoke without passion, antagonism, or conviction.

‘Perhaps I should. But I won’t.’

‘Why not?’

Mycroft spread his fingers, considering the back of his hand. They had begun to spot, as of late. They were becoming old man’s hands. ‘Do you remember,’ he asked, ‘the day I said that you and I belonged on the same side?’

‘I remember everything you ever said to me,’ he stated plainly and without conceit. Mycroft did not take it as exaggeration.

‘Ah. Well. I meant it.’ He didn’t quite know what to say next, or rather how to say what he needed to, and he almost wished for a squabble, a trivial sort of spat familiar to them both, to break out between them again and spare him the pain of this silence. But Sherlock, for once, was not inclined to speak. So Mycroft steadied himself and continued. ‘I was once determined to persuade you to align yourself with me, to trust that I knew best what you should do with your life. I didn’t understand, then, that the realignment needed to be mine. You were on the side of right because barely twenty-four hours before I said that, John Watson had entered your life. He changed everything. For you. For me, too, it would seem.’

‘I’m tired, Mycroft. I can’t think anymore. What are you saying to me?’

‘My apologies, dear brother. Crypticism has become more than habit, but second nature. What I am saying is, I’ve committed many wrongs against you. And I mean to set them right.’

‘We don’t need to talk about this.’

‘We do. Maybe not tonight. Maybe not in full. But there are things you ought to know.’ He stopped himself. There were things he needed to know, yes, but not right now. Not here, and not all at once. Pieces. ‘I don’t know if you were aware, but three days ago, the Woodhouses listed 221 for sale.’

Slowly, as if nothing more could surprise him and no more blows could shake him, Sherlock leant back. The chair groaned. ‘They can’t,’ he said without inflection. ‘The property isn’t theirs. It’s Mrs Hudson’s. She would never agree to sell.’

‘Legal or not, they listed it. For 1.7 million pounds. Three flats, fair condition, excellent location. Probably worth more than that. But, I imagine, they were keen to be rid of it.’

Sherlock closed his eyes, as if blocking out the world would change anything of its reality.

‘It sold.’

He sniffed, something of derision in him, though Mycroft doubted him capable of reaching even half the capacity of full ire. ‘Of course it did.’

‘Yesterday morning, the paperwork went through. It’s done.’

‘Someone else was certainly keen, making that kind of purchase sight unseen. Were they told it was once the residence of a psychopath? Do they know it is the scene of a slaughter?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what about all the bullet holes in the walls? Or the scorch marks on the kitchen ceiling? Or the smell we’ve never managed to scrub out of the second cupboard above the sink? Did someone tell them about any of those things?’

‘Sherlock—’

‘They should know, someone should tell them, that one has to twist and lift the door handle in the bathroom to get it to close properly. And they’ll want to replace the mirror in there—we never got around to it, you see, after John busted his hand against it. There never seemed to be any time. No time at all, and now . . . The blood in the upstairs room won’t easily come out of the floorboards, so they may as well just tear them up and start again. And the stair, the third stair rising from the landing to the first storey. It creaks a perfect D-flat when I step on it, and F-sharp when John does. I’ve been monitoring his weight by that stair, you see. It used to creak at an A-flat. But I’ll have to find other methods now, I suppose.’

‘You always did have rather curious methods.’

Sherlock didn’t respond to that. ‘Who bought it then?’

‘I did.’

It was the first thing Mycroft had said that seemed to awaken any real feeling of surprise in him. ‘You?’

Mycroft pulled an envelope from an inner pocket of his suit coat. ‘Under the name Arthur Doyle.’

‘What?’

‘I had been designing to purchase it for weeks, when I thought you would be best served by staying right where you are. Now, I’m not sure you’ll want to.’
‘No, we can’t… That is, it’s not up to me. John, he—he may never wish to set foot there again.’

‘I thought as much. The point remains, though, that the Woodhouses have no say in whatever happens to the property from now on. The deed belongs to Mr Doyle, or, if you prefer, to you.’

He passed Sherlock the envelope.

Stunned, Sherlock opened it. But inside was more than just a property deed. There was also a bank statement, a credit card, and a small, silver key, the kind suitable to opening small boxes, not full doors. ‘I don’t understand. What am I looking at?’

‘Read the name on the card and make a deduction.’

‘But he’s not real. He’s an invention.’

‘As far as the British government is concerned, he’s as real as you are. Maybe more so. Mr Arthur C Doyle has a birth certificate, a driver’s license, credit history, bank accounts, school records, and passport. Everything but a face. That key opens a safety deposit box in Sussex, should he ever need to acquire these documents.’

‘You want me to disappear.’

‘I’ve never wanted that. Not in all my life. All I mean to do is give you the option and, if taken, ease your way. Doyle is yours to do with as you will. Make of him an alias, a benefactor, a scapegoat, or let him lie. It’s your choice.’

Sherlock stared for a long while at the name on the card, running a thumb over the raised letters. In profile, his face appeared as Mycroft had often seen it as a child from across a room or while riding in the backseat of Father’s car or from within the dry larder—not the carefree, curious, and mischievous look of an as-yet uncorrupted and brilliant child discovering the world around him, but the joyless, introspective, and chastised expression of a boy being punished for something he couldn’t help. For a fleeting moment, Mycroft felt the impulse to put his arms around him and hold him, but even the urge, let alone the action, felt alien to him. Like Sherlock, he had had no models of such consolatory acts, in neither giving nor receiving. But Sherlock spared him his moment’s indecision by speaking again in a voice fighting to tamp down his emotions.

‘And John?’

Mycroft cleared his throat. ‘Mr Doyle does, of course, have an associate. A Mr Joseph B Conan, whose history is as complete as his partner’s. He’s a retired medical practitioner. One can stretch things only so far.’

Sherlock nodded, then hung his head.

‘The history of one Sherlock Holmes, I should also inform you, is gradually being erased.’

It was a contained reaction, bound to be missed by most, but Mycroft saw how the muscles in Sherlock’s back and shoulders and neck grew taut. He knew that these words were painful for him to hear, no matter how hard he tried to hide it, because once upon a time, his little brother had quite liked being Sherlock Holmes.

‘Not all of it. Not all at once. But steps are being taken to, shall we say, ameliorate a past that terribly influential persons have historically found… problematic.’

‘Birds of a feather.’

‘Precisely.’

‘So you’re deleting me.’

‘Rewriting.’

‘How?’

‘There was once a file—a box—containing certain sensitive information. Damning documentation, that is. It has been destroyed. Another has taken its place. A past rectified. As for your present, I’m working on that too. But trust me, Sherlock, the fewer details you know, the better.’

It was not only for his safety, but given their history and past accusations of Mycroft’s meddling, he doubted very much that Sherlock would appreciate knowing how he was using Lestrade to amend his past, or Molly to secure his future, or the likes of Michaela Warner and Henry Knight to alter his current reputation, and a dozen others beside. Most of them didn’t even know how they were agents in his own little web, and he intended to keep it that way.

‘Am I not to know the details of my own reconstruction?’

‘They are fine details, seemingly of little consequence. I told you before that morality is mathematics. Think of your life as a series of numerals. I’ve done little more than move a decimal point. For those who examine the books, it is not enough to arouse suspicions, though the maths now tell a different story.’

‘It won’t be enough, though, will it?’

‘On its own? No. But I’m not leaving it at that.’

‘Then what—?’

‘Do me the favour, just this once, of trusting me to take care of things.’

‘Why? Why are you doing any of it?’
He spoke quickly now, before he could justify a retreat. 'Because, little brother, your loss would break my heart. You see? When it comes to it, I'm interested only in self-preservation. I'm a very selfish man.'

Sherlock turned his head away, and Mycroft saw it for what it was: an ardent need to hide from Mycroft the emotion that crossed his face. But he wouldn't crack. Not in front of his brother. So Mycroft spared him and steered the conversation away.

'You can’t return to the flat, if you mean to at all. Not for a little while, that is. The police have taken it over, photographing every inch of floor and wall to put the story together. And then it will need to be . . . cleaned. You understand. But you needn’t worry about any of it. Others will do that for you. Meanwhile, I’m taking you home.'

'John—' He choked and stopped.

'You and John, when he’s released. You know I’ve room to spare.'

'We can’t ask . . .'

'You don’t get to. It’s done. My home is both private and safe, two things you and John need right now. This isn’t a debate.'

Weary, Sherlock nodded.

'Good. Well then. That’s settled, is it?’

'There you are!'

The Holmeses’ heads lifted together. Mycroft rose first, followed more slowly by Sherlock, whom he had to grip at the elbow to keep him upright when he nearly fell back into the chair. Lestrade strode into the room, a sorry sight with left eyelid swollen and sealed shut and a shirt and suit coat stained with blood in a wide circle. He walked straight up to Sherlock, wrapped arms around his neck, and pulled him in.

Lestrade’s embrace was fierce, but Sherlock did not return it. Observing from the outside, Mycroft could see that Sherlock’s stance was neither accepting nor resisting; he sought neither to prolong nor cut short. He just stood there until Lestrade himself felt the hollowness of his gesture, and he stepped back.

'Molly? ' Sherlock asked first.

‘Asleep. Sedated, actually. I didn’t want to leave her, but the doctors assured me she’ll be out for hours, and I needed to find you, see how everyone else was—’

'How bad?’

Lestrade’s eyes flicked to Mycroft’s, clearly trying to judge Sherlock’s state of mind by some signal from his brother. ‘Not bad. More scared than anything,’ he answered without elaboration. ‘She’s all right.’

‘She shot a man tonight.’

‘Yes . . .’

‘A man who meant to kill her.’

‘I know.’

‘She’s not all right.’

Lestrade conceded at last. ‘No, Sherlock. She’s not.’

Sherlock nodded, sharply. ‘And Donovan?’

‘All wind and piss like a tanyard cat,’ said Lestrade, forcing a grin. This time, Sherlock waited with insistent pause. ‘Right arm’s broken at the elbow. Mild concussion, whiplash, some bruising. She’s wearing a neck brace and is loopy from the pain meds, so she thinks she just had her wisdom teeth pulled. If you see her, be sure to compliment her on the ruff.’

Ignoring the attempt at levity, Sherlock pressed on. ‘And John . . . ?’

Lestrade shook his head. ‘They wouldn’t let me see him. First they had a lot of cleaning and stitching to do, and his therapist is in there right now.’

‘Dr Thompson is here?’

‘Been with him for a while, they tell me.’

‘Good. That’s . . . that’s good. He . . . he needs her.’

Again, Lestrade’s eyes met Mycroft’s before falling away. ‘And you, Sherlock?’

‘Me? Fine. I’m fine.’

‘Right, but—’

‘Look at me, I’m fine. Nothing happened to me, did it? It’s you lot, you . . . ’ He gestured vaguely at Lestrade’s obvious injuries, then let his hand fall. ‘You should get back to Molly. Asleep or not, you should be with her.’

Mycroft nodded succinctly at Lestrade; he stood just behind Sherlock and out of his line of sight.
Fortunately, Lestrade picked up on the signal and took a step back. ‘Right. I think I will do. Get some rest, eh, Sherlock? Only a few hours left of midnight, and we’ll know more in the morning. Gregson’s spearheading this one, and I’m sure he’ll have a briefing. Everything will look better in the light of day, I’m sure.’

He left, and Mycroft noted how he favoured his right side. He had probably sustained some injury to his ribs. He had questions for Greg Lestrade, and further instructions, but neither was of highest priority at the moment.

‘Come, Sherlock. There’s a room down the hall where they’ll let you sleep.’

It was the fact that Sherlock made no protest that troubled him as he followed his brother, wordlessly, from the waiting room.

***

He slept restlessly, and every time he closed his eyes he saw blood. After four hours fighting the images that intruded into his mind, signifying a horror that had not in fact transpired, he awoke to find a change of clothes folded in a chair by the door. He dressed quickly, scrubbed both face and hands at the sink, and left the bloody clothes on the floor to return to the waiting room, having received no word of John nor allowance to go see him. It was just after daybreak, and as he stepped foot past the threshold he saw Ella Thompson sitting in the chair he himself had occupied the night before, eating a yoghurt and turning the pages of an out-of-date magazine. He stopped short. When she saw him, she smiled.

‘Mr Holmes, good morning.’

He nodded reservedly. ‘Dr Thompson.’

‘Sit, please. I’ve another yoghurt, if you’d like.’ She indicated another cup on the table at her elbow. ‘Hospital food, but it’s not bad.’ For having spent the night in hospital, awake and working, she looked remarkably refreshed.

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘No, I don’t expect you are. But maybe you’ll sit with me anyway?’

After a prolonged moment of hesitation, Sherlock edged into the room and chose a far seat on the wall adjacent, creating a wide berth between them. There, he sat rigidly—straight-backed and neck taut—and stared straight ahead, expecting her to start talking, to dive straight into her questions (How did he feel, and what were his dreams like, and had he always endangered the lives of his friends, before John Watson?). But the joke was on her: He had never had any friends before John Watson.). But she did not, only kept spooning yoghurt into her mouth, one creamy dollop at a time, and idly turning pages in the magazine in her lap. The quiet was maddening.

‘Is John awake?’ he asked, hoping for affirmation and so an excuse to find his feet again.

‘Not for the last couple of hours, no,’ answered Dr Thompson. At last, she set the empty cup aside and turned over another page. ‘These places always choose the most asinine magazines, don’t they? Whatever happened to providing a daily paper? Anything more current than last December would do.’

‘I don’t read the papers,’ said Sherlock tightly.

‘No, of course you don’t. I wouldn’t either, if the press went after me the way they do you. I’m sorry for that, Mr Holmes. It must be very difficult.’

Here it came.

‘Go on. Ask, he thought, almost daring her. How much of it is true? How does it make me feel? Wouldn’t my mother be appalled? He scowled as he waited. Again, nothing.

‘Did he fall asleep on his own?’ he asked next, desperate for information.

‘Sedated,’ she said plainly. She closed the magazine and let it rest in her lap. ‘Doctors needed to get his blood pressure back down and control the pain. Last I knew, he was also being treated intravenously for the ammonia poisoning. They weren’t sure how much he consumed but suspect he was out of danger by the time paramedics got him here, owing to the milk you had him drink. They’re monitoring all vital signs closely, but, I am told, he’s doing very well.’

‘You seem to know a lot about it.’

‘I’ve been in consultation with his physicians for the past two hours.’

‘And?’ If he pressed hard enough, would she tell him anything? ‘What do they say? Will he walk again?’

She smiled kindly, though a little sadly. ‘I suspect so. He’s fine, Mr Holmes.’

‘Fine?’

‘In the comparative sense. They’ve taken scans, performed tests, given him a thorough examination. They found no breaks, no bruising on his spine, no evidence of pinched nerves in his hips or knees or ankles. There is no physiological reason for his apparent paralysis.’

Sherlock’s heart had begun pounding in earnest, and he wasn’t sure if the reaction was joy or fear. ‘Then it’s psychological. Again.’

‘Our initial assessment—mine and the doctors’, I mean—is that John is suffering from what is termed conversion disorder. Are you familiar with it?’
He was.

‘Nothing is conclusive yet, of course. Last night’s events are still too fresh, and some things are too early to tell. But we have reasonable evidence for our assessment. Would you like me to explain what may be going on with John?’

He knew this tactic, had even made use of it himself—put the client at ease by offering something they wanted anyway, make them believe they are in control of the discussion because they verbally conceded to having it. Damn, she was good. Unable to do anything else but fall into her little trap, he nodded stiffly, then said, ‘What about protecting the privacy of your patients?’

If she recognised her own words being parroted back to her, this time with a note of scorn, she let it pass. ‘For me, always a priority. Until, of course, a patient signs a form permitting me to discuss his condition with family or close friends. John asked for the form himself. You should know, your name is the only one on it.’

He didn’t quite know what to make of that. ‘Tell me about conversion disorder,’ he said.

‘It’s one form that somatic symptom disorders may take and is characterised by neurological symptoms that lack physical cause. Conversion disorder is often triggered by strong, sometimes overwhelming emotions, such as grief or fear or guilt, and other times by high-stress situations, such as abuse or trauma. More common manifestations include the loss of speech, as well as seizures, tremors, even blindness. Or, as with John, paralysis.’

‘But it’s not real.’

‘It was real to John. Last night, anyway.’

Sherlock had thought it real, too. He remembered very sharply John beseeching him to take him out of room. He had slung one of John’s arms around his neck and shoulders, bracing his feet beneath him and trying to balance with the medical boot. John hung on, and while Sherlock gripped him at the waist, he pulled them both up. At the pressure against his battered body, John cried out in pain and let out a sob against Sherlock’s neck—was it broken ribs? torn skin?—but when Sherlock made to unscrew him, to set him on the ground again and check for wounds he had overlooked, John’s grip around his neck only tightened, and through clenched teeth he said, ‘Please. Downstairs. Now.’ And with John clinging to him, half draping his back, Sherlock carried him out of the dark room, leaving the dead man in a bed of blood. John’s legs had hung limp and senseless, like dead rabbits. Sherlock’s own were clunky and unsteady as they descended the stairs, and he thought they might fold under him at any moment. When at last they reached their sitting room, Sherlock laid John on the sofa and ran to fetch milk, the emergency kit, and all the while, those legs never moved; not a muscle twitched. Twenty-three minutes later, the police and paramedics finally arrived.

‘You know well enough that this was not John’s first traumatic experience,’ Dr Thompson continued. ‘He’s been suffering post-traumatic stress at varying levels of intensity for the greater portion of his life, probably beginning with the death of his mother when he was still a child. He was never diagnosed, never even saw a therapist to help him cope, and anyway the disorder was little understood back then, and more commonly associated with war veterans anyway, which he was to become. His experiences in Afghanistan compounded a condition he was already battling. Last October intensified his symptoms drastically.’

‘But he’s been improving,’ Sherlock insisted. ‘Little things have been getting better. We’ve been working on it. The nightmares haven’t gone away, but they’re less frequent, and his appetite was returning. I was hoping . . . ’ He had to stop and recompose. ‘After last night, it’ll be like none of that progress even happened. Won’t it.’

For the first time, she leant toward him, elbows on knees. ‘Mr Holmes. A few weeks ago, I was called in after John was attacked on the railroad tracks. That night, he was catatonic. His encounter deeply rattled him, leaving him in a prolonged state of mental distress and renewed depression. Though he exhibited some signs of regression, one of the things that bothered him most was that he had frozen in a moment he believed he should have fought. Last night, he did. Despite the fear and pain, he fought for his life. A regressed subject would not have been able to do what he did. The John of just two or three weeks ago would likely have frozen again. But he fought. For John, that was important, no matter the outcome.’

‘No matter the outcome? He might have been raped again. He might have died.’

She nodded gravely. ‘But died fighting.’

Sherlock wanted to understand how that was better, but it almost seemed worse that, no matter the effort, fight or freeze, a bloody end was inevitable.

‘All the same, he’s struggling with what happened. He has intimated to me that he doesn’t understand why he has survived all that he has. He can’t make sense of it. Tonight, he said it again—that he doesn’t understand why he is still alive.’

‘Is he . . . suicidal?’ The word burned in his throat.

‘Oh no. Not in the least. Just, shall we say, perplexed. He has reasoned that he should have come off the worse. The fear of what his attacker had done to him before and might do again, was trying to do again, in conjunction with the physical pain and positions that recalled his suffering from before—the writer, thought Sherlock remembering that it had been his own phone charger that had bound him, the gag with his own socks, the ammonia—exacerbated the intensity of the belief that he should be seriously, detrimentally, harmed. But thing is, he wasn’t.’

‘He was.’
‘Not to the same extent as before. Mr Holmes, John was beaten pretty severely last night. I’m not saying he wasn’t. The bruising on his neck alone was enough to land him in hospital, and that is to say nothing of the contusions and welts on his back or the skin torn by his attacker’s nails and teeth. But not a bone was broken. He wasn’t stabbed. He wasn’t shot. He never lost consciousness. And he wasn’t raped. Physically speaking, things could have been far worse. Some part of him, however, is insisting that it was, which has led to psychological conflict. Amidst the confusion and hallucinations, his mind converted his fear of harm into a psychological paralysis with physical result. In layman’s terms, his compromised brain told him that he had lost both feeling and function in his legs. And where are sensations and movement processed? In the brain. It’s a convincing lie.’

‘But John knows all this now? You told him?’

‘He was asleep before we landed a diagnosis. But he suspects. That is, he knows that his mind isn’t working the way it should. He admits to being confused about which parts really happened and which did not.’

‘Does he know he killed Darren Hirsch? Does he know that man is dead?’

She took a deep breath. ‘We told him. He asked, suggesting that he wasn’t sure, and we told him. When he wakes up, however, he may need to be reminded.’

Sherlock nodded slowly, thoughtfully. Not for the first time, he tried to envisage exactly what John had gone through from the moment he realised he was under threat. His febrile imagination conjured the fear and raw panic as if it were his own; it was enough to debilitate any man. So how John had managed to surmount both in order to slay the Slash Man was a wonder to him.

‘It would be well for him,’ said Dr Thompson, her voice pulling him back before he wandered too far, ‘if you were there with him when he wakes up.’

Sherlock found himself, not in the darkened flat playing witness to a terrifying intrusion, but once again in the sterile, colourless waiting room, to see Dr Thompson inclined toward him, watching him in earnest.

‘He kept asking after you last night. Thought maybe you’d gone away, or that you’d never come home to start with. He wanted to know you were all right.’

‘Why did no one let me see him then?’

‘The primary surgeon overruled me,’ she said frankly. ‘And then they sedated him. But it might be a good idea if you are the first person he sees when he regains consciousness. He will likely be disoriented and in pain, so you should be there.’

‘What about you?’

Dr Thompson smiled but shook her head. ‘I’m not the one he calls his safety net.’

‘What’s that?’

She smiled. ‘He needs you.’

‘He doesn’t need me. I’ve been little help to him, lately. He needs his therapist, someone who actually knows how to help him.’

‘You do help him. More than anyone. You’re his touchstone to reality, Mr Holmes. You’re the one who reminds him that he’s alive, and that being alive is a good thing. But more than that, you’re the one who loves him most. Is that not true? I tell all my patients this, because it’s a fact: Doctors and therapists, they are indispensable as caregivers and counsellors. But it’s those who love us who save us in the end.’

He could think of nothing more to say. Dr Thompson straightened the magazines on the coffee table, collected her rubbish, and left him to his thoughts.

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‘Thrice dead. That’s what we used to call it in school. When your man came in, he was thrice dead.’

‘How do you mean?’ asked the chief superintendent.

Dr Torrence snapped on a pair of gloves and waved him over to the wall of silver doors. ‘I’ll show you.’ He pulled the latch on one of the doors, grabbed the end of a rolling table, and heaved.

‘Uff,’ he grunted. ‘Hefty bugger this one. 198 centimetres, top to toe. Weighed in at 115.2 kilos. They don’t make ‘em this big very often.’

Given that the autopsy had ended less than an hour ago, and that he didn’t have the manpower yet to move the cadaver into a black body bag, the corpse was dressed only in a thin white sheet. Dr Torrence lifted the top of the sheet and folded it down, exposing the upper half of the corpse of Darren Hirsch. The most obvious and eye-ensnaring wound was at the neck, but Gregson also spotted the slice in the abdomen, pink and puckered like a pair of parted lips, just above the belly button. He noticed it only because he knew where to look. The autopsy had introduced new incisions (a large t-section down the torso and across the chest), which distracted from the fatal wound.

‘So which was it?’ he asked, indicating between the slashed throat and stabbed belly. ‘Which killed him?’

‘Take your pick. Any one of them did. Or they all did together. The point is, Hirsch was a man dead three times over by the time you found him. Any one of the injuries he sustained would have killed him.’
'Three? You don’t mean the tongue.'

‘Absolutely I do.’ With gloved fingers, he tilted back the large head, pulled the corpse’s jaw down, and shone a light, the better for Gregson to see the severed, fleshy stump of a tongue. ‘See that? You can literally see the blood vessels, chomped straight through. One snap of the jaw, that’s all it took. The impact rattled a few of his teeth loose, too. You can see, right there, yeah? That one’s cracked. Quite the blow. Couldn’t have hoped for a more efficient strike—direct and devastating. I’ve never seen anything quite like it, to be honest. Granted, immediate medical attention might have saved him if this is all that had happened to him. Cauterize the wound, stop the bleeding. I doubt, however, that had he made it out of the flat, he would have had much time to get himself to A&E.’

‘Blood loss?’

‘Eventually, yes. Lots of important vessels in a human tongue. More likely, though, he would have suffocated first. Drowned in his own blood. We found quite a lot in his lungs. He was weakening fast.’

‘Before Watson even stabbed him, you mean.’

