The Bravery of the Soldier

by bakerstreetgirl

Summary

When a news story about a hostage situation in Afghanistan breaks, details about John Watson's military service come to light that the doctor had kept secret for a long time. Sherlock is intrigued and John manages to surprise the British government. What John needs in light of this story and the PTSD responses it flares up, is a friend. Can Sherlock Holmes step up to the job?

Deals mainly with John's career and military background, plus epic friendship, BAMFiness and a little bit of case fic.

Trigger Warnings for: War, Violence and Torture in relation to War, flashbacks, PTSD
I won't be posting warnings on every chapter. This story is about John's military service and the way he deals with it. I'm sure you can