‘Yes, I’d wager so. But it was the knife to the abdomen that sealed his fate.’ He indicated now to what might have been mistaken for a surgical incision. ‘One entry wound, six-and-a-half centimetres across, fitting the fifteen-centimetre serrated blade you found at the scene. Obviously, any stab wound to the stomach is going to be very serious. But with this one—he didn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because, Mr Gregson, his internal organs have been shredded.’

‘What?’

‘Cut to ribbons. They might as well have been put in a blender. You wouldn’t think a single blade could do that kind of damage with only one entry wound, but here we are. No surgical team would have had a prayer in putting that puzzle back together. Everything within six inches of the site of penetration got a taste of that blade, and then some, and in a space as tightly packed as the abdomen, that pretty much means everything. Stomach, kidneys, intestines, bladder, pancreas, even the spleen. Direct punctures, deliberate slices. If this were your typical case of multiple stab wounds, I would estimate between twelve and fifteen. Brutal, but precise. Surgeons need cameras to be so precise. One thing is for sure: the man who felled this beast knows his anatomy. He knew exactly where everything was.’

‘Well, Watson’s a doctor, isn’t he. And a soldier.’

‘It shows. Deadly combination, that, doctor and soldier. Yeah, he knew what he was doing all right. This would have hurt like hell. Still, can’t say I’m mustering much pity for the sorry sod.’

He nodded at the corpse. ‘I’ve been primary pathologist on all the people he’s landed in here. If you ask me, the bloke had it coming.’

‘So if he was dying already, as Watson must have known, why slash the throat?’

‘Hard to say. Maybe to expedite the process. But then . . .’

‘But what?’

‘He could easily have gone for the carotid arteries.’ Dr Torrence now indicated where the arteries lay, just beneath the skin on either side of the neck. ‘The slice of the knife had left a line filling the space between both touching neither. ‘The trachea was sliced clean through, one drag of the blade, that’s all. It would have been easy to press a little harder, sever both arteries, or even just one or the other, bleed him out faster. But that’s not what happened.’

‘I see,’ said Gregson with a frown. ‘Still. Slashed throat. That one would have killed him, too.’

‘Oh yes. One cut, deep enough to kill, not lengthy enough to kill quickly. I’d say your man bled out for, oh, eight to ten minutes instead of two. Like I said, thrice dead. As thorough a killing as we see down here.’

‘Right. Can’t help but wonder, then, if this last bit was, strictly speaking, necessary.’ He sniffed, staring down at the defeated killer and reviewing the facts in his mind. ‘The sheer size of him, the monstrous brutality he had exhibited in the past, the disturbing obsession—his people were still cataloguing the contents of his tunnel lair. That Watson had survived long enough even to reach the knife was, quite frankly, miraculous. But survive he had, and had ensured his attacker’s demise with a thorough gutting. So why go for the throat? ‘Find anything else? Anything I ought to know?’

‘More a matter for his doctors, I suppose, but Dr Watson will want to get tested for STIs. Yellow discolouration of the eyes almost certainly suggests Hirsch was infected with a strain of hepatitis, and inflammation of the genitals may indicate chlamydia. Possible crab lice. Not at all surprising, given the unsanitary conditions he’d been dwelling in, the number of people he’s raped. Ewan Nichols tested positive for hepatitis B, likely from sharing needles, and Orrin Tippet was HIV positive. We don’t know whether Hirsch was or not—still waiting on blood analysis to come back, though even if he was infected, the blood test may come back seronegative for the antibody; on average, seroconversion takes around thirty days, and it’s been only three weeks since his contact with Tippet. But any of your boys who came in contact with the body should get checked in thirty days, and again in ninety. Awful lot of blood spilt from this one. Can’t ever be too careful. And I know Watson was bleeding a fair bit himself, too. Exchange of fluids almost certainly took place.’

Gregson shook his head pitiably. ‘Poor bastards can’t catch a break, can he? You’ll have the report
sent to my office the moment you know anything?"

'Of course.'

'Thank you.' Gregson started towards the door.

'One last thing, chief.'

He rocked back.

'The man who attacked our Molly.' He slapped a closed silver door behind him, indicating said man. 'Any word yet on who he was?'

'The boys are working on it.'

'Thing is, I’ve seen what these people do. Every one of their victims has come through here, and I’ve seen what those men and women suffered while still alive. All of it. My team and I, we’ve noted every single bruise and tear and broken bone. We’ve witnessed the evidences of his savagery. And I saw Mary Morstan’s body. The way they killed her . . . If they had killed Molly, I know how I’d feel about it, and she isn’t even family. So this? He pointed at the gaping red line in Darren Hirsh’s neck. ‘I’d say it was pretty damn necessary.’

Gregson had no response. His eyes were locked on the gash. Neither did he feel any pity. If anything, he felt that justice had been done. But he was an officer and upholder of the law, and that’s just not how things worked.

At last, he left the morgue.

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The morning following the storm saw blue skies over Britain, a rarity no matter the time of year. Snow blanketed the city, but the roads had been cleared for the morning commute as Londoners carried on with their lives, the ebb and flow of weather never a disruption, just a matter of course.

Within the intensive care unit of St Bart’s, behind a door guarded by two police officers, John Watson and Sherlock Holmes slept, one man curled on his side where the bruising was less severe, an IV running into one arm and ECGs monitoring the beat of his heart; the other lay atop the covers of the nearest bed, on his opposite side. In this way, upon waking, the first thing either of them would see was the other.

Sherlock had not meant to fall asleep, but upon entering the room and ensuring that all was as well as he could make it, he felt inexorably drawn to the bed, and upon lying down, he sank so fast that he didn’t even realize that sleep and crashed upon him like a wave. Now, he was drawn from unconsciousness by the soft sound of a plastic spoon scraping the bottom of a polystyrene bowl. He opened his eyes to see John, sitting upright in the hospital bed and scooping the last spoonfuls of soft vanilla ice cream into his mouth. Groggily, unsure whether he dreamed, he lifted his head from the pillow.

'John?'

John swallowed, took one final bite, and set the spoon and bowl down on the tray. 'Morning,' he said lightly, though his voice was a little hoarse. Then he pushed aside the swinging table and folded his hands together in his lap.

Sherlock pushed himself up and felt his head throb; he squeezed his eyes closed against it and let the pain pass. Then he rose to his feet and came nearer. Feeling ungainly and heavy-footed, he swayed and stumbled.

'Hey,' said John, more compassionately now. He reached for Sherlock’s arm, and Sherlock let himself be pulled closer to sit on the edge of the mattress. ‘You should sleep longer.’

Though sinking back into an unthinking state was greatly appealing, he shook his head dismissively and regretted the action at once. The pressure inside his skull only shifted, making his head ache all the more.

'How are you?' he asked. He was looking at the gauze pads placed strategically around John’s neck; the shiny, red, battered skin that outlined the bones of his skull; his cracked, scoured lips; and, where the hospital gown draped down one shoulder and the wires from the ECG pads stuck out, the large bandage covering the severest of the bites, as though from a ravenous animal. Sherlock tried to pull his eyes away from these things and focus on John, whom he expected to be in a state of distress, disoriented like Dr Thompson had predicted, or in unspeakable pain. But John was just sitting there, placid and alert. But when he looked into the one bloodshot eye, his own burned in response, and so he tried to focus on the other instead.

John nodded. ‘Ice cream for breakfast. Can’t complain. Hungry, to be honest, but I can’t swallow too well, so it’s water, ice cream, and jelly for me for a bit.’ He offered a close-lipped smile, and Sherlock couldn’t understand it—not just the grin, but that John had any sort of appetite. ‘Have you eaten?’

Again, Sherlock shook his head, bemused. His attention was now focused on the IV running into John’s right arm, and the plasters over the skin on his left where they had drawn blood.

‘You should eat. You look pale. Probably low blood sugar.’ When Sherlock didn’t answer, just stared at the old scars looping the outsides of John’s wrists, John put a hand on his arm and gave it a little shake. ‘Hey, Sherlock?’ Sherlock lifted his eyes. ‘You with me? What is it?’

The question felt backwards, nearly incomprehensible. Almost on impulse, because it was a question and John was asking, he opened his mouth, feeling compelled to provide some sort of response. But he didn’t know how to articulate any of what he felt, and little of what he thought. He managed two words: ‘Last night.’
'Yes?'
'I'm sorry.'
'What for?'
Sherlock blinked, stunned. Did John . . . not remember? Did he not even question why he was in hospital with new injuries that would yield new scars? Dr Thompson had said that John might need reminding, but he had expected confusion, not amnesia. 'I . . . left you. Alone. In the flat.'
'Not your fault,' said John, looking concerned. 'Police say you were tricked. That Moran’s people were watching the flat. Those texts weren’t from you. I know that now.'
He spoke so calmly. He seemed so clear-headed. There seemed to be no confusion at all.
'They didn’t tell me much else, said I could give a statement later. But I haven’t seen Lestrade at all. Where is he? Is he okay?'
Sherlock gave a noncommittal shake of his head but said, ‘Someone went after Molly. Someone was waiting for her when she got home.’
John’s eyebrows rose in concern. ‘Oh God.’
'She’s alive. She . . . shot the intruder. Right through the chest.'
'He’s dead, then.'
'Yes.'
'Who was he?'
'One of Moran’s, presumably.'
'But Molly killed him.'
'Yes.'
'Thank God. Was she hurt?’
'She’ll be okay.'
'Was that why you didn’t come home? Because you were helping Molly?’
'I . . . couldn’t help her.'
With great need to explain himself, he proceeded to tell John everything that had transpired from the moment he received the first deceitful text, how he and Lestrade and Donovan had all been fooled and driven far from the scenes of planned attacks and to the Slash Man’s hideout. But he couldn’t bring himself to voice all he had seen there, so he elided over the photos on the walls and described instead the duplicated keys, the untrustworthy locksmith, and the television set with live feed from Baker Street.
‘I saw him go into the flat. He knew I was watching, and he taunted me by waiting until I could see him put the key in the lock. And I couldn’t warn you. We couldn’t even warn the police. The calls were being intercepted, and the radio was busted in Donovan’s car. And then the weather— the snow and ice and wind and that goddamn phone call . . .’
‘Sherlock, hey, it’s okay,’ John was saying, squeezing his arm.
But Sherlock had been carrying on with barely taking a breath, and he couldn’t stop now. He needed John to know that he had done everything in his power to reach him; he wouldn’t just leave him. So he told John about the snow and the bus and the crash and leaving Donovan behind and calling Julian Smalls and coming right up to the front door of 221.
'... and there was a van, a black transit van, like the one Karim described, and it was pulling away, just as I was getting closer, and oh god, John, I thought you were in it. I thought I had come too late.’
John nodded slowly, taking in all that Sherlock was saying. ‘The getaway car, then. That’s what you saw? They were waiting for Daz to bring me out.’
'But they left. If they were still waiting, why did they leave? Even if they saw me coming, what would it matter? They could have taken me out, easily.’
'Or they thought you were bringing the police. Or they had a police radio and were listening in, or hell, they just got scared. They’d been waiting too long. Daz, he . . . whatever the plan was, he didn’t follow it. I’m sure of it.’
'What do you mean?’
'Something he said.' For the first time since Sherlock had awoken, he saw John’s eyes darken, and the line of his jaw, though black and swollen, hardened.
'What did he say?’
John’s thumb was moving absent against Sherlock’s arm, and his fingernails were sinking into his skin. He couldn’t make eye contact. ‘You can already guess, I’m sure, what he tried to . . . That is, that he meant to . . . God, you’d think saying it once, it wouldn’t be so hard the second time.’
'You don’t have to say it.’
'No, I do.' He held Sherlock’s arm even tighter as he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. ‘Daz came to the flat last night to rape me. That was his agenda, not Moran’s. *Mine first*, he said. He was determined to . . . have me. Right then. Before Moran could. But I don’t believe it was the plan.’ Sherlock placed a hand over John’s and squeezed back. ‘No. Cock Robin was the plan.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The nursery rhyme. “Who Killed Cock Robin?” It was spray painted on the wall in the entryway.’

‘I didn’t notice.’ He shook his head. ‘I’m Cock Robin, am I?’

‘In a way, I believe we both are. Irene Adler would have thought herself clever for devising the double entendre with the use of another bird, the final rhyme.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Going for the more obvious, John: The media once called you “Robin”. It’s even on your old blog. Irene would have known that. She would have thought it apropos.’

‘Hat-man and Robin.’ He laughed shortly. ‘I used to be so fond of that.’

‘Were you?’

‘Of course I was. Go on then. Tell me about the rhyme. I’m not very familiar with it. All I remember is that it’s long, and it kind of disturbed me as a kid.’

‘You know I only just learnt it myself,’ said Sherlock, but only as a disclaimer. ‘In the poem, Cock Robin is murdered by a sparrow, who readily confesses his crime in the first stanza, and a fly bears witness of the act in the second, and a fish catches the spilt blood in the third. Thereafter, all manner of birds and creatures—beetles and bulls, linnets and doves—assist in arranging and executing the funeral for Cock Robin: digging the grave, carrying the pall, tolling the bell, and so forth. The final stanza reads how all the birds mourned together the death of Cock Robin.’

‘So it’s a metaphor. The robin wasn’t friendless, and he was well cared for, even after his death.’ Sherlock shook his head, having read the poem very differently. ‘You think those creatures were his friends? Do you really believe that’s what Adler and Moran are implying? That *friends* have lifted the tragedy of this death? The sparrow is never punished for his crime. These creatures—they prepare for a funeral with *enthusiasm*. They are given their assignments to carry out with gusto, with only a fair few participating grudgingly. This rhyme is a boast: all the creatures working together in the interest of one man’s death. They are Moriarty’s network of spies and culprits. They are all participants in the death of one, even if, in the end, only one of them carried out the deed. One man to make the copy of a key, another to rig a video feed, another to spray paint black wings on the pavement. All have played their part. And but for the uncontrollable lusts of one of them, they would have succeeded. They would have taken you, John. It would have been over. Whatever Adler and Moran had planned, it was to be the capstone of their game, all of it culminating in . . .’

‘Me,’ said John. ‘My death, your demise. A coup de grâce at last.’

‘And I . . .’ Sherlock stammered and pulled away, finding his feet. ‘I almost let it happen. If I had solved it sooner, if I had only stopped them when I had the chance . . .’

‘No. No. Stop that. Come here. Sherlock.’ Sherlock stopped backing away from John’s outstretched hand, but he couldn’t come near again.

‘It’s a tie-back to the bird left in Molly’s kettle,’ he said, falling back on the only thing that ever made sense to him: not an outstretched hand, but cold facts and puzzle solving. ‘The wren with snipped wings. I told you the story, that night, of the King of the Birds. Cock Robin is believed to be a more modern, that is, an eighteenth-century retelling of an even older tale of the Hunting of the Wren, a poem about the symbolic slaughter of the King of the Birds who tricked his way into flying higher than the eagle. Just a trick. All of it, all that he accomplished, everything for which he was admired—party tricks. His whole life, a pretence, a sham. So hunt him, kill him, a just fate for a fraud of greatness. Depose the false king. Do you see, John? Cock Robin is merely symbolic of the ancient trickster wren. Hunting you for *sport* is as good as killing me in effigy. But it’s not fair. Why can’t they just leave you alone? Why don’t they just go after me?’

‘Sherlock. Please,’ said John, pleading. His arm had not fallen but remained outstretched still.

‘It won’t stop. You know it won’t. The only way I can think to save you is if we . . . John. We have to go away.’ John’s fingers curled in and his arm drooped a little.

‘We can’t stay in London. We can’t leave our front door and be safe. We’re not even safe *behind* our front door. Mrs Hudson is already gone, and Molly’s a target, and anyone who stands anywhere close to me—Lestrade, Donovan, anyone—is going to get hurt. We have to go.’

‘No. No, we can’t—’

‘Mycroft has arranged things. He has plans. He’ll provide us with the means, and new identities, and we can simply disappear.’

‘Would you stop?’ John planted two fists on either side himself and pushed into the mattress to adjust himself straighter in the bed. ‘I’m not leaving London.’
‘I’m sorry, John, I never wanted it to come to this—’

‘No, you would stop and listen to me? Silence fell between them as John breathed loudly and gathered his thoughts. At last, he raised his head and spoke. ‘Do you know why I’m sitting here, right now, talking to you? Do you know why it’s me in this hospital bed and Daz on a cold slab in the morgue, and not the other way around?’ He didn’t give Sherlock a chance to answer. ‘Two reasons, Sherlock.’ He held up a stiff forefinger. ‘One: They made a mistake. They thought Daz was one of their greatest assets. They thought him loyal to a fault, or they wouldn’t have sent him last night. But guess what? He proved himself a weak link in the chain. Well, my guess is that he isn’t the only one. Theirs is not an airtight operation. It feels that way, because since it all started we keep getting slammed again and again, but last night prove that it’s just not. We can find the other soft spots, you and me, and take them out. That’s what we were meant to do from the start.’

‘But—’

‘Not finished. Two—he held up a second finger now—he’s dead because he attacked me in my home. One. Anywhere else, he would have got the better of me, but that was my territory. However slight, and I know it was slight, I had the advantage. I know every step of that place even in the dark, so when it mattered, I knew where to run. Even if that meant I stayed ahead of him for only a second, it was a second that counted. More importantly, I knew where I had stowed a weapon. That man—he was trembling now—is dead because he attacked me on Baker Street.’

Sherlock blinked rapidly as he stared into John’s burning eyes.

‘I won’t leave,’ John said with a look of stone cold resolution. ‘I’m done taking the hit. They’ve already taken too much; they’re not taking this, too. I was born in London, and you chose it for you. We have lives here, a home, people we love. And I’ll not be chased from it. Damn it, we should fight for it, Sherlock. You know this city—it’s streets, its people, its secret places and hidden weapons—better than anyone. You see the cracks that others don’t see, the underbelly others pretend isn’t there, the utility others can’t even imagine. So here is where we make our stand. Here we hold that slight advantage. They turned London into a weapon against us; we can turn it back. This is our battlefield. We can take it back.’

Sherlock’s nails sank deep into the skin of his hand. ‘I assed to know this place, John. It’s foreign to me now, and rejects me at every turning. I don’t know if I can do this.’

‘Of course you can. We can. Only we can. No one else is suited to it.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because we’re a weapon, too: You understand the mind of a master criminal. And I know the heart of a killer.’

At the declaration, silence settled into the hospital room like a storm cloud. Sherlock felt the electricity as though it were in his veins, jolting him with each beat of his heart. He had not expected John to utter the plain truth of it, but truth it was. He had glimpsed the mind of James Moriarty and been impressed by what he had seen, more than he had been repulsed. In the beginning, it had been a fascination, even fun. But for John . . .

‘You’re a doctor.’

‘And a soldier.’ John’s stare challenged him. Again, silence. Then: ‘I’m neither.’

‘You help people.’

‘Who!’ he shouted suddenly. He could practically feel himself light up dangerously from within, and the lightning sought release, an iron rod to strike. ‘Who have I ever helped? Nobody!’

‘That’s not true.’

‘People are dead. Not only the victims of the Slash Man, of or Moran, but back further and further still. Not only men like Dr Frankland and Jeff Hope, but good people, too. Soo Lin Yao and the old blind woman and others whose names I didn’t even bother to remember, because that’s the kind of man I am! Thoughtless, careless, and those around me die. I killed my own mother, John. I carry it with me. I always have.’

John made to get out of the bed, but his movement was arrested by a lower half that remained unresponsive to his commands. And Sherlock, despising himself, was in that moment grateful for the paralysis. He didn’t want John anywhere near him. John, trapped in the bed, looked down at his deadened legs, then up again at Sherlock with red eyes brimming with tears.

‘Ah. There it is. See? I’ve seen that look before. I’ve disappointed you again. Glad to know some things never change.’ He circled menacingly to the other side of the bed, just out of reach.

‘What ever you think I am, whoever you imagine me to be, you are wrong. Not a genius. Not a hero. Barely a living man. Did you think I could change the world? The only change I have ever brought anyone is pain and destruction. And you, John, are exhibit A. Since the day you met me, you’ve been nothing more than target practice for my enemies. You’ve been kidnapped and shot at and tortured and abused. You’ve lost friends and loved ones, and here you are; back in hospital, bearing the marks of what friendship with Sherlock Holmes has cost you. They say it’s not so bad, that it could be worse, but look at you. Your face is black and blue, your neck has been wrung like a dishcloth, and you’ve legs that no cane can ever make right. You just barely escaped with that it could be worse, but look at you. Your face is black and blue, your neck has been wrung like a dishcloth, and you’ve legs that no cane can ever make right. You just barely escaped with

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There was a soft knock on the door, and Sherlock flinched before spinning toward the wall to hide his face. The blood was pounding so loudly in his ears that he almost didn’t make out the voice of the timid nurse behind him saying, ‘Sorry to pop in, but I need to change the morphone drip and
check Mr Watson’s vitals.’

‘Could you give us a moment?’ John asked desperately, unable to mask the hurt in his voice.

‘No, it’s fine,’ said Sherlock, walking to the door. ‘Do whatever you have to. Just help him.’

He couldn’t look at John again, not right now. He left the room and let the door fall closed behind him.
TUESDAY, MARCH 10, 2015

THE SLASH MAN SLAIN

Special Report by Michaela Warner

Central London – After countless weeks of living in fear of a man known on the streets only as the ‘Slash Man’, the homeless people of London, targets of a series of assaults and murders in recent months, will hopefully sleep a little easier tonight.

Darren Phillip Hirsch of Holloway, Islington, was found dead at the scene when police, responding to an emergency dispatch, arrived at 221 Baker Street, the private residence of Mr Sherlock Holmes and Dr John Watson. Hirsch died as a result of blood loss and other injuries sustained after breaking and entering the upstairs flat, apparently with the intent of harming the sole occupant, Dr Watson.

‘It’s a clear case of self-defence,’ Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade of the Metropolitan Police told The Guardian. ‘He attacked Dr Watson in his own private residence and tried to kill him, leaving Watson no choice but to protect himself by any means necessary.’

Hirsch has been directly tied to the violent deaths of six men and one woman occurring within the last nine weeks, as well as the brutal sexual assaults of at least a dozen others over the course of the last two years. Police have had a warrant out for his arrest and have been actively seeking him since last October when he was finally identified as one of Watson’s abductors and torturers, as well as one of four men culpable in the murder of Watson’s partner, Mary Morstan.

Of the four abductors, only one remains at large—Sebastian Moran, former colonel in the Royal Marines and known associate of criminal conspirator James Moriarty, who shot himself on the rooftop of St Bartholomew’s Hospital in June of 2011 after framing Sherlock Holmes for the kidnapping of the Bruhl children and other crimes. Moran’s whereabouts are currently unknown, and it is unclear whether he had any part to play in Hirsch’s presence on Baker Street Sunday night.

‘Moran continues to be our prime suspect,’ Lestrade said. ‘He should be considered extremely dangerous. Anyone with information as to his whereabouts or activities is urged to contact police immediately so that we can get this criminal off the streets and in a top security prison where he belongs.’

Meanwhile, Dr Watson remains in hospital recovering from injuries sustained during the attack. Neither he nor his partner Sherlock Holmes were available for comment.

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When John awoke, he discovered Sherlock missing. Five hours before, he had fallen asleep only after several long minutes staring at the man’s back, one bed a chasm away from the other. They had talked only briefly, once Sherlock had finally returned, some hours after his abrupt departure. It was a tense conversation in which Sherlock tried his clumsy hand at an apology and John had tried to placate him in insisting that no decisions needed to be made, not yet, maybe no time soon. But when John tried to address some of the more troubling things Sherlock had said, he could practically feel physical walls rising between them, and he backed off until they had reached an uneasy, unspoken compromise that they needn’t discuss things that had been said in a moment of emotional weakness. Then Sherlock had lain down with his back to John, and they didn’t speak again the rest of the night.

But now, barely dawn, Sherlock was gone. Gravely unsettled at seeing the empty bed and finding himself alone, John called for the two officers standing guard at the door, who said that Mr Holmes had stepped out an hour before but couldn’t answer where to. And John, suspecting it wasn’t breakfast that had called him away, begged them to find him as soon as possible while trying ardently to get himself out of the bed before a nurse discouraged him. One leg bent to his will. The other refused.

Sherlock was discovered only ten minutes later in the closed pharmacy on the ground floor, having picked the locks of both doors and cupboards. His pockets were filled with oxycodone tablets, vials of Perfalgan, and three packaged syringes. When security grabbed him to pull him out of the cupboards and haul him away, he gasped in pain, shuddered, stumbled, and upon hitting his knees, one of the men thought they heard him mutter, ‘Don’t tell Mycroft.’

He was pale as a sheet, drenched in sweat, and shaking uncontrollably. A passing doctor just arriving for his shift took one look at him and sent him immediately to the emergency department. There, a team of doctors and nurses administered a gastric lavage at once—shoving a tube down his throat, pumping everything from his stomach, and leaving it dry—only then discovering that he’d not yet taken any of the pills, nor indeed had he ingested any food at all for at least twenty-four hours.

It wasn’t until taking Sherlock’s blood pressure, drawing blood samples, and fixing him with an IV that the emergency team at last removed the medical boot and found the source of his agony and near-septic state: the ankle was grossly swollen, the size of a grapefruit and the colour of a rotting aubergine. Upon closer examination, they discovered that the bad sprain had become a lateral malleolus fracture—all the running and pounding had placed continual pressure on the fibula until, finally, it had cracked and jarred out of place. Encased in a hard plastic shell, no one had noticed, not even Sherlock in his adrenaline-fuelled madness and subsequent numbness. Eventually, though, both had subsided, and the pain—of broken bone, of spreading infection—had been a blaze.

John didn’t even see him before he was in surgery. Because of the rushed nature of the job—
given the severity of the infection and danger of giving him full anaesthesia—they applied only a local anaesthetic to numb the skin, tissue, and nerves in the ankle and foot before making the first cut. What they didn’t know was Sherlock’s full medical history, nor his high tolerance for pain medications. The anaesthetic wasn’t working. He felt everything down to the bone. But he was under conscious sedation and unable to speak or to move sufficiently to convey his suffering. They proceeded to reposition the broken jigsaw of his bones and apply an internal fixation of plate and screws to provide stability. Eventually, he passed out from the pain, and his elevated blood pressure returned to normal. The doctors figured the drugs were working.

***

Chief Superintendent Gregson unbuttoned his grey suit coat and settled himself at the table across from Molly in a private conference room of the hospital. He pulled out a digital recorder and laid it on the table.

‘How are you today, Ms Hooper?’ he asked, offering a reserved but kind smile.

‘Better. Thank you.’

She subconsciously touched the tender lump on the side of her face where she had been struck. The pain was dulled by medication, and was nothing compared to the concussion the intruder had given her with the butt of the pistol. They had shaved a portion of her head just to stitch it, and now she wore a long strip of gauze as a halo to keep the padding in place. The worst of the bruising, though, was at her hips bones, and she was grateful he couldn’t see that. Only, he had, in fact. They had taken photographs. For the report.

‘They’re treating you well, I hope.’

‘Too well, I think. I know too many people here.’

He chuckled good-naturedly. ‘Not a bad problem to have, friends. Have you been discharged?’

‘Just this morning. But I’m staying here until . . . That is, Greg and I . . . we haven’t really talked yet about what we’ll do. He’s been busy.’

‘Police have cleared out of the house by now. And we can offer you a list of security options—’

‘It’s not that. I . . . don’t think I can go back. I thought Greg and I could withstand anything, together, but— Sorry, could we not talk about this? You have questions.’

‘Of course. I won’t keep you long.’ He reached for the recorder and clicked the on button. ‘Chief Superintendent Luke Gregson of the Metropolitan Police, interviewing Molly Jane Hooper at St Bartholomew’s on this the tenth of March, two-thousand fifteen, two days following an attack at her place of residence. The time is thirteen hundred hours.’

She had already given a statement that night, while events were still fresh in her mind, wrapped in a heavy blanket and holding Greg’s hand. But it had had been brief and skeletal, and she knew she would have to give a more thorough accounting of it again, once she had had time to reflect and recall the details. So she commenced in the retelling, having spent the last thirty-six hours reliving it again and again in her mind. She tried not to think about how close she had come to being killed, or to watching Greg get murdered. But it was right there, at the forefront of her brain, just how bad things might have been.

‘I know you said the intruder didn’t say much,’ said Gregson, ‘but anything you can remember may help. Did he mention Sebastian Moran?’

‘Not that I recall.’

‘Did you get a sense of how much he knew, who he knew? For example, did he mention anyone from the Yard, like Lestrade?’

‘He knew who he was, when he came home. But nothing before then.’

‘Did he mention Sherlock Holmes?’

‘Not by name. He told me to keep quiet until “our friend” arrived. I didn’t realise until after that he meant Sherlock. I thought he might mean his own people.’

‘And was there any other reference to his people, or to a plan? Any insights into their operation?’

‘No. I’m sorry. He really didn’t say much at all.’

‘That’s all right. That’s not surprising.’

‘Did you ever find out who he was?’

‘Yes, in fact,’ said Gregson, and he pulled from his attaché case a folder, which he slid across the table to her. ‘He had a criminal record, even served time.’

‘Gerard Stephen Ashcroft. Served in the military until his discharge nine years ago. After that, he served as muscle for embezzlers in Dublin and Cardiff. Did six years of an eight-year sentence for beating a man into a coma. He was granted parole just last August. Moran’s people must have recruited him pretty quickly, it would seem. To be honest, we were a little surprised to see him carrying that weapon, as the Army wasn’t using that particular pistol at the time of his discharge. So he must have acquired it elsewhere. Moran is likely providing his people with firearms.’
At this, Molly felt the two-day constriction in her chest tighten even more, but she remained unreactive on the surface. Conflicted, she wondered if now was the time to confess. That man, Ashcroft, had not come to the house with the pistol—he had taken it off her. It was John’s service pistol, and since giving it to her for protection, his words, delivered at the conclusion of her first and only lesson, had not left her: ‘Keep the safety on,’ he had said. ‘But chances are, you’ll never have to use it. So it may be best if no one knows you even have it. Technically, I’m not even supposed to have it anymore.’

She didn’t know what kind of trouble he might find himself in, being in possession of a gun without authorisation, nor the sort of trouble she herself would be in for keeping it in the house. She had been nervous about it from the start and hadn’t told even Greg, nor had she corrected the police when they had made the assumption that the intruder had brought it with him. They had missed the gun in their search of her last flat, but it was in their custody now. Surely there were identifying markers—fingerprints or serial markers or something of the sort—linking it to John. Unless he had somehow expunged them? What use was it, now, confessing the truth? The man was dead, and by Lestrade’s pistol, not John’s. But might the misinformation in any way effect their hunt for Moran? She couldn’t imagine how, and with deep chagrin, she stayed silent. This wasn’t the only secret she was keeping from Lestrade, and it grated on her. She desperately tried to put it out of mind.

After that, Gregson’s questions were of the standard variety, and she answered them as though by rote. After half an hour, he finally turned off the recorder.

‘Thank you, Ms Hooper. We’ll let you know if there’s anything else. And I wish you a speedy recovery.’

‘I just want this all to be over.’

‘We’re doing everything we can.’

‘I know.’

In desperate need of fresh air, she pulled on her coat and left the conference room.

***

Meanwhile, Sally Donovan was still laid up in bed, but not for much longer. Her discharge would happen that afternoon, following one final evaluation, at which point her father was coming to take her home to Bradford. She had been given two weeks’ leave, something she had never taken in all her twelve years with the Met. In a way, it felt like failing.

The telly above her bed was droning on about the economy or the weather, two things she couldn’t give a rat’s arse about. Nobody was giving her much information, just the highlights, the stuff they would tell the news to make them think they had the whole story, the soft version given to victims and friends of victims to appease them in their distress. She knew that game, and she hated being on this side of it. Gregson kept telling her to take it easy, not to worry, things were being handled. Lestrade had been by twice and been frank about what he knew, but his primary concern was with Hooper, and so his stays had been brief.

Then there had been Sherlock, who seemed to know even less than she did, probably for the first time during the whole of their acquaintance. Yesterday’s had been an unexpected and slightly uncomfortable visit, and not only because he was calling on her in hospital. He seemed . . . off, somehow, in a way she couldn’t quite put her finger on. He had asked concernedly after her condition and wasn’t satisfied until he had looked at her medical chart for himself. Then he had launched into a rapid and confusing array of statistics about everything from vehicular collisions to broken elbow recovery times and reasons most people didn’t take whiplash seriously enough. It was like glancing at a page in the encyclopaedia and being expected to digest all of the information in a nanosecond. He then terminated with a rushed apology, rocking off his right heel as if he kept stepping on a tack and staring out the window as he expressed how he had been wrong to insist on speed in such treacherous conditions, and to take from her the stun gun, and to mock her hatless head.

Before she could tell him to shut up and not fret over any of it, he left as abruptly as he had come.

Now, as she lay crossly in the bed flipping channels, someone else showed up whom she wasn’t expecting, announcing himself with a soft tap on the door before pulling the handle and letting the door swing in.

‘Awake?’

John Watson peeked in from the hallway, halfway down the door frame to where he should have appeared, and when he saw that her eyes were open, he wheeled himself into the room.

‘They weren’t kidding about the legs then,’ she said. She decided not to comment on the face, which looked beat to hell, or the neck; he wore bandages like a winter scarf. ‘How bad is it?’

‘Oh, they’re fine,’ said John with a small, unperturbed grin. ‘Woke up this morning and I could do this.’ ‘As if it weighed a hundred pounds, he slowly lifted his right leg from the footrest of the wheelchair and flexed it at the ankle, wincing and gripping the armrests. ‘Couldn’t do it yesterday,’ he said, breath tight, and he exhaled loudly as he rested it again. ‘The real mess is right up here.’ He tapped the side of his head. The smile seemed painted on now.

‘More of the trick cyclist for you, then, is it?’

He took her candour in stride, almost seemed to appreciate it, in fact. ‘Can’t imagine a day when I won’t need that anymore.’

‘If it’s working so well for you, you might want to recommend it to your pal Holmes. I would’ve done myself, had he let me get a word in edgewise. Motor-mouth, that one.’
‘Has he been here?’ asked John, a new light of interest in his eyes.

‘Just the once. Yesterday. Wanted to see my chart.’ She snorted but it dissolved into laughter, and she ended up shaking her head. ‘That’s just like him though, isn’t it? Give him data or give him death. I shouldn’t laugh. He . . . he’s not doing so well, is he?’

‘Had surgery this morning.’

‘Did he? Why?’

‘Ankle. He did a number on it, running about.’

She winced in unexpected sympathy. ‘And the rest of him?’

John shook his head no, but his lips didn’t even part. Clearly, this was a private matter, and Sally Donovan was not one to discuss it with. She respected that.

‘I see you’re not wearing the neck brace,’ said John, moving the conversation away from Sherlock.

‘It was mostly precautionary, they tell me.’ She rubbed the back of her neck and shoulders with the hand of her good arm. ‘Feels muscle-sore, but they have me on relaxants. And a cocktail of other things.’

‘Do you mind?’ He indicated the chart in the cubby at the foot of her bed.

‘Have at it, doc.’

He pulled the clipboard and flipped the first page, his eyes scanning her medical history and current condition. Her x-rays were also in a folder clipped to the back, and he pulled those out, too, and held them to the light coming in through the window, resting the clipboard in his lap. Looking at her broken elbow, he asked, ‘Pretty clean break. That’s fortunate. No need for an arteriogram, I take it?’

‘A what?’

‘Test that helps doctors determine whether the break also severed the artery running right along the elbow.’ He drew a finger up his own arm along the elbow, demonstrating. ‘Needs surgery to repair it. But looks like you avoided that. Fingers cold or numb? Can you grip a pen?’

‘Like a pro,’ she said, flexing the fingers sticking out from the plaster.

‘And how long did they say you would have to wear the plaster cast?’

‘Six to eight weeks,’ she said with a scowl.

‘Any residual effects from the concussion?’ he asked, looking at the second x-ray. ‘Blurred vision, nausea, that sort of thing?’

‘Right as rain. I have headaches, but they tell me that’s probably the whiplash.’

‘Then they’re probably also telling you to note any dizziness or difficulty speaking, yeah, that would suggest otherwise? Or numbing or weakening in the limbs?’

She couldn’t help but snigger, but she grew serious again almost at once. ‘Why are you really here?’

He closed up the folder, replaced it under the clip, and slid it back in the cubby. ‘To thank you.’

‘For sliding my car into the front end of a moving bus and nearly killing us both? No gratitude required.’

‘For being an ally. We haven’t had many of those since his return, but you’ve been one of them. We . . . weren’t expecting that.’

She picked at a bit of fluff on her hospital blanket. ‘I’ve only been doing my job, Dr Watson. No need to thank me for that.’

‘Yeah, well. Your mates haven’t exactly been doing theirs. So it’s commendable. And it means something to us. Sherlock came to see you because he had to know you were all right. And while he may never have the grace enough to say a proper thank you, I wanted to make sure it was said. I also wanted to say, I’m sorry you got hurt.’

‘Says the man in the wheelchair.’ But her lips quirked up, and he nodded, understanding. ‘Do you ever regret it? Taking up with him in the first place, I mean. After all that’s happened . . .’

The look on his face was unreadable—not quite offended, not exactly upset, but she instantly wished she could recall the question all the same. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘Over the line.’

‘It’s a fair question,’ he murmured.

But at that moment, a crowd of loud voices and laughter from far down the hallway drew nearer, and the noise pressed through the open doorway. ‘Shit,’ said Donovan. ‘That’ll be the boys. Annoying buggers, the lot. Hey, you may not want—’

‘I’ll just roll myself out then, shall I?’ John said, another close-lipped smile touching his otherwise battered face, but she could tell how little he fancied a run-in with even off-duty coppers.

‘Yeah, you might want to. It’s about to get stuffy in here.’
John gripped the wheels and manoeuvred himself toward the door as easily as if he’d been in the chair for weeks already. She supposed that spoke to his uncanny and well-practised adaptability to hard times and frequent setbacks.

‘Watson.’

He looked back.

‘Do you remember what I told you, early on—about finding yourself a hobby?’

With undisguised wariness, he nodded.

‘Right. Well.’ She sighed and leant her head back into the pillow. ‘I don’t think he’d take to fishing. Do you?’

He dropped his chin, a little chuckle finding its way out. ‘No, I don’t.’

‘Best keep at it, then. The pair of you.’

He gave her a nod. ‘Cheers, Sally.’

‘John.’

***

Lestrade as near as bolted into the room, startling Molly from where she sat in a chair lacing her shoes.

‘I’m selling the house,’ he announced.

‘What?’

‘Consider it done. I’ve just talked to an estate agent, and it’ll be on listings by tomorrow morning.’

‘Greg, I—’ She stood up, shoes still unlaced. ‘What’s this about?’

‘I can get one of the boys to pack us a couple of bags, and I’ll hire cleaners and a moving crew and sell off all the furniture. We’ll start fresh, from the ground up. Just tell me where you want to go, and we’ll go.’

‘But . . . ’ She was flabbergasted. ‘But it’s your home. I can’t ask you to leave your home.’

He bared his hands to her. ‘I don’t want it. I never wanted it. I bought it only because Angela wanted it. If I’d had my way, we would have lived closer to the Yard and save me the commute, but she always hated the inner city, said she wanted more space, even though she never wanted kids, so we moved, but that’s not even the point, none of that matters, because I’m selling it.’

‘For . . . me?’

‘Molly—’

She frowned and said, ‘What is it you want?’

‘I just said—’

‘That you moved to accommodate your wife. And you’ll move again to accommodate me.’

‘No.’ He stepped closer, ran his hand down her arms, shoulder to elbow. ‘To benefit us both. This.’ He squeezed her arms. ‘What we have together, what Angela and I never came close to having. new. If I’d had my way, we would have lived closer to the Yard and save me the commute, but she always hated the inner city, said she wanted more space, even though she never wanted kids, so we moved, but that’s not even the point, none of that matters, because I’m selling it.’

‘For . . . me?’

‘Molly—’

She frowned and said, ‘What is it you want?’

‘I just said—’

‘That you moved to accommodate your wife. And you’ll move again to accommodate me.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of how desperately I’m in love with you. Sometimes I can barely breathe.’

With both hands now, she pulled his face to hers, then flung arms around his neck as she kissed him fiercely. His hands dropped to her waist and wrapped her tightly against him. His body was warm and solid, and in that moment, she forgot all her pains, all her fears, and allowed herself to be comforted and in love.

‘Promise me . . . ’ she began in a whisper, when their lips had parted and she had space enough to draw breath.

‘Everything,’ he said. He placed his cheek against hers and stroked her back.

‘Promise me, Greg, that this is real. Promise me that no matter what happens—her fingers curled around the back of his neck—we’ll make it through alive. We have to, we have to. If he had killed you—’

He pulled back gently and took her face in his hands. ‘I failed you Sunday night. I shouldn’t have
He pulled back gently and took her face in his hands. ‘I failed you Sunday night. I shouldn’t have let them get anywhere near you. But things are going to be different. We’re going to get these people, Molly, and I will protect you. I promise.’

But she shook her head. ‘That means nothing if you’re not alive and well by my side.’

‘Then I promise that too.’ He grinned at her and kissed her on the brow, just below her bandages. ‘You’ll see. This will all be over soon, and then you and I can get on with being . . . you know. You and I.’

She smiled shyly back. ‘I’ll hold you to it, you know.’

‘I’m counting on it.’

They had brought blue, black, and yellow balloons, a whole case of Jammie Dodgers (on the belief that they were her favourite because one of the boys had once seen her eat one . . . once), and a small, white, stuffed bear with a red cross painted across his belly. The card was signed by as many people down at the Yard as could fit a signature around the words Don’t get down—Get well, and the front cover showcased a kitten crawling over the lip of a stone well. Donovan couldn’t imagine a more revolting card.

For twenty minutes, her fellow officers moved around her hospital bed. They played with her remote controls (telly and bed alike), teased her that she looked better with the ruff, mocked her two-days untamed hair by wondering how many plasters and pills and needles had disappeared into it, carried on about football and pub quizzes, and declared that the world must be coming to an end because Sally Donovan was on sick leave. Only Dryers, trying to remain inconspicuous in the back of the bunch, seemed uninterested in the horseplay, and he propped himself against the wall, staring out the window if not at his shoes. She bore it all as long as he could, until one of the officers said, ‘And all for nothing, eh, Donovan? Watson didn’t need Holmes to save him after all, and you’re the one who winds up in hospital. Fuck that. Should be his sorry arse in the bed, am I right?’

‘All right, you lot. Get out,’ she said tiredly.

‘Whoa, girl, it was a joke!’

‘Not even in the mood, Rossi. Out. If I see your ugly mugs again before my two weeks are up, I might just punch them. Until then, out, you clods.’

‘All right, boys, we’ve overstayed our welcome,’ said Pratt, clapping two men on the shoulders and steering them to the door.

They bid her farewell, laughing as they went and landing two or three more verbal spars, and filed out one by one. At the end of the queue was Thomas Dryers.

‘Oi,’ she said as his toe scraped the threshold. ‘Not you.’

He froze, his back to her, and when the last man was out of sight, he backing up and into the room, closing the door softly. When he turned around, his head was lowered demurely, a strand of hair falling into his eyes, and he looked up at her through long lashes. ‘Sergeant,’ he said.

She adjusted herself in the bed, a tricky feat given she had only one good arm. But she was determined to sit as tall as possible.

‘The woman on dispatch,’ she said. ‘The one not putting my calls through. Gregson said she’d been arrested.’

Recognising this was a business meeting, of sorts, he nodded, with a casual flick of his head to toss the fringe from his eyes, then stood straighter. ‘She’s been officially charged with conspiracy and hindering police. If more comes out, there may be others.’

‘Is she talking, then?’

He shrugged. ‘I’m but a lowly constable, hardly a member of the super-secret inner ring. But rumour has it that she doesn’t know much of anything. Paid off, apparently, to misdirect calls from either you or Lestrade. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of twenty thousand pounds.’

‘Paid by who?’

‘Claims she doesn’t know.’

‘Damn.’

‘Yeah.’

Silence fell between them as Donovan racked her brain for more questions to ask. Just seconds before, she had had an entire list of them, she’d been absolutely craving information, but of a sudden she couldn’t recall a single one. Must be the drugs, she reasoned.

‘Is that really what you wanted to ask me?’ said Dryers, quirking an eyebrow.

‘Of course,’ she snapped. ‘What else?’

‘Look, I get it. I do. You’re miserable at this flirting lark—as her jaw dropped open in offence—but the door’s closed and it’s just me and you. I won’t poke fun.’ He made a welcoming gesture. ‘Have at it.’

‘That is not what this is about.’

‘Oh? Oh. So this is an apology. Okay, then, I’ll have that, too.’ And he held his hands behind his
back and raised his chin, as if waiting to be socked in the jaw.

‘You’re a right berk, you know that?’ she growled, an insult met only with a grin, and she sighed. ‘Fine. Look. You want me to say it, I’ll say it. I was wrong. I followed the evidence, and I made a false accusation. It’s not the first time I’ve been wrong on something like that. Just consider yourself lucky that you got only half a week of house arrest and not three years of exile. Happy now?’

‘Make it up to me?’

She narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to push her too far. ‘How?’

‘Nothing . . . disreputable. Nothing outside the realm of what you were angling for to start with. Let me take you out.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Dinner. And none of this corner-fish-and-chips stuff. A real and proper meal. Fine dining, you know? You, me, and a bottle of red wine.’

Her stomach did something funny, and she felt her skin warm. Traitorous corpus.

‘No.’

‘Seriously, Donovan, what’s a man got to do—!’

‘That’s not how this works, Tom. What kind of woman do you take me for? I accused you of subterfuge and duplicity, forced you to spend four days in an ankle monitor on fraudulent sick leave, and bullied you into lying to your superiors.’

‘Well, shit, when you put it that way—’

‘When I do that to a man, I take him to dinner. Friday next, seven o’clock, I’ll meet you at the Murano. Wear a tie.’ He’d gone slack-jawed and saucer-eyed. She relented a little. ‘I’ll let you choose the wine.’

To her astonishment, his eyes danced, and he seemed to be working very hard to restrain his smile. ‘Now then. That wasn’t so hard, was it?’

‘Get out, constable.’

‘Sergeant.’

He bowed himself out.

***

By end of day, Lestrade and Molly had relocated to an undisclosed hotel outside the city and Donovan was driving north with her father to her hometown of Bradford. Sherlock had been left in post-op: although his ankle surgery had been minimally invasive and had gone well, his blood tests had revealed signs of dehydration, high white blood cell count, increased cortisol, and other stress indicators, and the doctors agreed that he should be monitored closely overnight. He was accompanied, during those solemn hours, by Mycroft.

That night, John was left on his own, to consider all that had transpired and to fret over his uncooperative legs and Sherlock’s disconcerting state. But he wasn’t cut off completely. He and Sherlock were given regular updates on the other via a nurse named Heather, whom they employed as their personal messenger pigeon.

Next day, early in the morning, John was awoken by an email alert on his phone. He received so few emails, and none of them welcome, that the noise startled him into full consciousness, and as he reached for his mobile, he felt himself tensing with anticipated dread. But upon opening his inbox, he saw that the sender was neither S. Hillock nor K. Riley, but H. Knight. And the subject line read ‘To Dr Watson, from an old friend’.

Less than an hour later, Sherlock returned to his room to find John upright in the wheelchair, seated beside the window and tapping away on his phone. He put it aside as Sherlock hobbled nearer on crutches he was clearly ill adept at utilising. His right leg was casted from foot to mid-calf, and he crooked his knee to keep it from dragging on the floor.

‘Suppose I shouldn’t have balked at the cane,’ he said.

John grinned up at him, a gesture restraining the ache he felt. Mask to mask, then. ‘Should get yourself a nice set of wheels,’ he said, rummaging a hand along the curved rubber as if it were part of a luxury car. ‘Go on then. Get off your feet. Stay a while.’

Sherlock set aside one of the crutches, dragged a chair, and plopped into it. Then, before John could initiate any particular threads of conversation, he pulled from his hospital-issued pyjama trousers a deck of playing cards and tossed them to John. ‘Shuffle and deal,’ he said.

In total, they spent five days in hospital, whiling away the hours playing gin andummy, and when they tired of that, John taught Sherlock Texas Hold’em (using ice lolly sticks and plastic spoons as chips) and Sherlock taught John All Fours. Midday, Sherlock usually fell aslepp while John watched daytime telly; and morning and afternoon, John disappeared for two hours at a time to meet with his therapists—Dr Thompson or Dr Harper—to straighten out both mind and legs. When they were together, though, they didn’t talk about Darren Hirsch or Sebastian Moran; they avoided the matter of 221B; they ignored the news and the papers and the world transpiring outside of Bart’s; and the two times John gently tried to initiate discussion about things that had been said, Sherlock deftly sidestepped and distracted, and so they didn’t talk about that either. Nothing, neither past mistakes nor future concerns, had place in the hospital room they shared. It
was a sanctuary, of sorts, in which their only cares were for their immediate hurts and the things that couldn’t wait for tomorrow. It would come to an end—they both knew it. But for now, they would exist quietly while the outside world carried on without them.

**Friday, March 13, 2015**

Following three full days of intensive therapy and fuelled by sheer willpower, John was walking as well as he had before the attack, the minor limp from the months-old bullet wound now a familiar feature to his gait. The hospital provided him with a new aluminium cane, which he resignedly accepted.

They were jointly discharged Friday morning, but they didn’t return to 221B. According to Mycroft, who was sceptical but silent about their decision to remain in residence in London, it was still being ‘cleaned and repaired’, and it would be another few days before it was ready for them. They were invited, instead, into Mycroft’s penthouse, a high-rise in the city to which John had never been before. Though its location was logically situated on the stretch between Hyde Park and Home Office, he couldn’t help but be surprised by just how accessible it was from Baker Street; he even thought he could see his patch of roof from one of Mycroft’s large windows, a mile and a half away. For some reason, he had always imagined Mycroft’s place—no that he ever really imagined it—as being so much farther away, remote and mysterious, not in the heart of London where he and Sherlock, too, existed.

The top floor of an affluent high-rise, Mycroft’s flat could hardly be called a flat. It was spacious and expansive, comprising two storeys and nine rooms, each immaculately furnished with Mycroft’s minimalistic but expensive tastes, a contemporary blend of modern man and turn-of-the-century politician that spoke both utility and extravagance in sterile blacks and whites, woods and silvers, and unspoken sovereignty in a palace of onyx and alabaster, chrome and glass. But despite their welcome to make themselves at home, John could scarcely sit on a wooden stool without feeling like he was violating the boundaries imposed by an invisible velvet rope. It was all the things 221B wasn’t: tidy and uncluttered, spacious and untouched.

By the time they arrived, Mycroft had already dismissed the cook for a five-day leave, and the housekeeper for the same, and he cancelled his sessions with his personal trainer until April. But he kept his chauffeur, now fully recovered from his October injuries, on call, and he brought in his private barber for one night; and for the first time in many weeks, Sherlock and John both received haircuts, as well as a good shave. Clothing and toiletries had been brought from Baker Street, and Sherlock and John were each given their own bedrooms, which were en suite and as lavishly furnished as the rest of the penthouse. To these they retired early that first night, shortly after sundown, and the quiet that already occupied the vast apartments settled into perfect stillness.

But Mycroft could not sleep. Sherlock was under his roof again, for the first time in nearly thirteen years, and as ever, it was because he was in trouble. There had never been such trouble as this, however. Mind whirring and whistling with schemes and all the pieces of his increasingly complex puzzle, Mycroft knew he was not one for sleep anytime soon. He arose, slipped into his dressing gown and slippers, and left his bedroom for the library, where he would pour himself a brandy, sit, and think until morning.

A soft light coming from the front lounge deterred him, however, and that’s when he found John, reclined on the sofa, hands laced together across his middle as he stared up at the ceiling.

‘Trouble sleeping, Dr Watson?’ he inquired.

John started and shot up from the couch, wincing at his pains from a not-quite-healed body, and Mycroft regretted not announcing himself with heavier footfalls. ‘Apologies,’ he said.

‘No, I just . . .’ John moved his legs off the sofa and sat on its edge. His eyes marked the front door, and then Mycroft realised how John, in a strange environment, one he didn’t entirely trust, had deliberately left the comfort of his private bedroom to position himself as close to the most obvious point of entry as possible. First line of defence. Ever the soldier. Mycroft also noticed the boning knife resting on the side table nearest John’s head, evidently nicked from his kitchen.

‘Accommodations aren’t what you’re used to,’ Mycroft said, sparing him from lying about why he was really there.

‘I’m just . . . accustomed to sofas, I guess.’

Not a lie, just an excuse. John’s arms braced him on either side, and he looked awkwardly to the side, his face turned from the single lamp he had illuminated.

‘I’ll not disturb you further,’ said Mycroft. He turned about, intending to continue on to the library, where he would pour himself a brandy, sit, and think until morning.

‘Mycroft.’

He paused and turned back.

‘Sherlock.’ A long pause. ‘Something he said, a few days ago. It’s been bothering me. I thought you might know . . .’

It was the first time in a very long time that John had voluntarily begun a conversation with him. Mycroft stepped further into the room and settled himself into a leather armchair, waiting for John to continue.

‘He said he killed his mother.’ John looked at him directly now, sadness on his face. Mycroft wished he wouldn’t. He was not well equipped at managing sad people, especially when their mood seemed but a reflection of his own. ‘Why would he say that?’

Mycroft closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He rubbed a spot at his temple, worrying away what felt like an ancient throbbing headache.
'How did she die?'

‘That depends on who you ask, I suppose,‘ he said wearily, recalling with sharpness the day, so many years ago now, when he’d received the phone call that his mother was dead and Sherlock had been arrested. ‘A coroner’s answer: drug overdose. Zolpidem, to be exact, mixed with red wine. The psychologist’s answer: depression—it’s what drove her to it. And the causal philosopher would say: Sherlock.’

John frowned deeply.

‘I did tell you he had the mind of a philosopher,‘ said Mycroft softly.

‘But—‘

‘The short story is, Sherlock was not an easy child. I doubt very much he has reminisced fondly on life and growing up in the Holmes household.‘

‘He doesn’t reminisce at all.‘

‘No, he wouldn’t:‘ He sighed. ‘Like I said, he was an unusual sort. Brilliant, even as a young boy, but odd. A challenge, we’d say. Mummy, she never learnt to handle him. Father never tried. And as you know, I was the rubbish big brother. Until you came along, Dr Watson, there wasn’t a single individual who really tolerated him, or cared for him as he deserved.‘

John shook his head, and his shoulders sagged.

‘It’s my fault, I’m afraid, that Sherlock even had cause to accept the blame for her death. It wasn’t getting arrested and interrogated by suspicious policemen who assumed he had poisoned his own mother for the insurance money. It wasn’t a misguided conviction that he could have stopped her. No. It was me, sending my unwell brother to an unwell mother, both depressed, both chemically dependent, and thinking they would sort each other out. He thinks she died simply because he was there, that he was a poison worse than zolpidem. And he’s never forgiven himself for being . . . the person he is.’

‘He said—‘ John’s voice caught, and he cleared his throat so he could continue. ‘He said he carries it with him.‘

‘Carries what?‘

‘Death.‘

Mycroft, whose eidetic memory was just as sharp as his little brother’s, remembered the four-year-old child, asleep in the coffin. He wished he had gone straight for the brandy.

‘I need to know one thing, Mycroft,‘ said John. ‘Just one.‘

‘Ask.‘

‘Do you care for him? As he deserves?‘

Mycroft regarded the good doctor carefully before speaking. He slowly lowered his arm to rest against the cool leather. ‘If Sherlock took after anyone in the family, it was Mummy. They both had a hard edge, but the softer features were always there, the parts that wound. I had the greater misfortune of replicating our father. Like he was, I am cold, distant, and prefer quiet and solitude to almost all forms of company. I know this about myself. But in one regard, Father and I are on complete opposite ends of a spectrum.‘

‘In what respect?‘

‘From the time Sherlock was a very young child, that man was ashamed of him. He didn’t love him. He didn’t give fig for him. And he never once lifted a finger to save him. In that respect, Dr Watson.’

He rose to his feet, bid John goodnight, and retreated at last to the sanctuary of his library.

Monday, March 16, 2015

The town car idled on the kerb behind them, the engine still running. The pavement was cleared of snow, and what had not been shovelled was melting fast. Sherlock stood in front of 221B, his weight resting on the crutches and knee bent. At his side, John seemed barely to have need of his cane, but he carried it with him all the same.

‘A few updates, as it were,‘ said Mycroft, stepping to the door. ‘The first being this.‘ He indicated the new buzzer. ‘The camera has a 150-degree range of sight standing still and can be operated to shift and show you 180 degrees, giving you optimal view of both ends of the street from the comfort of your flat. Night-vision is automatically triggered at sunset or when registering dark daytime conditions. A display is set up in five locations—sitting room, kitchen, both bedrooms, and even the bathroom—so you can monitor street activity from any room in the flat. This camera is tamper-proof and set behind plate-glass so it can’t be broken or cracked. If darkened in any way—black paint, a thumb pressed to the lens, whatever—an alert sounds after five seconds.‘

‘Sounds pricey,‘ said John.

‘Is it?‘ Mycroft asked without concern. ‘Now. Your entry into the flat is now keyless.‘ He indicated a pad at the side of the door. ‘Three modes of entry: first, thumb print. This will register only the thumbprints of you two and your landlady. Others may be added, but I do not recommend it. Once you have swiped your thumb, you speak the password, which you will determine between yourselves. As long as you are within one metre of the door, your voice will register; it will recognise the password you have chosen and verify your identity through voice recognition, the latest in biometrics software. I recommend, however, that you change the
password regularly. You may also teach the software to recognise an alert or decoy password or stress indicators in your voice that automatically notify police or each other. Shall we enter? Dr Watson, if you would do the honours? The temporary password is Beresford. It will expire by end of day.

Sherlock watched with reserved interest as John stepped up to the door, slid his thumb over the reader, and said aloud, ‘Beresford.’ Then he heard a soft hum and two distinct clicks as locks were disabled, and they walked inside.

‘221A has all the same security features as your own flat,’ Mycroft said, following them inside and closing the door behind him; it locked itself automatically. ‘And 221C has been converted into a weapons bunker and veritable war room.’

‘What’s that?’ said John.

‘First things first, Dr Watson. Shall we go upstairs?’

As they ascended, Mycroft took Sherlock’s crutches from him while his little brother hopped up the stairs on his one good leg, bracing himself on the walls and bannisters. Between hops, he said to Mycroft, ‘Who did you—?’

‘All private contractors, none of them working on the same projects, and all under my direct supervision. Blueprints, too, are in my possession, which I will happily turn over to you, should you require them.’

‘Right.’

They entered the flat, and Mycroft showed them the lock features on the door, which he assured them could be found on all doors. He showed them, too, how to operate the display screens, revealing the view of the street, and how to buzz someone up. Then he walked over to the large windows, the boards now gone and curtains parted, and light streamed through to brighten the whole room. Mycroft rapped roughly on the glass. ‘Bulletproof and grenade resistant. With the added feature of one-way reflective transparency. You can see out, but no one can see in. In summer or as needed, they can be opened, shut, and locked by voice command.’

John snorted, but he was clearly impressed. ‘Do they play music, too?’

‘No, but they will tell you the current weather at a glance.’

John smiled wryly.

‘One more thing. Dr Watson, if you would lead the way to your bedroom.’

They ascended once again, and Sherlock held his breath as they drew nearer the room where Darren Hirsch had eight days ago met his bloody end. John, he saw, entered the room straight backed and chin raised. But his feet stilled, and Sherlock heard him utter an awed, ‘Oh.’

Coming up behind him, Sherlock saw what had given John pause. The room was virtually unrecognisable. The floorboards were new, of oak, it appeared, and orientated in the opposite direction to what they had been before. The walls were painted and one was papered, casting the room in slate-greens and greys and a rich dark brown. A new fixture hung from the ceiling, and two shaded lamps stood on either side of a new bed, his single mattress having been replaced with a king. In fact, all the furniture—what few and simple items they had been—were replaced and rearranged. The space was small but comfortable.

‘I believe this was one of Dr Thompson’s recommendations,’ said Mycroft, ‘that your bedroom resemble the last one as little as possible.’

Nonplussed, John merely nodded. He stepped further into the room and pressed a flat hand into his new duvet, testing the firmness of the bed.

‘The room has three features that should serve you well, for peace of mind. The first, your window, you’ll see, has been replaced by a full-size sliding door onto a balcony leading to the fire escape. Its locking features are as secure as any of the updates in the flat. Second, weaponry.’

Beside the wardrobe, built into the wall, was a safe, but without dial, just a flat square of steel, easily covered by hanging a painting or photograph. It measured, Sherlock estimated, forty-five centimetres in both width and height.

‘Also thumbprint enabled and voice activated,’ said Mycroft, instructing John to open it.

Inside, they found two pistols and eight boxes of ammunition. Hanging on the walls, five combat knives. Mycroft referred to it as a ‘starter kit’.

‘This bedroom will also serve as a panic room,’ said Mycroft without waiting for questions as to why and how such weaponry could be found in the wall. He indicated a panel by the door, right beneath the display monitor for outside. ‘Exterior-grade solid core door with a deadbolt, hinge screws, and strike plate screws to resist battering. Walls are reinforced with Kevlar, and a generator ensures electricity to power all built-in communications devices. Your room, too, Sherlock, has been equipped with these exact features, though I did take fewer liberties with the redesign. I know you can be particular.’

‘Mycroft, this is—’ John began, shaking his head in wonder. ‘Incredible. Just incredible.’

‘And Mrs Hudson?’ Sherlock asked.

‘Upon her return, you will, of course, have to instruct her in the use of all of these things. We wouldn’t want her locking herself into her bedroom without knowing how to call for help, after all.’
'We've not heard from her...' said John.

'Not to worry, Dr Watson. That's all in order, too. All in good time.'

They returned to the sitting room. Mycroft had not removed his coat, and he made no move to do so now. Instead, Sherlock could see him preparing to take his leave.

'Thank you, Mycroft,' John said. 'For all of it. We weren't expecting...'

'Think nothing of it. Now, I'll leave you to get reacquainted. Welcome home, Sherlock. John.'

Sherlock wasn't quite sure where it came from, but suddenly he felt the compulsion, the need, to make a gesture of some sort. What it meant, even he couldn't say, but before Mycroft turned away, he extended to him his hand. He had no words; he couldn't even look his older brother in the eye. He just stood there, hand outstretched, and as the seconds passed, he felt more and more the fool. Just as he was about to withdraw, Mycroft seized his hand, clasping it firmly. Their eyes met. Mycroft nodded, understanding what Sherlock could not. Then, at last, without a word, he turned and left.

***

It wasn't until nightfall, after an unburied day spent settling back into the flat and programming all their new gadgets, that Sherlock finally retreated to his own room, and John to his. Sherlock did wonder, though, whether it was a good idea, John's first night back—after the attack and after months of taking the sofa—to intend to sleep in his own bed. He anticipated spending the night listening for noises of distressed sleeping and nightmares, ignoring his own desires for rest, just to be ready, if need required it, to spring to John's aid.

He pushed open his bedroom door, expecting to find the furniture out of place here, too, or the colour on the walls altered or wattage in the lamps changed with brighter bulbs. But Mycroft had altered none of that. The only change, he saw, was a new mattress overlaid with a new duvet like enough to the one he had owned before. And one more thing. Atop the bed, resting in an open case lined with midnight blue velvet, was a new violin.

**Thursday, March 19, 2015**

The city had warmed to twelve degrees and the skies were a shade of blue that hadn't been seen since the previous summer. Late morning in 221B was quiet, but for the soft clicking of John on the keyboard and Sherlock turning pages in a chemistry magazine at the kitchen table. But he wasn't reading. John looked up from time to time to see that though his fingers flipped pages approximately every fifteen seconds, he was staring at the opposite wall without seeing anything at all. John had hoped that returning to the flat would help pull Sherlock out of his despondency, but to no avail. This was neither the saucy nor sullen Sherlock he had once been accustomed to. He seemed fatigued in a way that a long night's sleep couldn't shake. He said he was glad for the new violin, sat with it in his chair, and polished it fondly, but John had yet to hear him play it, not even to tune it. And when Lestrade and Molly called on them, he had sat rigidly, unable to look at Molly, and barely uttered two words beyond _hello_ and _goodbye._

John's efforts to talk to him were met with false smiles and repeated assurances that there was no problem, nothing to talk about, and my, how the weather's turned. But John could see it in Sherlock’s eyes: he was troubled, distant, with one foot in his mind palace day and night, and whatever memories he stood among, they were caustic.

_Not a genius,_ he had said.

_Not a hero._

_Barely a living man._

He continued to type, Sherlock’s odious words still stinging his ears. He kept one eye on the clock, the other on Sherlock, turning the pages of his magazine.

... _Did you think I could change the world?_

Yes. He had.

At half ten, Sherlock arose and lifted his suit coat off the back of the chair, pulling it on over a white collared shirt. Despite all that had transpired, his community sentence had neither been expunged nor deferred; but owing to the ankle injury, he had been assigned to indoor work in the form of data entry at The London Library. As punishments went, this one was not at all burdensome, in a way that a long night’s sleep couldn’t shake. He said he was glad for the new violin, sat with it in his chair, and polished it fondly, but John had yet to hear him play it, not even to tune it. And when Lestrade and Molly called on them, he had sat rigidly, unable to look at Molly, and barely uttered two words beyond _hello_ and _goodbye._

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Grabbing the crutches, Sherlock swung himself over to the window and looked down to the street. ‘Smalls is here,’ he said.

‘Could have seen that on the monitor,’ John said, pointing, though without taking his eyes off the screen of the computer. ‘Give me... two... ticks...’ He finished typing, clicked the mouse a couple of times, and closed the computer. ‘Right.’ John got to his feet. He was already wearing a jumper and wouldn’t need anything like a jacket with the temperate conditions. He grabbed the cane and followed Sherlock out the door.

While Sherlock expended his community hours in the library, John had physical therapy at St Bart’s, followed by another session with Ella, who strongly suggested that they meet every day for the foreseeable future. John didn’t think he needed it, so much, but he didn’t argue. Meanwhile, in the latter part of his afternoon, Sherlock was expected at the Yard. Julian Smalls knew the itinerary—the preferred routes and scheduled drop-offs—and he was being paid handsomely for his services, as well as his punctuality. So after dropping Sherlock off at the Library, he knew to
take John straight to Bart’s, and he was free to conduct his own business until John needed him again, but to be on call for whenever Sherlock was ready to head home. The man didn’t complain. In fact, he felt rather honoured to be found worthy—after some rather intensive grilling from a man in a three-piece suit—to play the part of a hired car to Sherlock Holmes.

***

When he walked into the Yard—or rather, swung in on his crutches—Sherlock could feel the eyes of the men and women like mosquitos landing on his exposed skin. When riding the lift, he got the distinct impression that the woman at his side was holding her breath and trying not to turn her head and stare. And as the lift doors dinged open and he crossed the familiar, spacious room on his way to Lestrade’s office, he watched as conversations died and heads turned and desk monkeys arose from their swivel chairs to watch him over the top of the cubicle walls. He knew people watched him—his whole life people had watched him—but he rarely allowed himself to be perturbed by it. Now, however, he wanted nothing more than to march straight back to the lifts and out the front door, exactly the way a lame man could not.

Lestrade greeted him with a wide grin and spread arms, but he didn’t go for the embrace. Instead, he teased Sherlock about his mastery of the double crutch, called it his trust form of genius, and then guided him down the hall—more eyes turned to watch—and into a secured conference room that had been set up with all the evidence gathered from both crime scenes and what was now being referred to as the Tunnel Lair. It was spread across four long tables, all of it, including items taken from St Mary’s Convent. The only things they hadn’t displayed, to Sherlock’s relief, were the photographs or videos; they were there, but in a short stack of closed manila envelopes secured with string.

‘This is the whole of it,’ said Lestrade, ‘Everything we have on the Moriarty Mayhem—we’ve already adopted the term, you see, to account for all these crimes—every scrap of evidence, old and new, and one item recovered.’ Sherlock’s eyes found the pair of grey underpants, sealed in a plastic bag, on the first table. ‘Still missing those last two, I’m afraid.’

The Moriarty Mayhem. Of course they had renamed it. The St Mary’s Abductions was only a small part of a much larger scheme of devastating affairs. Leave it to coppers to find something catchy and alliterative. But it was . . . strangely accurate. The crimes were only rightly attributed to the mastermind who had begun it all, and the word mayhem was surprisingly fitting. Commonly, it was understood as chaos, disorder, anarchy. But in the context of the law and the state, mayhem referred to a crime that wilfully inflicted bodily injury with the intent of crippling, or mutilating, and otherwise rendering the victim powerless to fight back or defend himself. That’s exactly what this had all been. Mayhem.

Lestrade stood aside and let Sherlock take his time examining the contents all laid out before him. They spoke little, only to ask and answer questions, one of another. Sherlock took care to inspect everything and mentally catalogue every detail.

But when he picked up the BK&T combat knife, its blade and grip both crusted over with dried blood inside the plastic bag marked H/8.3.14-S2, Lestrade stepped forward, saying, ‘Now, we’re trying to get the story straight on this item, actually, to match all weapons with attackers, track down their origins, that sort of thing. Initially, we just assumed Hirsch had brought it to the house with him, but John said—’

‘It’s mine,’ said Sherlock.

‘Yours. Huh. That’s not the kind of knife you can buy in the shops,’ said Lestrade. ‘It’s not even British Army issue. Where did it come from?’

‘It’s American,’ said Sherlock, setting it down again. ‘I acquired it off a dead Libyan drug-and-weapons runner in 2014.’

‘Was this before or after you spent time in prison down there?’ Sherlock looked at him in surprise. ‘How do you know about—?’

‘John. He mentioned in passing. Wouldn’t’ve done, but he assumed you had told me. I’m not saying you should have told me, maybe it’s not my business, but . . . Jesus, Sherlock, whatever happened to you, whatever you went through during those three years . . . What I’m trying to say is—’

‘It was after, to answer your question, while I was making my way to Malta. I thought it might be useful for me to keep it. Turns out, it was pretty damn useful. Any more questions?’

Lestrade looked chagrined. ‘How did you get it into the country? Airport security—’

‘Can be fooled easily enough. But I didn’t travel with it. When I left Egypt, I left everything beside my mobile. Only after John and I had settled into Baker Street did I send for it. I gave instructions and paid the landlord to mail me whatever meagre possessions I’d left there. Easy. With the right packaging, at the right price, you can send anything through the mail . . .’

A floodlight had suddenly exploded in his mind; it was enough to stop him in mid-speech.

‘Sherlock?’

‘What screening precautions does the Yard take with its post?’

‘Pardon? The Yard? Uh . . .’ He rubbed the back of his neck, a little disoriented by the sudden jolt in the conversation; he never seemed to get used to them. ‘Everything coming in is x-rayed and screened for dangerous chemicals. Why?’

‘And everything going out?’

‘Well, anything marked confidential goes through certain secure channels to ensure it’s not
intercepted.'

‘But ordinary post. Letters, small parcels. Do you x-ray everything leaving the Yard?’

‘No . . . No, we don’t.’

‘Brilliant,’ he whispered to himself.

‘Sorry? What’s brilliant?’

‘That’s it. Don’t you see it, Lestrade? Even you can see it now, can’t you? That’s how they did it! That’s how they got the evidence from the convent out of the building—through the post!’

‘But that’s—’ Lestrade shook his head strongly. ‘That’s impossible. The evidence lockers are under lock and guard. One needs clearance to access them.’

Sherlock laughed shortly. ‘All things that can be easily bypassed, inspector.’ He stepped to the table containing the evidence from the Tunnel Lair to lift the jar of what had turned out to be twenty-two identical keys to Lestrade’s house. ‘How many ways are there to make a copy of a key? One only needs the original.’

‘Are you saying—oh god, it’s another mole, isn’t it? Someone we haven’t ferretted out yet!’

‘Not necessarily. It could have been nicked.’

‘Without someone noticing their keys had gone missing?’

Sherlock contemplated. ‘If one had but the imprint of the key, a copy could be fashioned. It wouldn’t take a Yarder to do that. It may have been your own keys, or Gregson’s, or Donovan’s, quietly pilfered from your pocket while you stood in line for coffee or sat in a noisy pub. They push the key into a plate of putty or plaster, and return the keys with you none the wiser.’

‘But the guard . . .’

‘Pay him off! Pay them all off! Your dispatch operator—she confessed to being bribed, twenty thousand pounds to perform one simple task, and why wouldn’t she? A daughter with a congenital heart defect and a brother with gambling debts. She’s desperate for the money. And she’s just one player, one insignificant little cog in a machine, turning with all the other little cogs, and she doesn’t even know the effects of her turning. Who else, and how many, and how small are they? Moran and Adler don’t need to plant spies among the coppers if they can get ordinary people to perform ordinary tasks and remain silent. They may have employed ten or a hundred. So they get into the evidence lockers, probably at night, when the place is quiet, but they can’t just walk those items out the door. Even the night guards are bound to notice a metal cilice jangling in someone’s pocket. No, they’d send it through the post. It’s the simplest task with the least amount of risk. To your mail rooms, Lestrade. We’ve lowly postal workers to interrogate.’

He grabbed his crutches and, with Lestrade hurrying after him, made at once for the lifts. Again, the eyes followed him, burning into the back of his head, and he hated it. He couldn’t shut down the feelings of discomfiture and shame he had once been able to master. He didn’t care what people thought of him, he never had, he had convinced himself of it a thousand times over thousands of days! What did they matter? What do any of them matter? Let them think me a criminal, a fraud, and a freak. They aren’t quite right, of course, but they aren’t wholly wrong. Ignore them. Ignore them all. Inconsequential. Idiotic. Stupid, stupid!

‘Are you all right?’ Lestrade asked.

Only then did Sherlock realise he’d been speaking aloud, muttering to himself just under his breath. His jaw snapped shut. He stopped dead in the middle of the room. Then something broke loose. ‘What is wrong with your people, Lestrade?’ he shouted. ‘Have they never seen a man on crutches before?’ He turned his face to the room and loudly berated them all: ‘Haven’t you all got work to do?’

Lestrade waved a hand, indicating that his people should sit down, turn their heads away, get back to work. ‘Don’t mind them,’ he said. ‘Come on.’

They made it into the lifts. Sherlock was breathing loudly through his nose, teeth set on edge but jaw locked. The excitement from just two minutes before had vanished, leaving behind a pang of hollow victory. ‘You’re not bothered, are you?’ asked Lestrade.

‘What? Of course not,’ he lied.

‘They can’t help it.’

‘Like children,’ he scowled.

‘They’re just, you know. Processing. It just shows up out of nowhere, and you can’t say it’s not just a little moving. They can’t help but be impressed, I reckon.’

The lift doors opened, and Lestrade stepped out, but Sherlock didn’t move. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Oh come on, Sherlock, you know what this is about.’ When Sherlock didn’t confess his ignorance, Lestrade clarified: ‘The blog.’

‘What blog?’

‘John’s blog!’

‘What about John’s blog?’
Lestrade half-laughed, shaking his head. ‘Don’t you know? He updated it. Just a few hours ago.’

Sherlock blinked, not sure what to think or to say.

‘I . . . take it you haven’t read it.’

He shook his head. ‘Wh . . . what did he write?’

But Lestrade had sobered and now shook his head. ‘I think you should just read it.’

Their plans were aborted as Sherlock went in search of a computer. At a free desk, he rapidly typed in the web address he knew so well, but his fingers were so agitated that it took him three goes to get it right. But when he hit enter, an error message:

Error 500 – Internal Error
Please Try Again Later

‘Damn, it’s been doing that for hours,’ said Lestrade. ‘Tech guy said it’s probably due to heavy traffic on a site not built to accommodate this kind of attention.’

‘What attention? You said he’s only just posted it,’ said Sherlock, typing the address again but getting the same error message. He slammed his fists on the keyboard.

‘Sure, but it’s sort of gone viral. That’s why I was sure you’d seen it. Didn’t he tell you he was writing—?’

‘No.’ Internal Error. Please Try Again Later.

‘Well, you know how he’s got that counter in the panel on the right? Last I saw, it was at thirteen thousand hits. That was two hours ago. Tech guy traced the URL and did some other fancy computer stuff, and he reckons it’s got well over twenty-five thousand by now, if people can get through. Comments are disabled, but people are talking about it onli—’

‘What does he say!’

Lestrade clapped a hand on his shoulder. ‘Go home, Sherlock. Keep trying the site. I’ll look into the mail room myself, get that ball rolling. See how far I can get on my own, eh? Go home.’

***

All the way home, sitting in the back of Julian Smalls’ taxi, Sherlock loaded and reloaded the blog on his phone, but the error message kept repeating. With his good foot, he bounced his left leg restlessly. He had a plan. If the blog wouldn’t load, surely John had kept a draft of whatever he had posted somewhere on his computer. He would simply need to find it, and it wouldn’t take a hacker to track it down.

The car slowed, stopped. ‘Here you are, Mr Holmes,’ said Smalls.

‘Thank you,’ Sherlock muttered. He didn’t have to bother with the fare—Smalls had been paid a handsome advance to see him through any provided services that month, and the rest as a very generous tip. Sherlock hopped to the front door, slid his thumb across the reader, spoke aloud the password (askrah, John’s choice), and hobbled inside. There, he threw the crutches aside and bounded up the stairs as quickly and as easily as one leg could bound. He was sweating by the time he reached the landing, and he rubbed his moist hands against his trousers before falling into the chair at the table where John’s closed laptop lay. He flipped it open, entered the password (Sadie), and saw, as if it were waiting for him, the homepage of John’s blog. He’d not closed it out.

At the top, the familiar green banner and the words The Personal Blog of Dr. John H. Watson, and just below, 19 March, and just below that, the title: ‘Who Is Sherlock Holmes?’

But the first words beyond that were not John’s:

A Foreword, by Henry R Knight

I met the news of Sherlock Holmes’ return from the dead with incredulity. It was a tale fitted for Halloween stories of the season, and to be honest, the suggestion upset me. You see, the thing is, I knew Mr Holmes. That is, I was acquainted with him. In March of 2011, I hired him as a private detective to discover the truth of my father’s murder. It was a twenty-year-old case, and he wasn’t much inclined, initially, but with a little persuasion, he accepted with startling enthusiasm.

He was a marvel. In less than forty-eight hours, he had solved a case neither police nor conspiracy theorists had been able to crack in the course of twenty years. It was a testament to me of the sheer genius of the man. The details of the case I won’t go into (though you can read about it yourself on this very blog), but I know that if it weren’t for Mr Holmes, my father’s killer and the true nature of his death would never have been known.

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I was for this reason that I was so appalled by the treatment Mr Holmes received in the weeks following his supposed death, and why I was loath to see all the malicious libel resurrected with the man. The papers and news broadcasts painted him as a fraud and a villain, and I knew neither were true. I had seen his genius in action—a twenty-year-old case! That was no con, I had been privy to his brilliance and the wonders that followed, and it broke my heart to think that he would never know just how much good had come from his solving that one case. He would never know how the truth of my father’s death had liberated me. His physical and mental health improved steadily over the weeks and months that followed. I found pleasure again in working, in socialising, in all the aspects of my life I had neglected while tormented by my father’s restless ghost. Because I had been freed, I was able to move on. I fell in love. I married. I have a son. I even have a dog (an irony I expect Mr Holmes would appreciate). I believe my father is at peace, and I am too. And I attribute all of this to Sherlock Holmes.
Though rumour and negativity about him continue to pervade the media, I am not alone in my favourable estimation of the man. He helped me, just as he has helped so many others over the years, and chances are, he never knew just how much. Certainly, the general public does not. Below are the voices you have not heard, the people, real men and women, who have benefited from their acquaintance with Mr Holmes, much as I have. John Watson, Mr Holmes’ friend and partner, and creator of this blog, has kindly agreed to host what can only be described as a tribute to the only man worthy of being called London’s only consulting detective. Here is the true story of Sherlock Holmes that John Watson has been telling all along.

Jain Wilson, Cardiff
I never met him myself, and I regret that. I knew only what he had done: he solved my wife’s murder and, in the same night, the murders of four other victims of the same serial killing. Losing Jennifer broke my heart, but if not for Sherlock Holmes, her death would have been written off as suicide, and others would surely have died. It’s my belief that he saved lives that night he didn’t even know about.

Charity Marimot, Whitechapel
It was incredible. I’d only just met the man, and I’d said barely ten words before Mr Holmes alerted me to my husband’s infidelity. If it hadn’t been for him, I might still be married to that worthless [deleted by administrator] hole. Thank you, Mr Holmes!

Lauren Schaffer, Cornwall
I had never been so frightened in all my life. This kind of thing wasn’t supposed to happen to ordinary people like me. My husband had already left for work, and I was in the kitchen making toast when two men wearing dark masks broke into the flat. They forced me into my car and held a gun to my head while I drove. I was directed to a car park in the centre of the city. There the men strapped a bomb to my chest, and they told me I had twelve hours to live. I was terrified and distraught, and I believed I was going to die. If not for Sherlock Holmes, I would have done. Because of him, I was rescued within nine hours. I had been given a second chance at life, and I wasn’t going to waste it. I left my husband, quit my job, and began an organisation dedicated to bettering the lives of battered women from Plymouth to Bristol. Five years later, we’re ready for expansion. It wasn’t only my life that was saved that day.

Michael West, Twickenham
The police thought my son was a terrorist, a traitor to his own country. He worked for the government, was involved in some top-secret projects, and when he was murdered and some confidential files went missing, it was the first assumption they jumped to: traitor. It took Sherlock Holmes to prove otherwise and clear my son’s name, pinning the blame for his death and missing files where it really belonged. I’ll never forget that.

Amanda Holland, London
I suppose he didn’t have to tell me what the hairpin was worth. To be honest, I wasn’t terribly attached to it. He could even have told me it wasn’t legally mine and to turn it over to the police. I was naïve enough, I would have just handed it to him right then and there and been none the wiser. He could have walked away a millionaire. Instead, he told me its worth, and then just smiled. I’ll never forget that smile. I was a loon, absolutely ecstatic, and I remember almost nothing else that happened that day. But for that smile.

The names and stories went on and on.

He found my daughter... .
He proved my innocence... .
Mr Holmes saved me a fortune in legal fees... .

Name after name, and Sherlock scrolled faster and faster down the page. Testimony after testimony flashed by on the screen, dozens and dozens of them, some only a few sentences, others lengthy paragraphs. Though he moved with speed, he took in every word, every name, and his brain jarred with the memories and intricate details of each case. He’d not deleted a single one. But he couldn’t dwell on these testimonials, not now, not yet. He didn’t understand them, couldn’t make sense of their gratitude and praise. In that moment, the wrenching in his heart could not be abated; there was only one man’s story that made any difference to him at all. And it came at the very end.

His heart stilled when he came to it, and he read slowly.

John Watson, Baker Street
The world has decided that Sherlock Holmes is a villain. You may believe this yourself. You believe this because of what you have heard from his enemies, from people who do not know him, and from reporters who have twisted the words of those of us who do.

This is my first entry on this blog in nearly four years. As with every word I have left here in the past, I craft these with my own two hands. No one has asked me to write this; no one has told me what to say. And as I have always done, I will strive to be as honest as I know how and leave a true accounting. So I will begin where I left off.

I believe in Sherlock Holmes.

I believe that when he came into my life, five years ago, he saved me. Only two months earlier, I had been invalided home from Afghanistan, having been wounded during a sudden and hostile siege on our base. Due to my injuries, I was deemed unfit to continue active duty, and I was discharged too soon back into civilian life. Returning to London, however, proved almost fatal. I felt useless, worthless and depressed. I had only an estranged sister, few acquaintances, and no friends. When I slept, I slept badly, but most nights I just lay awake and thought of how unfortunate I was that the bullet that had incapacitated me from the start had not done worse. Looking back, I believe I was only days away from either becoming entirely dispossessed, like too
I met Sherlock at what I would now describe as the most critical juncture of my life. Almost overnight, I went from having barely a bed where I could rest my head to having a place to call home and someone to talk to, worry over, laugh with, and assist on mad adventures. For the first time since being torn out of my previous life, I felt useful, like my life had purpose again. Sherlock was strange in the most glorious way, brilliant and amusing and exciting, and I looked forward to waking each morning just to see what his day would bring us. I wished to be his friend, if only for the privilege of accompanying him on cases and seeing his brain in action. What amazed me most, though, was that he designed to befriend me in return—a tremendous rarity and so a great honour. He did not know it at the time (or maybe he did), but our meeting saved my life.

Over the course of our acquaintance—the most intense but gratifying eighteen months I’d ever experienced—he saved that sorry life again and again, in so many ways that I cannot begin to number them. In moments when it mattered most, in times of highest danger, he was there to pull me through. I like to think I returned the favour a time or two. He relied on me, to an extent, as one does an appendage. But I’ve always known the greater debt is mine.

The day he disappeared, he saved me again. At the time, though, I didn’t understand. None of us, in all of England, understood that he had chosen to fall as ransom—his life for others’, including mine. He did not in reality die, but I do not count his sacrifice as any less meaningful, for what is a life, but home, family, friends, work, passions, and reputation? And he gave it up, all of it. He let the world believe him a murderer and a fraud, and he fell away into obscurity with no expectation of ever returning.

I have lost many people over the long years of my life. I am the last of my family. Fellow soldiers—compatriots I had been charged to save—fell to my right and to my left in the heat of battle and on the operating table. The love of my life was killed right before my eyes. But of all the people I have loved and lost, Sherlock alone came back. And when he did, it was only to save me again.

What you have heard about his return, from the press and through the grapevine, has been categorically untrue. Suggestions that he was behind the plot of the St Mary’s Abductions, as they are popularly called, or that he has in any way been controlling or silencing me since, are unfounded, vicious, and in all other ways fallacious. Yes, I was abducted by his enemies, held captive for ten days, and tortured beyond reason. My partner, a woman I loved dearly, was killed. Others have since lost their lives. All of us, Sherlock included, have been victims of the ongoing mayhem Moriarty raised up when he was alive. But there’s been one man fighting against it all along, both during his long absence and since his astonishing return, and on the whole, he’s been fighting alone.

London, you have ridiculed him, demonized him, and called for his blood. In return, he has found your missing treasures, tracked down your criminals, jailed your murderers, rescued your children, and saved your lives. He is not without personal fault, and he has made mistakes, but he never stops fighting for the safety and happiness of those he loves. I do not ask you to laud him, or admire him, or hell, even thank him, though he deserves every last shred of gratitude you can offer. But you can, at the very least, learn the truth about the man, and it is this: that he is a good man.

I owe him everything. My life, my purpose, and my happiness. Though he scoffs at even the slightest display of sentiment, I cannot refrain from stating boldly and with unreserved conviction that no man can ask for a more loyal and loving friend, and he is mine.

Sherlock finished reading. The blood had drained from his hands, and the pounding in his veins was no longer a result of his rush up the stairs. He felt caught in dream, like he wasn’t sitting in that chair, like the words burning in the screen in front of his eyes were an illusion. To make them more real, he read John’s entry again. Then a third time, engraving each letter of each word so deeply into his memory that the imprint appeared on the inner chambers of his heart. When he felt he couldn’t take much more of the burning in his chest, he snapped shut the lid on John’s laptop, joined his hands together so that the tips pressed against his lips, and closed his eyes in thought.

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When he opened them again, he was seated in his chair, one leg crossed over. He scarcely remembered having moved, but he wasn’t surprised. That happened, sometimes, when he lost himself in the recesses of his own mind and memory.

It was a noise that had drawn him out—the closing of the front door, a foot on the stair, the slow creak of a wooden F-sharp. And John appeared in the open doorway, leaning on his own cane but bearing in his other hand Sherlock’s crutches, which had been left tossed aside in the entry hall. John gave him an inquisitive look, eyebrows raised, eyes round, and indicated the crutches in his hand. “All right?” he asked.

Sherlock found his mouth too dry and his teeth too glued and his neck too stiff to give any sort of appropriate response. Instead, he glanced to John’s chair, indicating he should sit.

John nodded, set aside the crutches, and took but two steps before he tossed the cane to the sofa as well. He crossed the room and sank easily into his chair where he waited patiently for Sherlock to continue.

It took him a moment.

“I looked you up on the internet today,” he said at last, voice husky, words carefully measured.

John’s face was at once impassive and wide open, ready for whatever Sherlock had to say next. “Anything interesting?” he asked.

“Found your blog,” Sherlock felt an odd sort of tingling in his head, somewhere behind his nose. He sniffed. “You’ve updated.”
John nodded slowly. ‘And what did you think?’

His breath hitched, but only a little, and he forced himself to shrug, anxious to move this conversation into the territory of the casual and inconsequential. As such, he pulled his eyes away from where John watched him so carefully. It was easier to focus on a bare patch of rug. ‘As ever, John,’ he said with every attempt to infuse his voice with flippancy, ‘you have greatly romanticized the truth of things. I’ve always said you have a flair for sensational narratives. And exaggeration.’

A long pause. He still couldn’t bring himself to look at John.

Then John spoke: ‘I’ve never lied on that blog. Not once. I’ve only ever . . .’ He trailed off, and as the silence dragged on to the point of unbearableness, Sherlock lifted his eyes and found John waiting for him. ‘. . . held back.’

For a long moment, they held one another’s eyes, and slowly John’s words penetrated his defences. They sank past the protective layers of skin and overcame all bodily resistances to infuse every particle of his being, becoming a part of his very makeup. And at last, he understood what John was telling him, what he had been telling him all along but which he had seemed incapable of comprehending, no matter how bald the declaration. Three times, John had said it already, and Sherlock hadn’t understood. But it was this last, the most delicate of them all, that spoke most clearly.

He was fast losing control. His jaw began to tremble, the fingers of one hand latched fiercely to the back of the other, and his vision blurred. He turned his head away quickly, toward the hearth, wishing for escape. John shouldn’t have to see him like this, so overcome with gratitude, so overwhelmed with the warmth of a friendship he had never trusted he would ever know, that he was on the verge of losing himself entirely. A tear tracked down his face. He brushed at it hastily. He bit down so hard on his own tongue he tasted blood.

Across from him, John stood, and Sherlock was indebted—he would be left alone in the room, given some privacy, and time, to pull himself together again. But instead, John stepped closer, positioning himself alongside Sherlock’s chair, and John’s left hand rested lightly on his unyielding shoulder. Then he brought his left leg up and sat himself on the armrest. He tenderly turned Sherlock’s head around and pulled him into his chest to embrace him. Within the strength of that secure hold, Sherlock found release—it came like a wave crashing through him, and he was powerless to hold it back. He choked, then with the tears came the sobs, and he cried openly into John’s shirt. He felt arms tighten around him, felt John’s head rest atop his own, and with both hands he grasped the front of John’s shirt, giving into the need to hold and be held, for what felt like the first time. In all his life, he could recall no other time he had been so embraced.

‘I’m sorry!’ he said. His voice was strained and pitched, and wracked with tears. ‘For all the hurt, for what you’ve lost, I’m so sorry!’

But John hushed him gently. ‘I know. Sherlock. I know,’ he said. The sound of his voice was all around him, and as certain as his embrace. Fingers dug into his back in an effort to draw him closer still. ‘And I forgive you. You never have to say it again.’

John’s arms never slackened, and even as the minutes passed and Sherlock calmed, neither sought to break their hold of one another.

“We’re okay,” John whispered. ‘You and me.’ He kissed the top of Sherlock’s head, rubbed his cheek into the curls. ‘We’re going to be okay.’

‘I’m so tired, John,’ said Sherlock.

‘I know. And it’s time to rest.’

‘We’re Okay,’ by kellpod
Epilogue

SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 2015

They took two trains and the whole of the morning to get there, and it would be well past dark before they returned to London, but neither minded at all. The carriages were mostly empty, and the hillsides rolled with a kind of sea-like serenity. When they wished to, they talked, and at one point Sherlock produced a deck of playing cards again to continue their ongoing game of gin rummy, but otherwise he slept, and John sat back and watched the greening English countryside slip past the window on a breeze.

When they arrived in Norfolk, they hired a car and driver and drove from Norwich to the tiny village of Little Melton. The car rolled to a stop in front of a little brick house with a hedged-in garden and a long, cobbled path. They got out of the backseat of the car just as the front door of the cottage home cracked open.

Leaving his crutches in the front seat, Sherlock balanced on the open car door as he watched John march up the path and push straight into the house. Four seconds later, he was back, squeezing a floral holdall under his right armpit and hefting a suitcase in his hand. With his left, he grasped tight to Mrs Hudson as he all but dragged her out of the house. Already shoeed, coated, and hatted, she was ready for travel. She came along with little but hurried steps, clutching a handbag and trying to keep steady pace with John. Behind them, a middle-aged woman stepped out onto the porch but came no further, watching them go with arms crossed beneath her breasts and a jaw set like a bulldog’s. Sherlock saw another set of more cowardly eyes peering through parted curtains. From the first storey, a pair of children watched sadly through an open window.

When they reached the car again, John released Mrs Hudson into Sherlock’s arms while he loaded her luggage into the boot. Sherlock tucked her head beneath his chin and wrapped her body close to his, glaring over the top of her head at the man and woman scrutinizing them in powerless silence. The boot slammed closed. John came back around, and now it was his turn to give Mrs Hudson a proper hello. By this time, Sherlock saw, she was crying. She stroked a light hand over John’s fading bruises on one side of his face and kissed the other. No one looked back at the Woodhouses while they loaded into the backseat, Mrs Hudson between them.

As they drove away from Little Melton, Mrs Hudson kept one hand in Sherlock’s, the other in John’s, and wept all the way back to Norwich.

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For someone who lived by an adage beginning if you can’t say anything nice, Mrs Hudson had very few kind words regarding her niece and niece’s husband, and she used them with abandon. ‘I should never think to speak ill of family,’ she often began her sentences, and finished them with something like, ‘but the way Gillian feeds those boys up with fats and sweets is criminal’ or ‘but Sherlock has sneezed out more brains in a day than Robert has in that whole plum-fool head of his.’

Hearing her speak like this made them both endlessly happy.

The way she described it—and Mrs Hudson was not one for fanciful embellishments, though she did have a knack for storytelling all her own—she had been living as a veritable prisoner, and her niece served as warden. The Woodhouses had been attentive to all her needs but none of her wants. She had a warm bed to sleep in at night, full kitchen access, and her favourite teas and biscuits, but they monitored her telly programmes, restricted her internet access, and confiscated her phone. First, it was ‘misplaced’; then Roger claimed to have found it, lied that he had dropped it, and on the pretence of guilt had taken it to the shop where the tech specialists were supposedly ‘taking longer than expected’. They changed the channel on the telly if ever a reporter began speaking the name Sherlock Holmes, were wary of all news of London, and stopped taking the Daily Mail altogether. To keep her aunt distracted, Gillian planned long outings, bribed the twins into ‘playing with aunty’, and asked her to tell long stories of when she and her sister (Gillian’s late mother) were girls and the mischief they would get up to, because she knew her aunt was fond of those early years and loved to reminisce.

In response to her niece’s tactics, Mrs Hudson requested outings to shopping centres and cafes where she knew she would be within earshot of a news programme or within arms’ distance of a stray paper to nab and shove into her handbag for later perusal when she popped off to the loo.

She taught the children the game ‘What Did Sherlock Holmes Do Today?’, one of her own design, that encouraged them to learn as much information as they could on the man and receive a reward when they reported back. Gillian found out only when she discovered that the twins had not kept the game to themselves, but that all the children of the neighbourhood were now playing and had come up with an elaborate points system independent of external rewards. So she forbade her children from playing the atrocious game and disallowed even the mention of Sherlock Holmes in the house. But on solitary evening walks, the children of the village sought out Mrs Hudson. She was Granny Hudson to them, and after they had reported their news, she shared with them stories. ‘Did I tell you the one about the aluminium crutch?’ she would ask, or ‘There was the time Sherlock saved me from the Americans,’ and before long, they were requesting their favourites and playing ‘detectives’ in the park.

Gillian and Robert believed her brainwashed and obsessive. They believed the stories in the papers and on the telly, that Holmes was dangerous and manipulative, a master charlatan. But the first two doctors they took her to declared her both healthy and hearty, of sound mind in no need of turning power of attorney over to anyone. They had to work hard to find one who agreed with their assessment of her fragile and incompetent mental state, then took that statement to an official who named them executors of her estate. In an effort to sever all ties to London, they listed her property for sale, assuring her that she could live out the rest of her days in comfort on the proceeds of the sale, omitting, however, the little detail that they were to be her sole inheritors.
Then Mycroft Holmes, who had been monitoring her wellbeing all along, took matters into his own hands.

‘I should tell you,’ said Sherlock while they sat tea in her flat, after two hours tutoring her in the finer details of not locking herself in the panic room unnecessarily, ‘the deed has been signed over to me. Just to get it out of their hands. I will, of course, return 221 to its rightful owner.’

She patted his arm. ‘You were going to come into it anyway, Sherlock, love. You and John. When you both came back, I named you successors to the property. Thought I mentioned it?’

Both Sherlock and John shook their heads no, a little astounded.

‘Must be old age,’ she said with a wink and sipped her tea contentedly. ‘May as well let things lie, Mr Holmes.’

Wednesday, March 25, 2015

Greg Lestrade was on his fifth interview and missing Sally Donovan immensely. That was unexpected.

‘And how long have you been on staff?’ he asked Edward Stallman across from him.

The man’s hands were joined between his knees and his head bowed in shame. Good. Lestrade was in no mood to contend with one of the defiant ones. Heidi Ringwald had been the same, but Mitch Jenkins had been the put-upon sort, and George Yarrow adamantly denied any involvement for three solid hours, despite being the only caretaker without a corroborated alibi who fitted the hole in the plot. That one had been tiring.

‘Fifteen years,’ said Stallman to his knees.

‘Long time.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Long enough to know better than to take bribes from strangers and mess with Yard property, eh?’

Stallman shrugged, not in cheekiness but gesturing more toward ignominy.

‘How much was it, again?’

His mouth barely moved. ‘Ten thousand.’

Lestrade whistled. ‘Ten thousand quid. Damn. Just for turning a key. Hard to say no to that, innit?’

‘I had problems. Money problems. Couldn’t say no.’

‘And the dosh just showed up like magic.’

Stallman nodded. ‘Day after New Year’s, it was just sitting there. In my account.’

‘We know. We checked. Tell me again what this man looked like.’

He blushed as he said it. ‘Father Christmas.’

‘That’s right,’ he laughed, a finger ticking the air. ‘Father Christmas. Fluffy white beard, rosy red cheeks, and belly like a bowl full of jelly. On Christmas Eve.’

‘I know how it sounds . . .’

‘Sounds like a Christmas miracle,’ Lestrade said sarcastically.

‘I’m sorry. I told you everything I know. Everything. I’ve lost my job. Maybe my freedom. Soon enough I’ll lose the money, too, then the car, then my wife will leave, and the kids with her . . .’

‘What do you mean, you’ll lose the money?’

‘They’ll take it back.’

‘Come again?’

‘That’s what he said, the old man.’

‘What did he say?’

‘That if I told anyone, the money would disappear. And then some, he said. They’re gonna wipe me clean, I just know it.’

Lestrade drummed his fingers on the table thoughtfully, and after a spell of silence, he said, ‘A moment, Mr Stallman. Just you keep stewing.’

He left Edward Stallman in the interrogation chair and stepped into the observation room. ‘You hear that?’ he said to Gregson. ‘They find out Eddie squealed, they’ll retrieve the money from his account.’

‘Not if we freeze the account,’ said the chief superintendent. ‘That’s evidence. Probably blood money to start with. We’ll freeze all the accounts.’

Lestrade shook his head. ‘I think we should let it happen.’

‘What? Why?’
‘We’ve already tried to trace the origin of the money and failed. They’ve covered their tracks too well. But we may be able to track where it goes.’

‘Tag it.’

‘Precisely.’

‘Good thinking, detective inspector. I’ll get Hodgson on it right away.’

They turned to regard Stallman. Even through the glass and at some distance, they could see how badly he was sweating. ‘Poor bastards, the lot of them,’ said Lestrade. ‘They had no idea what they were making happen. Easy money, that’s all that mattered. And we’ve caught only a handful of what are surely dozens more.’

‘These people—Moran’s people—they sure know what the hell kind of game they’re playing, don’t they?’

‘Yeah,’ said Lestrade, but perhaps for the first time since the start, he didn’t feel shrouded in impossibility. ‘But they’ve slipped up just enough: they’ve left cracks. And the cracks are splitting wide.’

_Thursday, April 2, 2015_

John scratched a line through the sixth name on the list and proceeded to the next. ‘Terrence Gentry,’ he read aloud.

‘No, definitely not,’ said Sherlock. He was reclined into his armchair, legs stretched long, head thrown back, staring at the ceiling. He displayed a deportment of displeasure, but he was participating all the same. ‘Self-described cognitivist, but really of the Freudian persuasion. You should read his case studies. Next.’

‘Alan Langlais . . .’

‘Next.’

‘Ursula Zane—substance abuse, compulsions, and addictions . . .’

Sherlock tapped his fingers together thoughtfully. ‘Put her on the “maybe” list.’

John complied, but even as he did so, he said, ‘Not really you, though, is it?’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘You’re not an addict. Your cravings are merely symptomatic. And maybe you’re a bit compulsive about some things, but that’s not really the issue here.’

Sherlock sighed.

‘You’re only saying yes to that one because it’s easier to talk about needing a cigarette than anything you really need to talk about.’

‘Now who’s the psychoanalyst?’

‘Here’s one. Adam Giles, practitioner of humanistic psychotherapy, with special focus on anxiety disorders . . .’

‘. . . and recently appeared in the papers for insurance fraud.’

‘Did he?’

‘Yes. Next.’

John smirked. ‘Trusting the papers on that one, are we?’

Sherlock groaned and pressed his palms into his eyes. ‘Is this over yet?’

‘Sherlock.’ He turned in the chair to speak more directly to the top of Sherlock’s bed head. ‘Please. This is important. You’re the one who made _me_ go—’

‘As I recall, that decision was all yours.’

‘—and I was glad for it. Ultimately. And before you say this is any different, I’m not making you go. You said yourself it maybe wasn’t such a bad idea. You’ve been through some pretty horrific traumas, Sherlock. Years of it.’

‘I wouldn’t say trauma—’

‘Believe me, that’s exactly what it’s been. Harsh and unrelenting. I know I’ve said it already, and I know you’ve dismissed it, but Ella’s terrific. Having dealt enough with me, she’s already got more insight than anyone into exactly what we’re up against—’

The buzzer sounded, and their heads turned as one toward the nearest monitor. Standing on the pavement just outside the door were a man and a woman, not old but of some greater years, side by side with a bearing of resolve—his hands clasped behind, hers in front, and both standing as erect as soldiers.

In recent weeks, they had had few visitors not already known to them. There had been the occasional reporter hoping to get his or her own scoop on Michaela Warner’s latest Sherlock Holmes spin, but not the sort of attention they’d received when it was first announced that Sherlock was alive, despite the resurgence in the popularity of John’s blog. He continued to collect and post testimonials, but he had not enabled comments—he was interested in neither
debates nor insipid remarks of either defamation or support—but that hadn’t stopped the hosts of
online spectators from reposting his defence of Sherlock, quoting him in and out of context, and
spreading the article from Britain to Japan in both directions. By now, John’s blog had received
more than a million hits, and Sherlock’s was experiencing renewed interest itself. Signs had
appeared around London in the form of graffiti and posted in bedroom windows reading I believe
in Sherlock Holmes. There were still the trolls, the doubters, and the unqualified pundits voicing
their loud, angry, and contrary opinions. But theirs were no longer the only voices shouting.
John arose and crossed the room, putting his thumb to the call button below the monitor. ‘Yes, can
I help you?’ he asked.
He watched the man and woman look at each other before answering, as if reaffirming something
between them, and the man replied. ‘We have come to see Mr Holmes.’
‘Do you know them, Sherlock?’ John asked over his shoulder. Sherlock was now sitting upright
on the edge of his chair, his expression of petulance evaporated. ‘Let them in,’ he said.
John hit the button again. ‘First storey. Please close the door behind you,’ he said, and he remotely
opened the front door and watched the street until it was firmly shut behind them. Then he heard
them ascending the stairs.
By the time they appeared in the flat, Sherlock had risen to his feet, standing to receive them but
not moving forward to greet them properly. John noted an air of both expectancy and guardedness
in him now. The plaster cast on his ankle was visible below the hem of his pyjama trouser leg, his
dark hair was unkempt, and he wore a t-shirt and dressing gown—and yet he stood there with a
kind of unquantifiable dignity that compelled the older man, upon entering, to ignore John
entirely, face Sherlock, and say, ‘Sir.’ The woman cast her eyes to the floor.
‘Have a seat,’ he said, nodding to the sofa.
John sat, too, on a wooden chair between Sherlock and the couple.
‘Mr Holmes,’ said the husband, ‘we’ve never met before, but—’
‘I know who you are,’ said Sherlock. ‘My condolences for the loss of your son. Your grief must
be immense. It bears saying, however, that I never met him myself.’
‘No, I suppose you never did.’
‘He was a good man,’ said the wife, ‘a kind soul. He didn’t deserve . . .’
‘None of us did. Richard had the misfortune, however, of sharing his face with a madman,’ John
at last understood, but before he could make his surprise at their coming to Baker Street known,
Sherlock had pressed onward. ‘Now. How may I be of assistance?’
The woman reached over to where the man’s hands hung between his knees and gripped him hard
at the wrist.
‘We were hoping, Mr Holmes,’ he said, ‘that you could find our son.’
‘The greatest likelihood, Mr Brook, is that Richard is dead.’ Mrs Brook’s eyes closed as she nodded, holding onto her composure, but her nails were latched
onto her husband’s arm. He placed a hand over hers and rubbed gently to soften her hold.
‘We expect that is true,’ he said. ‘But it is a terrible thing, sir, not getting to say a final goodbye
and lay him to rest. It is unbearable not even knowing how it is Richard left this world.’
‘The truth may be worse.’
‘Mr Holmes,’ said Mrs Brook, ‘for three years, we believed we knew the truth, and it was an ugly
one. But we knew it, and we eventually learnt to sleep again. I have barely slept a night since
discovering it was not my son in that grave. I must know what happened to my child.’
John watched Sherlock closely. He hadn’t moved an inch from where he stood since the Brooks’
arrival. His weight was trusted to his sturdier leg, the other used merely for the sake of balance.
But now, the strain of standing so still was getting to him. He shifted, and stretched out a hand for
John’s shoulder; in one hop, he was nearer, and he leant on John like a crutch.
‘Why have you come to me?’ he asked.
‘The police,’ said Mr Brook. ‘They named him a missing person back in January. He has since
been declared dead. But they’re not looking for his body. They say, there’s no trail to follow, no
evidence of any kind to warrant an active search. They won’t help us.’
‘Why have you come to me?’ Sherlock asked again.
‘Because you’re the Detective,’ Mrs Brook explained. ‘You’re a genius. All those people’s
stories, all those lives you saved. They’re true, aren’t they?’
Sherlock didn’t move, but John nodded assertively.
‘You’re the only hope we have left.’
‘We’ll compensate you for your time and resources,’ said Mr Brook. ‘You name a sum, and
whatever it is, we’ll pay it.’
‘No,’ said Sherlock. ‘I don’t work like that.’ He leant further, putting more pressure on John’s
shoulder as he relieved the weight entirely from his casted leg, but John bore him up.
‘Please, Mr Holmes—’
'I'll take the case, Mrs Brook. But not for money. You need to understand two things right now. First, this one will take time. Maybe a long time.'

'We understand.'

'And second, your son was murdered. He’s nearly four-years dead, so his remains, if any remains are to be found, will tell a tale only of horror. I cannot have you entertain even the slightest hope that he will be found alive, or that his end was soft.'

'Of course,' said Mrs Brook, breathless.

Sherlock nodded. 'But I will discover what happened to him.'

There was nothing more to be said. The Brooks stood, thanked Sherlock from their place by the sofa, and exited the flat. Sherlock released John’s shoulder and settled back into his chair, drawing his hands up beneath his chin. John waited until he heard the door downstairs lock behind them. Then he arose and went to the window, watching them leave. They walked arm in arm down the street. At a glance, they seemed a normal couple; then Mrs Brook’s face turned into her husband’s shoulder, and his arm came up quickly to support her, and John knew she was crying.

'You took the case,' he said.

For a moment, Sherlock said nothing. He was as still as a statue. 'Yes.'

'For the man who tried to put a bullet in you. At the very least, the one who destroyed your violin.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'People make mistakes, John. They have regrets. I have to believe they are not condemned to live with them the rest of their lives.' He turned his head and quirked an eyebrow. 'Have I disappointed you?'

John shook his head and answered gravely, 'Not in the least.'

Friday, April 3, 2015

'I took a shower this morning,' said John. Then, to clarify, 'A proper one, I mean. I had Sherlock standing by, just in case, but it was fine. It was all fine.'

'How did it feel?'

'Wonderful.' He had been anxious, certainly. Having gone to bed with the determination to do it come morning, he had awoken with the sun, his anxiety level at about a three, bordering on a four; but when he came down the stairs, Mrs Hudson was already busying about in the kitchen making breakfast and Sherlock was tinkering away on his violin, a cheery exercise of scales and arpeggios; he flashed John a quick smile, and his fingers kept right on dancing. A feeling of contentment arose in him, an old warmth nestled deep in his stomach that he had not felt in a long time, and his anxiety level returned to a two. They all breakfasted together on hardboiled eggs, toast, and tea, and then John excused himself to shower.

Once alone, he stood before the sink and coached himself softly: 'Do it. Just do it. Go.' Then he twisted the tap and let water run hot until steam filled the air. He focused on the sound of rushing water filling his ears to block out his own breaths that might suggest he was breathing too hard. Then he began to undress. And when he did, he did so quickly and averted his eyes from both himself and from the new mirror, which had begun to fog. Then he stepped into the stream.

'Any feelings of discomfort and exposure?'

'Not while in the shower,' he said. Behind the curtain, and with the hot water flowing down his skin and enveloping him in warmth, he’d felt calm and in control. He had lathered soap into his hands and washed quickly—still conscious of the uneven surfaces where scars marred his skin, especially the deeply pockmarked thighs. He didn’t look, he didn’t have to look, but he scrubbed arms, chest, and legs thoroughly and all at once, for the first time in many months. 'It was a short one,' he admitted, 'like an Army shower. I dried and dressed as quickly as I could.'

'This is excellent progress, John,' said Ella. 'I think you know that. It will only get easier.'

He nodded, restraining a smile of satisfaction.

'And you’re sleeping well? In the bedroom?'

'In the bedroom, yes.'

'And well?' she said, noting he’d skipped that question.

'Better than before.'

'The dreams?'

'Well. I’ll always have the dreams. Won’t I.'

'Are your dreams the same as before?'

He continued to smile, though it was a little overwrought now, and gave a noncommittal sort of shrug.

'John.'
‘Sure. Same dreams.’ He scraped his fingernails against the insides of his palms. ‘Sometimes.’

‘Any new ones?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know what I mean. Nightmares inspired by the attack in your flat.’

‘Ahh,’ he said, shifting in his seat, rubbing his nose. ‘I’m sure some are bound to spring up, now and again.’

‘And have they?’ She was not letting him sidestep anything.

He nodded and glanced at the clock.

‘Let’s talk about that. What do you dream, and how do the dreams make you feel?’

He licked his lips. ‘You know, I woke up from a nightma—dream, just this morning. No, yesterday, I mean. I was . . . upset. Nothing new there. But I calmed myself to a three in mere seconds. My mind was my own.’ He nodded sharply.

‘That’s excellent, but what I’m asking about—’

‘Got my appetite back, too. Mostly.’ He chuckled a little forcibly. ‘Found out Sherlock can guess my weight within two pounds based on a creak in the stair. Can you believe that?’

‘John—’

‘Oh, and I meant to say, he’s agreed to see someone. Well, he’s agreed to sit through a single session with someone, see how it goes, but that’s progress, yeah? A step in the right direction?’

‘John, why don’t you want to talk about it?’

He worried his tongue between his teeth, debating. Then, deciding it was futile pretending not to know what she meant, he said, ‘We did talk. When I was in hospital.’

‘Yes, to an extent.’

‘Good. Right. So . . .’ He shrugged again. ‘And you told me, then, that I was coping very well. Nothing has changed on that count. I’m doing very well.’

‘You are. Very well indeed. Although, the way we handle things, or think and feel about things, in the immediate aftermath is one thing. The long term is quite another. And yes, you managed that trauma better than anyone expected.’

‘Great.’

‘But there are aspects we have not yet discussed, things I don’t know whether you’ve fully confronted with respect to what happened.’

John spoke through an impatient smile. ‘Ella, I know what happened. Exactly what happened. I told you all of it. And I’m fine.’

‘You killed someone.’

‘Yes, I did,’ he said curtly. The fake smile was not gone completely. ‘It’s not the first time.’

‘John—’

‘What was I supposed to do? Just lie there and take it?’

‘I’m not suggesting you were wrong to do what you did. But the distress over ending a man’s life, even an evil man—’

‘Not a man. A beast. Carnal and wild and dangerous.’ He could feel his temperature rising. A bead of sweat slipped down his neck and past his collar.

‘Just the same, the act of taking a life—’

‘I had the opportunity to defend myself and end this, and I took it. I don’t regret it. I would do it again.’

‘Just the same?’

‘I said, I’d do it again. I know the cost of ending a life. I’ve paid it before.’

‘What is the cost, John?’

‘Nothing I can’t afford.’ He shook his head roughly. ‘You seem to think I ought to be bothered by this. I’m not. I removed a threat—to others, to myself, to Sherlock even. In war, that’s what you do. And I did it in the most efficient way possible.’

‘Is that what you were thinking about? Efficiency?’

He blinked. Licked his lips. ‘What do you mean?’

‘How did you kill him?’

‘With a combat knife. You know that.’

‘But how?’
He clenched his jaw and looked toward the window. ‘Blade to the gut,’ he said. Then, more clinically, ‘Penetrating abdominal trauma.’

‘Was that enough to do the job?’

‘He wasn’t coming back from it.’

‘Then why, John, did you also cut his throat?’

‘I . . .’ His fingers curled around the armrest, as though he might fall out of the chair if not properly anchored. ‘. . . had to . . . finish it.’

‘What do you mean?’

He said nothing.

‘He was dying already. Wasn’t he? The police report—’

‘He killed Mary,’ said John, barely above a whisper. ‘He sliced her throat wide open. Her blood spilt out like water from a jar.’

Ella controlled a wince. ‘I thought Sebastian Moran—’

‘He killed Mary.’ His voice was suddenly bold, and his eyes flashed angrily. ‘Don’t you get it? Daz was there, too! He held me down, trapped me in that chair, so there was nothing, nothing I could do, and I would have done anything! Everything, to stop the blood or hold her while she . . . Yes, it was Moran’s hand, Moran’s scalpel, but if I couldn’t get to him, then Daz, his pup of a lackey, would have to serve. One for the other. Don’t you see? It’s called a vicarious atone—’

Something cold rose up and spread through him, rushing from his stomach to the ends of his fingers and toes. He tried to make it stop—he clamped a hand across his mouth and arrested his breath—but the words were already spoken. The coldness set his skin on fire and churned in his gut; he thought he would throw up. Someone whispered in his ear: ‘There you are.’

‘John.’ Ella’s voice travelled toward him slowly, distorted and undefined. ‘John, you’re all right. You need to breathe.’

He shook his head and rocked forward.

‘I want you to go to your safety zone. Close your eyes, take your hand away from your mouth, and go there, now.’

With trembling arms, he gripped the armrests once again, squeezed tight his eyes, and pictured 221B.

‘Inhale. One, two . . .’

Morning sunlight filtered through the flat’s open windows, catching the swirling dust. On the desk lay Sherlock’s books and his own laptop, open to his blog where he knew he’d been typing. Mrs Hudson had set out biscuits and tea. ‘Three, four . . . He heard the log snap in the hearth (something about pine and rapid oxidation and where had that come from?), and the vision shimmered. He looked around for Sherlock, or evidence that he was there, too. Instead, he saw Sebastian Moran, sitting in John’s armchair.

‘No!’ he cried, and he shot to his feet. One leg nearly gave out, but he caught himself and moved at once for the door.

‘John, you need to calm down before you can leave. Regain control.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he gasped. ‘I’m fine, I’ll be fine, I just . . . I have to go. I have to . . . I have to go.’

And he threw open the door and disappeared.

**Wednesday, April 15, 2015**

Molly was waiting for him when he pulled to the kerb outside of St Bart’s. Once inside the car, they leant for each other and shared a lingering kiss-hello.

‘Good news and bad,’ he said, once the car was rolling again. He shifted quickly into third gear.

‘Mm,’ she groaned. ‘Bad first, then.’

‘We lost the Granger house.’

‘Oh no, really? The one with the dumb waiter and the bookshelves built into the staircase?’

‘That’d be the one. Someone else was offering ten grand over what we did, and they nabbed it.’

She sighed. ‘It even had that westward-facing nook for watching the sun go down.’

‘We’ll find something just as nice. Better. It’s prime buying season, so we just have to be quick on our feet. It’s why my old place sold as quickly as it did, despite the . . .’

‘Bloodstain.’

‘Yes, well, didn’t seem to bother them, did it? I figured it’d be a sticking point.’

‘But you priced it so low, no one cared, really.’

‘I mean, you’d think they’d insist it be replaced first.’

‘And chance losing the sale? Or maybe they’re the kind of people who like to have a story to tell.
their guests.’

‘Hell of a story.’

‘Let’s have the good news, then, shall we?’

Lestrade reached an arm into the backseat and brought back that morning’s edition of The Guardian.

‘Is it the one with the two members of the jury?’ she asked, taking the paper from him. The story had broken just that morning—it had been all over the news. Two jurors from Moriarty’s trial had jointly come forward with the admission that they and their families had been threatened: return a verdict of not guilty, or else. Fear had sealed the verdict, and shame had bought their silence for four years.

‘It’s all unravelling, isn’t it?’ he remarked, barely restraining a smile. ‘But no, this is something better. Page 3. Another report by the lovely Ms Warner.’

She flipped the paper open, preparing to skim, but the photograph of Kitty Riley was front and centre. Molly read the headline aloud: ‘Senior reporter for The Sun pleads guilty to perverting the course of justice.’ She gasped and spun her head around so quickly she cricked her neck.

‘Really?’

‘Read it.’

Her eyes dragged down the page, and her lips moved rapidly, and silently for the most part, except when she couldn’t help but voice the words aloud. ‘Two counts of concealing evidence, and one count of maliciously targeting an innocent person.’ She frowned. ‘Only one?’

‘Part of the plea deal. We had stronger evidence of criminal actions against John—evidence of stalking, illegally acquiring that coroner’s report, and so forth—and only fancy footwork when it comes to her slandering Sherlock and provoking the attacks against him.’

‘Pity,’ said Molly, shaking her head. She kept reading. ‘Sentencing will take place Thursday next. . .’ Leaving the paper open to glare at the face in her lap, she asked, ‘So what can she expect? More than a fine, I hope.’

‘Each count has a minimum sentence of four months’ incarceration—’

‘Is that all!’

‘—but maximums of up to eighteen for concealing, and twenty-four for targeting John. As a first-time offender, she may be allowed to serve sentences concurrently. I don’t know what her solicitors have bargained. But if I were a betting man, I’d wager she’ll spend twenty-four to thirty-six months in an open prison.’

Molly nodded, disappointed. ‘Not what I’d give her.’

Lestrade let go of the gear lever and squeezed her knee instead.

‘I see she quoted you,’ said Molly, then read, ‘Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade says that Ms Riley’s irresponsible and in some cases destructive reporting has severely hampered the police’s investigations into the Moriarty Mayhem of these last few months. He says, “Not only has Ms Riley been publishing false information and vilifying innocent citizens, but she has also misled the public into believing harmless persons were dangerous and dangerous persons harmless. This is a matter of public safety, and Ms Riley has tossed it aside in the interest of selling newspapers and furthering her career.”’ She looked over at him admiringly. ‘Well said, detective inspector.’

He grinned modestly and deflected the compliment. ‘Some responsible reporting, for once.’

‘Mm,’ she agreed, slipping her hand atop his and running a thumb across his knuckles.

‘You’ll notice Ms Warner never once mentioned Sherlock by name.’

‘No, she didn’t,’ said Molly, a little surprised. ‘Why not?’

‘I asked her not to. Take him out of the spotlight for half a moment at least. Give him and John both a bit of privacy for a change. I’m kind of surprised she respected that request. Not used to that.’

‘Other papers won’t be so kind.’

‘Yes, but I’m not giving interviews to those papers. Whatever Ms Warner’s game is, she’s playing it well, because I’m falling for that girl.’

Molly slapped his arm in a playful, scolding way, and he chuckled.

‘I see she quoted you,’ said Molly, then read, ‘Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade says that Ms Riley’s irresponsible and in some cases destructive reporting has severely hampered the police’s investigations into the Moriarty Mayhem of these last few months. He says, “Not only has Ms Riley been publishing false information and vilifying innocent citizens, but she has also misled the public into believing harmless persons were dangerous and dangerous persons harmless. This is a matter of public safety, and Ms Riley has tossed it aside in the interest of selling newspapers and furthering her career.”’ She looked over at him admiringly. ‘Well said, detective inspector.’

They arrived just as the sun was setting and the air was chilling. Lestrade parked, reached into the backseat again, this time for a flat, square object wrapped in blue paper. ‘You think this is a good idea, right?’ he asked.

‘I do.’

‘Like this?’

‘I think he’ll appreciate it. Really.’

They walked arm in arm to the front door, and Lestrade rang the bell, saying to Molly as he gestured to the thumb pad and tiny camera lens, ‘Welcome to Fort Baker Street.’
Seconds later, the door opened to them, and they carried on upstairs to where dinner was being set out. Mrs Hudson proceeded to make a fuss over how lovely Molly looked that evening; her hair was growing out again, but she styled it well enough to hide where it had been shaved. The flat was cleared of clutter (at least, the clutter was neatly stacked in the corners), and the wall behind the sofa was for the first time in several weeks cleared of all those little notecards, newspapers clippings, and photographs. Lestrade knew they had merely been relocated to the basement flat.

When they all sat to eat, the conversation fixated on house hunting and funny news stories and tales from the mortuary, and when Sherlock seemed on the cusp of making a request of Molly for some samples, John announced dessert.

Afterwards, as Sherlock and Mrs Hudson saw to the washing-up, John stoked the fire. Then, when he settled into his chair, angled out toward the room, Lestrade, feeling a little wary but egged on by Molly’s significant looks, approached him, saying, ‘We brought something for you, John.’

Such a gesture was clearly unexpected, and John took a moment to recover from his surprise. ‘Oh?’ That’s when Molly came forward, carrying something about the size of a thin book, wrapped.

‘To be fair,’ said Lestrade, ‘it was yours to start with.’ As Molly handed John the parcel, he continued, ‘We were keeping it in the evidence lockers, but we don’t have any need of it any longer, and you should have it back, you really should . . .’

He held his breath and felt Molly take his arm as they watched John peeled back the paper. Then John froze, finding himself holding a picture frame measuring five by seven; staring out at him from behind the glass were himself and his Mary as they sat together in a dimly lit pub. John’s right arm wrapped around her back, and her hand was laid atop his left where they were joined on the table between their drinks. Their heads rested together, and they smiled, Mary brightly, John warmly. The photograph, Lestrade knew, was less than a year old.

‘It’s a little crumpled,’ he said, needing to explain, ‘and slightly torn around the edges. The frame hides the tears, and the glass flattens out the wrinkles a bit.’

‘It’s perfect,’ said John softly. He brushed a thumb across Mary’s face. When he spoke again, his voice had thickened. ‘Thank you.’

‘You should know, the Yard did make copies. For the official report, that is, and because it holds proof that you were being watched. But I know a guy, and we can airbrush Stubbins out of the background, if you’d like. It can be like he was never . . . there.’

Again, he felt the wrongness of providing John with a photo, the only one he had left of Mary, that also contained the image of a man who had played a part in the events that led to her loss. How could he ever look at it and not see the spectre of death just over their shoulders, watching the happy couple, plotting their destruction? It was the first place Lestrade’s own eyes now always went, and he hated it. But John—he nodded, like he wasn’t really listening. He didn’t look up from the photograph, but his thumb kept stroking the glass over Mary’s face.

‘Sure,’ he said distractedly. ‘I’ll think about—’

Then his body stiffened, and he sat forward on the edge of his chair, still clasping the frame with both hands, but now bringing the photo closer to his face.

‘Something wrong?’ Lestrade queried anxiously, certain he’d made a mistake.

John shook his head, a little bemused, but he said, ‘I . . . know that man.’

‘Stubbins?’ Lestrade said with great surprise. He had shown John a photograph of Everett Stubbins back in October. He said he’d never seen the man before in his life.

‘No.’ John rose to his feet to move to better light. He angled the photograph to catch the glow of a standing lamp. ‘Murray. That’s Corporal William Murray.’

‘Who?’ Lestrade came closer to look at the man seated beside Stubbins at the bar, behind John and Mary, the man Stubbins had refused to identify. His face was just visible over Stubbins’ shoulder.

‘Bill Murray.’

Sherlock, overhearing the conversation, hobbled in from the kitchen, still drying a dish with a tea towel. ‘The man who used to comment on your blog?’

John at last looked up to nod at Sherlock. ‘He’s out of focus, but that’s him. I’m sure of it. I . . . never noticed him . . . before. Mary put all those pictures up on the wall after she had them printed, but I never really looked . . .’

‘Wait, who is he?’ Lestrade pressed. ‘How do you know him?’

‘He was a CMT in my unit. Combat medical technician. A nurse, basically. This man’—he tapped the glass over his shadowed visage—‘saved my life. In Afghanistan. I got shot, and if it hadn’t been for Murray . . .’

Sherlock came around the chair as quickly as his leg permitted, and the three men looked at the photograph together. Molly had dropped Lestrade’s arm and stepped back, but Lestrade could practically feel her holding her breath.

‘So what is he doing in a photograph with Everett Stubbins?’ Lestrade wondered aloud.

‘John,’ said Sherlock, ‘do you remember seeing him that night? In the pub? Do you remember talking to him?’
John shook his head. ‘I haven’t heard from Bill in years. Not since . . . the fall.’ He laughed without humour. ‘Why wouldn’t he have come up to me? Said hello? We’re old friends. I mean, we’ve known each other for years, years, even before we were deployed, and here he is, he’s looking right at me!’

‘Surveillance,’ said Sherlock, the word hissing out of him.

‘What? No.’ John shook his head roughly. ‘Not Bill. He’s just a nurse.’

‘People take bribes all the time.’

‘And he wouldn’t be the first Army vet Moran recruited,’ Lestrade put in.

‘Not Bill.’ John stepped away from them, taking the photograph out of their sight. Then he passed a hand across his eyes and groaned.

‘It may be nothing,’ said Lestrade, seized by a sudden need to salvage the night. ‘A coincidence, or a misunderstanding.’ He caught Sherlock looking at him with a highly dubious raised eyebrow, and he sighed, relenting. ‘But in any case, we’ll need to find him. Interview him. Find out why he was in the pub that night, and what connection he has to Everett Stubbins.’

‘Jesus,’ John said with laboured breath.

‘And question Stubbins again,’ said Sherlock, ‘now we have a name.’

‘He pulled me out of the line of fire,’ said John, as though to himself. ‘He saved my life. We’re friends.’

‘But you say he hasn’t been in touch?’ asked Lestrade. ‘Even once? Your name’s been all over the papers since October, after all. Why not send a text or email, something just to see how you’ve been?’

John shrugged, staring at the photo in his hands. ‘What would he say? All he knows of my recent life is that I’ve been little more than some maniac’s favourite punchbag?’

Oh John,’ said Mrs Hudson from the doorway to the kitchen.

‘Something,’ Sherlock growled. ‘A friend says something.’

Lestrade nodded sharply to Sherlock, the friend who had done everything. John turned away.

‘I’m going to get on this,’ he said, glancing at Molly, who, though holding her hands across her stomach as an indication of nervousness, nodded firmly. ‘Don’t worry about a thing. Not tonight. Do you . . . do you want to keep . . . ?’

‘Yes,’ said John sharply, his grip tightening on the photograph. Then, he seemed to catch himself, and he softened. ‘Thank you, Greg.’

And just like that, the evening was over.

***

It was midnight, and the flat was quiet. The fire was burning low, and a light had been left on in the hallway, but other than that, it was dark, and the sitting room was cast in a dark orange glow. When Sherlock returned from Mrs Hudson’s, slowly and with the assistance of the aluminium cane rather than the crutches, he found John seated on the sofa. The framed photo still rested in his lap, between his hands, and for a moment Sherlock thought he had fallen asleep like that. But then he saw John blink in silhouette, the dim from the windows outlining his profile. Though the light had mostly faded from the room, he was still looking at her.

‘May I?’ Sherlock asked, indicating the vacant seat beside him.

John nodded. So he leant the cane against the arm rest, grabbed the back of the sofa, and lowered himself beside John. His bones melted a little, and he knew he was tired, but he had no inclination to retire yet to his bedroom. He glanced over. From his vantage point, the light glared off the glass of the photograph and obscured the faces. So he inclined himself a little closer and peered at it from John’s shoulder. John subtly angled the frame, the better for Sherlock to see.

‘What do you make of it?’ he asked softly, and Sherlock knew he expected a string of deductions, the most minor of details hitherto unnoticed by the slower minds surrounding him illuminated, deconstructed, and strung back together again in a narrative that gave insight into the machinations that had long been at work behind the scenes. But Sherlock did not oblige this expectation.

‘I see two people,’ said Sherlock, his focus for once aligning with the stranger behind the camera, who love each other very much. That’s what I see. She was beautiful, John.’

John turned his head to look at him. He was close enough that, despite the dark, Sherlock could see the surprise shining in his eyes, as if he had expected anything else but that. Then he smiled softly, eyes returning to the photograph. ‘Yes. She was.’

‘I’m sorry I never met her.’

John nodded. ‘I am too.’

Sherlock knew, he could see it all over their faces as they left the flat, that Lestrade and Molly were second guessing giving John this photo as a gift. It had too much history, and heavy history at that. Not only had it sat as evidence in an abduction and murder case for six months, but within its borders it held forever the images of two men watching John and Mary like crows, presaging the death that would soon follow. Even Mrs Hudson had seemed unsure of it, and when Sherlock had seen her to her own flat—for she had indicated to him that she wished to speak to him
He agreed. John deserved more. But seeing John now, staring tenderly at Mary’s smiling face as if she were the only one the camera had captured, Sherlock knew Lestrade and Molly had been right to bring it.

“You know,” said John, “we almost didn’t go out that night.”

“No?” He was a little taken aback; he had expected, rather, that John would prefer to sit in silent company.

“It was raining out.”

This, Sherlock had already deduced. A woman in the background wore a jacket dotted with droplets, and the clock on the wall gave the hour as half seven, well before a June sunsdown, but the lights of the pub were bright, indicating a darker world outside, the kind of dark of a storm.

John continued:

‘Mary had been under the weather for a few days but was finally feeling better. She was restless from too many summer days spent cooped up in the bedroom with a box of tissues, so I said we should go out. She got so excited, she practically flew out the door without shoes on.’ He smiled fondly, remembering. Then the smile faded. ‘God, I miss her.’

Sherlock didn’t know what to say. He was afraid to speak at all, as if inserting his voice might break this spell, for John never talked about Mary. Not to him, not while awake. And out of respect, or maybe shyness, Sherlock never asked. But the photograph, knotty as it was, had been like a key to a forbidden door, and at the midnight hour, John wanted to talk.

‘I wonder if she knew . . . I mean, really knew what she meant to me. I never told her. Not the way a person should be told. I keep thinking about those things—the things I never said, or never said quite right. I told her I loved her. She knew that much. But I think about how she gave me everything, and I held back. In some ways. Important ways. She didn’t deserve that.’

Sherlock frowned, and when the silence drew longer, he ventured to speak, though softly. ‘I don’t think you realise, John, how much you give of yourself. To everyone. But to those you love most of all.’

‘She shared with me her whole self,’ John replied. ‘And why wouldn’t she? There was nothing for her to hide, and she was the most gracious person I ever met. After only six months, I felt like I knew her completely. After a year, I knew I never wanted to be parted from her. And I wanted to show her everything, everything I was. But I couldn’t. I was afraid I’d lose her if she saw the demons I carry with me, the monster . . . that I think I am, deep down.’

‘John—’

‘I couldn’t talk to her about Afghanistan. She knew about Harry and the drinking, but not about how much animosity there was between us. I don’t think I even mentioned Mike. He was part of a past I wanted to forget. I figured, why bring up the dead friends she could never meet? What would be the point? But I know—I was just hiding myself from her, pretending to be someone else, someone who wasn’t in pain. And that’s why . . . why I couldn’t even show her you. You were an important part of me. Of who I was. She knew who you were, of course. She knew you had meant a great deal to me, you and that life we had once . . .’

He sighed and lifted his head, looking around the sitting room. ‘This place. You know something, Sherlock? I don’t think I was ever truly happy before I came here. To Baker Street, I mean. Not as an adult, at least. It’s like I didn’t even know myself in the world. After Dad died, when I could finally leave, I was always running off, trying to find something that would make me feel like I was worth something to people, like I had something to offer. Did I ever tell you why I became a doctor?’

‘No,’ said Sherlock, his voice barely more than a whisper.

‘Something was wrong with me. I could feel it, for years I could feel it, but I couldn’t tell you what it was. I guess I figured, if I could fix other people, I could fix myself. It’s the same reason I joined Her Majesty’s Royal Army. Happy people don’t join the army, Sherlock. I was searching for something, I wanted, that is, I needed to feel useful to something greater than myself. I was trying to, I don’t know, make sense of myself. I’m not explaining this very well. But it wasn’t until . . . this’—he indicated the two of them—’that I finally felt like I fitted inside my own skin. I felt real. Things made . . . sense. In a way they never had before.’

‘And you were . . . happy here?’

‘Yeah, I was. This life, it was . . . special to me. Mary knew it. But then, she didn’t, I never told her. I couldn’t find the words. And I didn’t want her to think she meant anything less, because she didn’t. She meant everything. This meant everything. I kept thinking, someday. Someday, when it was easier, I would tell her what those days meant to me. Someday, I would tell her about knowing how to spot good Chinese restaurants and fake Vermeers, and what the inside of Buckingham Palace looked like, and what it was like coming home to a severed head in the fridge. I would tell her about the last time I ever took sugar with my coffee or pulled rank to investigate a glow-in-the-dark rabbit. I would tell her what it felt like, being a conductor of light. I thought we had forever for those things. I thought I had forever to tell her about them. But time ran out. Suddenly, it was too late.’

‘You’ve lived two lives,’ said Sherlock, ‘that are special. Not just one.’

‘Yes. And maybe I have the chance for one more. I just don’t want to make those mistakes again.’

‘What mistakes?’

‘Things left unsaid.’ He turned his head again, and half his face was cast in shadow, the other
dimly lit by the dying fire. ‘I’m glad you came back, Sherlock. No matter what else happens, I’ll always be glad of it.’

‘Tell me about Mary, John,’ he said. ‘I want to know her.’

John parted his lips, but hesitated. ‘It’s late,’ he said, meaning the hour.

‘But not too late.’

***

‘I dare say, you’ve laid out your case rather neatly, Mr Holmes.’

They shuffled papers, sipped from snifters, and readjusted spectacles on the ends of Their prominent noses.

‘It’s the most logical of solutions to our little . . . quandary,’ said Mycroft. His own glass remained untouched, barely noticed. He was a moderate drinker, and little effected by it, but he needed every mental faculty as sharp as a razor, and he was taking no chances. One sip, at the start, to demonstrate his ease and camaraderie, but not a drop since. ‘As long as he remains Moriarty’s prime target, the damage will be concentrated and therefore contained. Take away that focus and it becomes widespread and uncontrollable. Instead of a laser, a firestorm. For that reason alone, you need him alive and free.’

‘As bait.’

‘As insurance. As long as Sherlock Holmes is free, we know their plans. Moran and Adler are singularly focused on designs for revenge. Take him out of the equation, and we cannot begin to imagine what they will do next with the network Moriarty left behind.’

‘As long as Sherlock Holmes is free, the people of London are a target. Let us not forget that many have died on his behalf.’

‘We do not trust these people to stay their hand from greater acts of annihilation. We need their eye to shift away from London altogether.’

Mycroft laughed shortly. ‘Let us not be so near-sighted. Moran is a national traitor and bitter enemy of the state. He’ll not simply ignore the rest of us once he’s finished off Sherlock. No, we need to keep him focused—on Sherlock—for as long as we can while we make designs of our own to remove the greater threat to the city: Moriarty.’

‘There is no way to predict how long until they kill him.’

‘No. There isn’t.’

‘And it doesn’t bother you? Setting your brother up for destruction?’

Mycroft practised the art of nonchalance. Reclined in his chair with his fingers interlocked over his belly, he frowned in a way that suggested disinterest. ‘Sherlock is bound for destruction. He always has been. His demise may as well be in the interest of the nation.’

‘And if he should fail to tease Moran into daylight?’

‘They will come after him. It is a certainty. Moran has sworn vengeance against him, and Adler will not accept defeat at any cost. Our best course is to use him to our advantage.’

‘And what of his . . . companion? John Watson?’

‘Where one goes, the other is sure to follow. It is unfortunate, the cost, but it’s the price that must be paid.’

***

The conclave was over before midnight, but Mycroft Holmes did not go home straight away. The others filed out one by one, each to his or her respective residences where they resumed their public lives, but he stayed behind, in his private office, to work. He checked in with operatives in Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Hong Kong, who were just waking up; and with agents in Santiago, Havana, and Washington, who were just readying for sleep. He revised reports from the field and evaluated threats flagged by three different governments. He deployed agents on tactical missions in four different countries. He triple checked the accounts, verified the funds, and moved money around to where it would be most useful. And last of all, he checked the CCTV monitor displaying the front door of 221B Baker Street. All appeared quiet.

Rising for his coat, he rang Anthea, who had been awaiting his call.

‘Two minutes. Have the car ready,’ he told her. ‘I’ll have your briefing.’

The lift travelled silently from the highest floor to the ground. He bid the doorman goodnight by name and received a ‘Goodnight, Mr Holmes’ in return. Then he tugged on his Crombie overcoat and stepped outside where the town car idled in front of the building, waiting to take him home. The doorman followed him, pulling open the rear door of the car.

‘Thank you, Geoffrey,’ said Mycroft tiredly, and he ducked his head and slipped inside to where Anthea was waiting for him on the opposite side of the facing seat within the spacious car.

Only it wasn’t Anthea. The moment the door closed, it locked, and the car revved and rolled. Mycroft Holmes found himself seated across from Irene Adler.

He was not a man who startled easily, nor was he often caught off his guard. But he was a man of
supreme control; and so, even as adrenaline flooded his stomach and the blood drained from his face at the sight of her and the gold-plated precision small arms .25-caliber semi-automatic she levelled at him, he comported himself with dignity, and with all the coolness in the world he said by way of greeting and in an unshaken tone, ‘Intelligence placed you in Paris as of fifteen hundred hours just today.’

The woman raised an imperious eyebrow and answered with an equal degree of calm. ‘Intelligence, you say?’

‘You’re looking well.’

‘I am well rested.’

‘Is the grieving period over? Or are you finally bored of hiding in shadows and behind nursery rhymes.’

‘Plans change, Mr Holmes.’

‘When they are thwarted.’

‘I’m endlessly adaptable.’

He rolled his eyes and noted the stranger behind the wheel. ‘Where is Davenport?’

‘Oh, you must mean the driver.’

To an unknowing observer, both Mycroft and she appeared perfectly at ease, conversational even, if not for the semi-automatic charging the atmosphere with destructive possibilities. She sat with the coy but comfortable posture of her sex—knees together and angled toward him, head turned and tilted to emphasise the length of her neck and narrowness of her jaw. Her hair was pulled back and coiled into a low bun on the side of her head at the nape of her neck. She wore a black dress softly draped at the neckline, rippling all the way down to an asymmetrically cut hemline. Her bare arms were draped in a dark-blue silken shawl, and soft-leather gloves stretched inches above her wrist, complementing the mid-calf, high-heeled boots. She looked as though she had just come from a gala.

He waited for an answer.

‘He’s not dead,’ she answered. ‘Not yet. But I cannot vouch for his comfort. Two bodies in a boot is rather a tight fit.’

‘Anthea,’ he surmised, his heart sinking.

‘Is that what you call her? Pet names are so revealing, aren’t they?’

He was displeased. Very displeased. But he wasn’t the one holding the gun.

‘Are they conscious?’

She frowned, as though disappointed in him. ‘I don’t hear thumping. Do you?’

At present, there was nothing he could do for Davenport or Anthea. But to ensure their future safety, he had to secure his own. He was reasonably sure that she had no intention of pulling the trigger. Not just yet, in any case. Had she wanted him dead, she would have fired already, or had a sniper pawn take the shot. No, she wanted something, and it was one of two things: information, or favour. Mycroft prepared himself to respond to either.

‘We’re headed to Baker Street,’ Mycroft next deduced from the route. ‘I can assure you, Sherlock will not open the door to you, not even if you hold me as hostage with a gun pointed at my head. You overestimate our fondness for one another.’

‘I don’t think I do,’ she responded, simpering, ‘but I’m not using you as a hostage, Mr Holmes. I need you to deliver a message to my virgin sweetheart.’

So favour it was.

‘And in return? I trust you will release my personnel.’

‘You may retrieve them at your leisure. Though you may need a crane and diver.’

He couldn’t let her see how she was stirring him to anger. In any case, allowing her to excite any emotion in him was wholly counterproductive, and he needed to shut it down. For now, it was simply a matter of collecting information and data, as much as possible, so that he might decide the most prudent course of action.

‘And the nature of this message?’ he prompted.

‘I thought you’d never ask.’

Still levelling the gun at the centre of his chest, she bit the tip of the glove on her left hand and pulled it off, setting it aside and revealing long nails polished blood red. Then she reached for a small purse at her side, clicked it open, and extracted a tube of lipstick. She unsheathed it, twisted the bottom, and applied a shade to match the polish, performing each action with only her left hand. Given her profession, this dexterity did not surprise him.

Then she moved. She left her seat angled across from him to join him on the back bench. She placed the cold tip of the gun against his throat to pin him. Then, weapon anchored, she climbed on top of him. Fixing one knee between his thighs, she grasped the back of his neck above the collar with her free hand and pressed her lips against his own. He felt repulsed but, at her mercy, he did not flinch. Long fingernails dug into the meat of his neck and dragged painfully along the skin, and he thought she must have drawn blood. Suddenly, she kicked a knee toward his groin,
and he gasped reflexively at the sharpness of the pain. The gun rose up from chest to cheek, and she caressed the side of his face with it. Finally, she slipped a hand inside the inner pocket of his coat and extracted his mobile phone. Grinning, she returned to her seat, setting the phone in her lap. She picked up the glove and redressed herself in it.

‘I won’t ask whether you enjoyed that,’ she said blithely. ‘The Holmes brothers seem to share an enthusiasm for kissing beautiful women.’

His lips felt like they were burning. Unwilling to hide his disgust any longer, he wiped away the lipstick she had left there with the back of his hand; the burning seemed to transfer to the skin of his hand.

‘I will say, kissing you boys is terribly unsatisfying. Jim wasn’t overstating the moniker he gave you. Are you so cold with all your former mistresses? I shouldn’t expect such treatment.’

He wouldn’t rise to the bait and gave her no reaction. ‘What exactly is the message, Ms Adler?’ he asked with a sneer, licking his prickly bottom lip; there was a sharpness, now, on the tip of his tongue.

‘Darling,’ she said with a disappointed gaze, ‘you are.’

She went again for her purse and pulled out a small plastic bag. Then, with deft fingers beneath those gloves, she scraped gently at the corner of her mouth. Mycroft watched with bated breath as she peeled off a thin, gossamer layer from her lips and dropped it into the plastic bag. She pulled out a cleansing wipe, rubbed it across her mouth, and deposited it the same.

The tingling on his mouth was beginning to numb both lips and tongue; the back of his neck, though, was on fire, and all over, wherever the blood coursed through his body, his skin crawled as though he were covered with spiders.

‘What have you done?’ His heart had begun to race. His skin felt cold and his palms were clammy, but he wasn’t sure if such physiological reactions were the result of heightened fear or something far more deleterious. Then a wave of nausea struck, spread through him, and his stomach clenched in epigastric pain; his whole body shuddered, and he curled over his knees, knowing he would be sick.

‘Watch the shoes, love,’ she said disinterestedly, moving her boots away from where he might throw up. She casually picked up the mobile from her lap and began to type.

***

At half three in the morning, Sherlock awoke to the sound of a ding in the pocket of his dressing gown. His eyes opened slowly. In half a second, he remembered where he was—he had fallen asleep sitting upright on the sofa. John was still beside him, breathing deeply.

Carefully, he extracted himself from where John leant against him, and held John’s upper arms just until he was sure his friend would remain upright. Then he limped toward the hearth, now cold, and used his body to shield the light from the mobile as he opened his inbox. A text from Mycroft? At such an hour, it was not to be ignored. He opened it and read the single script.

C34H47NO11

His eyes narrowed in momentary confusion. A puzzle? Was Mycroft honestly sending him a little brainteaser in the middle of the night? His initial irritation gave way under the stronger reality that such a game was not at all Mycroft’s style. Whatever this was, it must be significant.

He recognised the pattern at once as a chemical formula, but he was less confident as to what it delineated. Carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen were among the most common elements on the planet, so whatever this meant, it was characteristically biological. Some formulas he could read at a glance (ethanol and propanol and sodium hypochlorite, for instance), but this one recalled nothing to him. Checking that John still slept, he sank down into his chair and began to search his online sources.

Aconitine, he discovered, and a chord in his memory was plucked. Aconitum was a plant, one he had researched after John had been gifted the ill-fated bouquet. Also called monkshood or devil’s helmet. He tapped and typed and scrolled through images of the delicate purple flower. Every part of it was highly poisonous, from pistil to root. Women’s bane, he read, and queen of poisons. The flower contained alkaloids that depressed the nervous system, instigated cardiac arrhythmia, and led to death. Ingested or absorbed through the skin, it was fast-acting and among the deadlier poisons on the planet, for which there was no antidote.

Suddenly, out on the street and right below the flat, three loud honks from a car horn blared through the window and shattered the night-time quiet. Sherlock flinched, and John started awake with a yolt. The photograph in his lap slipped to the floor, and the glass shattered. Three more honks, long this time, someone laying on the horn. Sherlock was on his feet, hobbling to the window. And finally, three more, abrupt, then silent. John twisted to look at the monitor, but Sherlock saw it through the glass. A black town car was driving away, and left behind on the pavement below was a body. He recognised it at once.

‘Mycroft,’ he whispered.

End of Book II: The Slash Man

To be continued . . .
The story *The Slash Man*, Book 2 of the series *The Fallen*, is now concluded. I began drafting in February of 2013 and posting to AO3 and FFN on August 30. Nearly a full year has passed since then, and I am grateful to those who have stuck with me to the end. Though an exhausting endeavour, it has been immensely rewarding on a very personal level, and the support, encouragement, and enthusiasm shared among readers has helped propel me toward completion.

This section contains the following:

- Appendix A: Timeline of Sherlock’s Childhood, Youth, and Early Adulthood
- Appendix B: Timeline of *The Slash Man*
- Appendix C: Index of Victims, Fairy Tales, and Other Puzzles
- Appendix D: Preview to Book III
- Appendix E: Acknowledgements

As before, the inclusion of this information is for the benefit of the interested reader. I am not offended if people choose to ignore it.

### Appendix A: Timeline of Sherlock’s Childhood, Youth, and Early Adulthood

This timeline makes assumptions about Sherlock’s date of birth, as well as other significant events in his life. Any errors or inconsistencies in the consequent timeline I provide here I consider in keeping with the canonical messiness.

**Childhood (0–12)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 6, 1976</td>
<td>Sherlock Holmes is born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>The Holmeses lose Sherlock at a funeral; he is discovered sleeping in a casket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Sherlock’s fascination with bones begins to be expressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1982</td>
<td>Mycroft leaves home to attend Eton College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1982</td>
<td>Sherlock cuts open a pigeon’s wings to learn how it flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He visits his first child psychiatrist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He acquires his first violin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 1983</td>
<td>Mycroft observes Sherlock’s compulsive tendencies and begins to worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983–1985</td>
<td>Mrs Holmes takes Sherlock to a string of psychiatrists, looking for answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 1986</td>
<td>The Big Boys Upstairs first take an interest in Sherlock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mycroft dedicates his life to protecting his little brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 1987</td>
<td>Sherlock reveals his father’s infidelity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>The Holmes’ divorce is finalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[John’s mother dies]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Youth (12–17)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autumn 1989</td>
<td>Sherlock goes to Eton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carl Powers drowns in a swimming pool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Sherlock refuses to return to therapy; he begins smoking cigarettes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mycroft buys Sherlock a new violin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[John’s father dies]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992–1994</td>
<td>Sherlock sneaks away from the school at night and becomes a petty criminal; his dependencies and addictions worsen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Adulthood (18–34)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Sherlock attends university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Mycroft is ‘invited’ to join the Big Boys Upstairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Sherlock drops out of university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1997</td>
<td>Sherlock sees his father’s name in the obituaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Mrs Holmes commits suicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 11, 2001</td>
<td>Attack on the World Trade Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Sherlock begins solving crimes by using his deductive skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter 2003</td>
<td>Sherlock meets Greg Lestrade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Lestrade starts using Sherlock on official cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>[John is shot in Afghanistan and invalided home]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Timeline of The Slash Man

This timeline begins in the week preceding the opening chapter of The Slash Man. We open with the plot points most pertinent to the events laid out in the story. Therefore, we begin on Christmas Eve of 2014, approximately one week following the conclusion of Ten Days and one week prior to chapter 1 of The Slash Man. It has been some two months since John’s rescue, though only about four weeks since he left hospital.

December 23, 2014
Two bricks fly through the windows of 221B and the front door is vandalised

December 24, 2014
Alone in a pub on Christmas Eve, Edward Stallman meets a man who bribes him simply to turn a key

December 26, 2014
Mycroft pays a visit to 221B
George Yarrow is bribed to steal Donovan’s keys

December 28, 2014
Randall Kensington has an imprint made of Donovan’s keys

December 30, 2014
Mitch Jenkins unlocks the evidence lockers; Heidi Ringwald steals evidence relevant to the St Mary’s abductions

December 31, 2014
Hidden within nondescript parcels, the dog dish, grey underwear, and cilice leave the Yard through the post

January 1, 2015
Thomas Dryers discovers the evidence missing
June Zalud is bribed to purchase sodium hypochlorite

January 2, 2015 [Novel beings]
Sherlock has a nightmare in which John falls from the roof of St Bart’s
Sgt Sally Donovan, spokesperson for New Scotland Yard, announces Sherlock’s exoneration to the press; Kitty Riley reveals her knowledge about the missing evidence
Lestrade attends therapy with Dr Quinton
The body of Sam Jefferies is discovered in Lower Clapton
Lestrade informs Sherlock and John about the missing evidence and dead body, which he believes to be a victim of Darren Hirsch, the Slash Man
Against explicit instructions, Sherlock goes to examine the body in the morgue; he tells Molly Hooper that John is not doing well; Lestrade discovers him there and gets angry

January 3, 2015
Lestrade calls Sherlock to confirm the identity of the victim
Sherlock and John visit the crime scene and find the victim’s shoe in a tree; they receive a cryptic text
Kitty Riley publishes an article denouncing Sherlock for the murder of Richard Brook
John has a sleepwalking nightmare, the first Sherlock has witnessed

January 7, 2015
Sebastian Moran is spotted in Baranavichy
Kitty Riley accosts Molly Hooper for information about Sherlock
Lestrade petitions Chief Superintendent Gregson to allow Sherlock Holmes to assist on cases; though initially denied, Gregson is later convinced and relents

January 8, 2015
Lestrade invites John to serve as a medical consultant to the Yard, and Sherlock to serve as John’s assistant

January 9, 2015
In the early morning, John has a nightmare about Mary
The body of Holden O’Harris is discovered at Borough Market; Scott Anderson, under Kitty Riley’s instruction, tries to stir Sherlock to anger and hits his mark by insulting John; John suffers a panic attack in front of other officers; Ewan Nichols confronts Sherlock about his broken promise
John has a bad day and rows with Sherlock; in the evening, while playing his violin, Sherlock is shot at through the window; John saves his life but suffers a severe panic attack
January 10, 2015
Mycroft visits 221B and suggests that Sherlock leave England, for his own safety; Lestrade berates Mycroft for his callousness

John has another nightmare and attacks Sherlock

January 16, 2015
After a bad session with his therapist, Lestrade receives a disturbing video from ‘Watson’

Donovan confronts Anderson regarding what she supposes is his involvement in the shooting; she leaves only to answer a text from Lestrade

Sherlock lies to John and goes to the Yard to be part of the briefing; John goes after him

Sean Lawrence, tech specialist, manipulates the cameras in the briefing room at the Yard

A video of Sebastian Moran carving an IOU into John’s back is shown to officers of the Yard; text messages are sent simultaneously to all officers present; John is discovered standing in the back of the room; Sherlock and John row in the men’s loo

Ewan Nichols is found hanging below London Bridge

Back in 221B, John hallucinates Sebastian Moran and almost shoots Sherlock; he decides to get help

February 6, 2015
John returns to Ella Thompson

Ralston Winters and Lynette Avery are abducted

February 9, 2015
The Sun publishes graphic photos of the convent; Kitty Riley is brought in for questioning

Ralston Winters is murdered

February 11, 2015
Lynette Avery is murdered

February 12, 2015
The bodies of Ralston Winters and Lynette Avery are found in a skip near Shepherd’s Knoll

February 13, 2015
Mycroft assigns Lestrade to the task of stealing classified materials from Home Office

Ella introduces John to the idea of ‘safety zone therapy’

Molly returns home from St Bart’s and finds a rose on the table and a dead bird in her kettle; she flees the flat and hurries to Baker Street; John teaches her how to shoot and gives her his gun for protection; Sherlock, John, and Molly return to her flat where they spend the night

Lestrade completes Mycroft’s assignment

February 14, 2015
Lestrade goes to see Molly and discovers that she had a break-in; John and Sherlock leave for breakfast, then back to Baker Street where the flat reeks of ammonia

Sherlock and John are called back to the scene of the break-in to be questioned by DI Dimmock; Anderson, part of Dimmock’s forensics team, mocks John with an offensive comment about sexual assault; Sherlock snaps and pummels Anderson to the ground; he is arrested for attacking an officer

Mycroft takes John home and tries to convince him to leave London on his own

Mycroft talks to Sherlock in holding and hints that there are larger though hidden machinations that ought to be feared

February 15, 2015
The Sun publishes the story of Anderson’s assault

Donovan reveals to Anderson, in hospital, that the Yard will be conducting an inquiry into his supposed collusion with Kitty Riley

Molly Hooper receives official sanctions at work; her landlord asks her to move out; Lestrade invites her to move in with him

Sherlock’s permissions with the Yard are officially revoked

Sherlock is detained unreasonably

John works on the riddle left on Winters and Avery

February 16, 2015
Mrs Hudson’s niece, Gillian Woodhouse, calls to express her concern over her aunt’s tenant

Sherlock is released and lured to the banks of the Thames where he is attacked, stoned, and thrown in the water; John and Mrs Hudson care for him upon his return to the flat; John accuses Lestrade of negligence; Lestrade goes to Baker Street to talk; later, after he’s gone, John reveals to Sherlock the pattern within the victims’ names

February 17, 2015
Samantha Hillock emails John and tells him to stop writing

Donovan has a ‘lunch date’ with Molly

Sherlock phones Donovan and tells her to look for a homeless man with the initials OT; she passes the assignment on to Dryers

Lestrade is questioned regarding Anderson’s professional behaviour

Donovan visits JoAnna Brook in Southwater to ask permission to exhume the body in Richard’s grave and is thrown out of the house (politely)

Donovan delivers information about OT to Sherlock and is reluctantly recruited to his team; the search for OT begins

February 18, 2015
Donovan and Dryers locate Osmond Tracy

February 20, 2015
Sherlock and John find clues on their doorstep; they determine the victim will be Orrin Tippet, and he will be attacked on the railroad tracks near Elephant and Castle; there, they discover a dying Tippet; Sherlock runs after a shadow and finds the corpse of Colin Simpkins; the corpse ignites; Sherlock catches fire and has to jump off the tracks; John is attacked by the Slash Man, and Tippet is shot in the head; John is taken to hospital

February 21, 2015
Lestrade and Donovan report to Gregson; Donovan receives a phone call from Mrs Brook; she puts in the order for exhumation

Sherlock and John return to 221 Baker Street and are met with an eviction notice

February 23, 2015
Michaela Warner publishes her soon-to-be-famous opinion piece questioning the truth about Sherlock Holmes

February 27, 2015
Kitty Riley follows John Watson to his therapy appointment; she corners him in a bistro and pursues him into the street where she reveals that Mary had been pregnant when she was killed; shocked and heartbroken, he flees and ends up wandering the city until he is attacked just outside the Poor Sailor

Sherlock finds John in the pub; John tries to get away, but Sherlock follows him to an alley where they have a confrontation

Lestrade tracks them down and takes them home

March 2, 2015
Michaela Warner publishes Claudette Bruhl’s story

March 3, 2015
At his physical therapy appointment, John receives a bouquet of flowers; John, Sherlock, Lestrade, and Molly visit Rosemary and Thyme to learn more about the flowers; Sherlock has a breakdown when he realises what the flowers mean

Kitty Riley is arrested on charges of obstruction

Karim Omid Niazi is abducted off the streets

March 4, 2015
Anthea visits Henry Knight with a proposition

March 5, 2015
The Yard deals with the KON fiasco and continues its search

Cyrus Coggins is tricked into using the cemetery for community sentence clean-up work

March 6, 2015
Lestrade has his final mandatory session with Dr Quinton

While working in the New Cemetery at Camberwell, Sherlock discovers a rose and feather on the grave of Ewan Nichols; roses are found at the graves of each of the victims of the Slash Man and Sebastian Moran; Sherlock and John go to Newport where they find forget-me-nots and poppies at Sherlock’s grave; they find Karim Niazi hanging from a tree and save his life

In hospital, John interviews Karim, and Sherlock serves as translator

Eva Almaraz leaves the nurses’ station for seven minutes
John sleepwalks again

March 7, 2015
Donovan crosses Dryers off her list of suspects

March 8, 2015
Sherlock, Donovan, and Lestrade receive deceptive texts; they discover the Slash Man’s lair;
Sherlock and Lestrade see Darren Hirsch enter 221

Molly and John are both attacked

John kills the Slash Man

March 9, 2015
At St Bart’s, Mycroft tells Sherlock he bought 221; he has created aliases for Sherlock and John to
use as needed

Ella Thompson tells Sherlock that John needs him

The autopsy of Darren Hirsch reveals how thoroughly John had killed him

Sherlock wakes up in John’s room; tensions arise, and Sherlock leaves upset

March 10, 2015
Michaela Warner writes up the death of the Slash Man

Sherlock, suffering severe pain in his ankle, tries to self-medicate; he undergoes surgery to correct
a lateral malleolus fracture

Gregson interviews Molly about the attack

John visits Donovan in hospital and thanks her for being an ally

Lestrade announces his plans to sell the house and build a new life with Molly

Donovan asks Dryers out on a date

Sherlock and John reach an unspoken truce and spend some peaceful time together

March 13, 2015
In Mycroft’s flat, John can’t sleep; he asks Mycroft whether he really cares for his brother;
Mycroft affirms unequivocally that he does

March 16, 2015
John and Sherlock return to the flat, which has been refurbished with the highest security
measures; Sherlock expresses gratitude to his brother

March 19, 2015
John updates his blog for the first time in nearly four years

Sherlock goes to the Yard to examine evidence; Lestrade informs him about the blog, which is
creating quite a stir among officers; Sherlock hurries home; he is stunned by what he reads

John returns home

March 21, 2015
John and Sherlock travel north to Norfolk to bring Mrs Hudson home

March 25, 2015
Lestrade interviews Edward Stallman

April 2, 2015
The Brooks hire Sherlock to find out what happened to their son

April 3, 2015
John suffers a painful self-revelation

April 15, 2015
Michaela Warner writes an article detailing the sentencing of Kitty Riley

Lestrade gives John a photograph of him and Mary; Bill Murray, an old friend, is in the
background; that night, John speaks openly to Sherlock of Mary

Mycroft ensures Sherlock’s safety from the Big Boys Upstairs by sacrificing it to Moran and
Adler; he has an unexpected and unpleasant encounter with Irene Adler and is poisoned

Mycroft’s body is dumped on Sherlock’s doorstep

Appendix C: Index of Victims, Fairy Tales, and Puzzles

Victims of the Slash Man

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>Last Name</th>
<th>Date Died</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Jeffries</td>
<td>Died January 2 (see rhyme #1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holden</td>
<td>O’Harris</td>
<td>Died January 9 (see rhyme #2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewan</td>
<td>Nichols</td>
<td>Died January 16 (see rhyme #3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralston</td>
<td>Winters</td>
<td>Died February 9 (see rhymes #4, #5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynette</td>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>Died February 11 (see rhymes #4, #5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Rock-a-Bye

Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetop.
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,
And down will come baby, cradle and all.

After he was killed, Sam Jefferies’ body was hoisted by the neck, up and into a large horse chestnut, and balanced precariously on a fork in the branch. This rhyme was selected specially to precede the others, suggesting to Sherlock that his world and any securities he might trust (essentially, his cradle) in were about to break apart, become unstable, and fall.

2. Ring a Ring o’ Roses

Ring a ring o’ roses,
A pocket full of posies.
Atishoo, atishoo, we all fall down.

Holden O’Harris was discovered in a market, a place of trade and exchange, with his pockets filled with rose petals (roses being Irene Adler’s calling card) and hemlock (a deadly poison intended to foreshadow Mycroft’s death). As Sherlock later tells John, a small bunch of cut flowers, like the ones here, is called a ‘posy’, pointing to the rhyme. Famously, this rhyme is often though erroneously associated with the Black Plague, as suggested by the sneezing (illness) preceding falling down (death). (The American version replaces ‘atishoo, atishoo’ with ‘ashes, ashes’, a reference to cremation. Either way, the act of ‘falling down’ being associated with death is clear.)

3. My Fair Lady

London Bridge is falling down,
London Bridge is falling down,
London Bridge is falling down,
My fair lady.

Ewan Nichols is discovered hanging below London Bridge, a steel cable serving as his noose. In the London Bridge game known in many English-speaking countries around the world, two children form a bridge with their arms while the others take turns passing under it until the bridge collapses and one child invariably gets ‘caught’ between the children’s arms. This prisoner, according to Victorian folklorists like Alice Gomme, was meant to serve as a watchman, someone who was charged to ‘watch the bridge’ night and day to ensure it does not collapse. Interestingly, this speaks to pagan superstitions of ‘foundation sacrifice’, that is, a captive was taken and buried in the foundations of the bridge to serve as a perpetual guardian. This presumably ensured its stability.

A parallel may be applied here. As with the cradle in ‘Rock-a-Bye’, the proverbial bridge is unstable and threatening collapse. As mockery, Ewan Nichols has been ‘captured’ and made as a human sacrifice to watch over the bridge.

4. Jack and Jill

Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after.

A more literal rendering of the rhyme is found in the deaths of Ralston Winters and Lynette Avery, who are known on the streets as ‘Jack and Jill’. After leaving the pub the Shepherd’s Knoll (the hill) for drinks (a pail of water), they are captured (their own ‘fall’); Ralston (Jack) dies first from a blow to the crown of his head; Nette (Jill) dies second (comes ‘tumbling after’).

5. Life Is But a Dream

A boat, beneath a sunny sky
Linger ing onward dreamily
In an evening of July—

Children three that nestle near,
Eager eye and willing ear,
Pleased a simple tale to hear—

Long has paled that sunny sky;
Echoes fade and memories die;
Autumn frosts have slain July;

Still she haunts me, phantomwise,
Alice moving under skies
Never seen by waking eyes.
The acrostic clued John into the hidden message within the names of the victims of the Slash Man.

6. Polly Put the Kettle On

Polly put the kettle on,
Polly put the kettle on,
Polly put the kettle on,
We'll all have tea.

Sukey take it off again,
Sukey take it off again,
Sukey take it off again,
They've all gone away.

When Molly Hooper returned home the night before Valentine's Day, she found a rose on her table with a note reading 'Molly put the kettle on', alluding to this rhyme. Though the rhyme itself has nothing to do with falling, it did get Molly to look in the kettle, where she found a dead wren with clipped wings (see #7).

7. Dreoilín, Dreoilín, Rí na nÉan

Dreoilín, dreoilín, Rí na nÉan                         The wren, the wren, the king of birds
Is mór a mhuirthín, is beag é féin                  His brood is big, but he is small
Lá 'le Stiofáin a gabhadh é                             St Stephen's Day he was caught
Is tabhair dhom pingin a chuirfeas é.             And give me a penny to bury him.

Many legends, poems, and fables exist relating the story of how the wren became the 'King of the Birds'. Sherlock gives the German account when explaining to John how the bird cheated the eagle and was cursed by the owl and shamed by all birds (see chapter 16).

The song given here, in both the original Irish and the English translation, speaks to the game of trying to catch a wren on St Stephen’s Day (December 26), also called ‘Day of the Wren’, usually by throwing rocks at the bird while it is perched on a wall (see #9), knocking it to the ground, and killing it for sport. Metaphorically, Sherlock is often depicted as a wren in these stories.

8. Three Wise Monkeys

See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

Usually given as pictorial maxim using three mystic apes, the Three Wise Monkeys are often seen together as one covers its eyes, another its ears, and the last its mouth. In Western culture, it is often used to suggest turning a blind eye to others' suffering.

This is exactly what the homeless accuse Sherlock of doing: effectively turning a blind eye to their plight, as their people continue to be targets of the Slash Man. As punishment, they stuff his mouth with mud and cover his ears and eyes, making him blind, deaf, and mute. Ironically, they are blind to the fact that the Slash Man is among them, assisting them in their act of cruelty.

9. Humpty Dumpty

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king’s horses and all the king’s men
Couldn’t put Humpty together again.

Sherlock and John are presented with seemingly obscure clues pointing to the location of Orrin Tippet’s body, which Sherlock is able to crack in short time (see chapter 22). The selection of the rhyme ‘Humpty Dumpty’ speaks to the futility of making something what it was before: once Humpty Dumpty, an egg, as the riddle suggests, has fallen, it cracks, and no power of kings or armies can restore a cracked egg to wholeness. Similarly, the abuses being enacted against the Slash Man’s victims (in this case, Orrin Tippet) have made indelible marks that can never be expunged. One cannot return from the dead.

10. Jack Be Nimble

Jack be nimble,
Jack be quick,
Jack jump over
the candlestick.

This blatant warning of imminent danger and the charge to act with exigency leads almost at once
to a literal fall, as Sherlock, to escape a fire, must jump off the railroad tracks to the pavement
below (see chapter 23).

11. Hickory Dickory Dock

Hickory, Dickory, Dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock.

Though this counting rhyme never appears in any explicit way in the novel, it is alluded to on
several occasions. As a child, Sherlock begins to keep an internal clock to mark the passage of
time whenever he feels anxious or alone (see chapter 25). That clock has been ticking ever since
toward the inevitable strike of the hour. Only Mycroft appears to be aware of this.

12. Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells, and cockle shells,
And pretty maids all in a row.

From an anonymous well-wisher, John received a bouquet of condolence flowers, comprised of
periwinkles, snowdrops, and black orchids. Sherlock gives a full explanation of how each of these
flowers relate to the rhyme as silver bells, cockle shells, and pretty maids; strips them of metaphor
in showing how they speak to medieval torture devices; and attaches their significance to weapons
used against John (see chapter 27). The word ‘garden’, he also says, is sometimes given as
‘graveyard’. In time, this leads to the search for gravestones of the victims of Moran and Adler,
their growing garden of the dead.

13. Three Blind Mice

Three blind mice. Three blind mice.
See how they run. See how they run.
They all ran after the farmer’s wife,
Who cut off their tails with a carving knife.
Did you ever see such a sight in your life
As three blind mice?

Sgt Donovan receives a text message and a taunt reading, ‘Three blind mice. See how they run.’
The ‘three mice’ referred to are Sherlock, Lestrade, and Donovan, blinded in that they are
deceived and lured away on the false pretence of chasing after clues or villains. It may be inferred
that the ‘farmer’s wife’ of the rhyme, who holds the carving knife and inflicts actual damage, is
Irene Adler.

14. O Danny Boy

O Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
From glen to glen and down the mountain side.
The summer’s gone, and all the roses falling.
It’s you, it’s you must go and I must bide.

But come ye back when summer’s in the meadow,
Or when the valley’s hushed and white with snow.
It’s I’ll be here in sunshine or in shadow.
Oh, Danny boy, oh Danny boy, I love you so!

But when ye come, and all the flowers are dying,
If I am dead, as dead I well may be,
Ye’ll come and find the place where I am lying,
And kneel and say an Ave there for me;

And I shall hear, though soft you tread above me,
And all my grave will warmer, sweeter be,
For you will bend and tell me that you love me,
And I shall sleep in peace until you come to me!

The motif of flowers and the theme of death is prominent in this ballad, which is liturgical and
often sung at funerals, although the original tune, ‘Londonderry Air’, is often considered a
victorious anthem. Victims of the Slash Man often heard him whistling this tune before they died.

15. Who Killed Cock Robin?

Who killed Cock Robin?
I, said the sparrow.
With my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin.

Who saw him die?
I, said the fly.
With my little eye,
I saw him die.

...
All the birds of the air
fell a-sighing and a-sobbing,
when they heard the bell toll
for poor Cock Robin.

Intended as the pièce de résistance of Moran and Adler’s series of rhymes and murders, ‘Who Killed Cock Robin?’ was left on the wall of the entryway to 221B (see chapter 30). As Sherlock describes (see chapter 31), the death of Cock Robin was to be synonymous with the death of John Watson. The execution of the murder was thwarted, and so the masterpiece spoiled.

Appendix D: Preview to Book III

Book III will conclude the series The Fallen.

The storytelling will grow in two directions—both advancing forward in time and extending backward to reveal hitherto unknown secrets, for example:

- Why was John labelled an ‘insubordinate soldier’?
- What really happened to Richard Brook?
- How did Sebastian Moran come to be Moriarty’s right-hand man?
- Why did Mary need a detective?
- And others.

The forward direction of the plot will, for now, be kept secret.

Appendix E: Acknowledgements

Once again, I would like to acknowledge the work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who originated the characters I have come to love so well, from Sherlock Holmes to Dr Watson to Inspector Lestrade to Mrs Hudson. His work continues to inspire my own, as it does the thousands of others who have embarked on works of fanfiction, whether it be professionally cinematic or as amateur as this.

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See you all for Book III.

For future updates and information, you can follow me on Tumblr at engazed.tumblr.com

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!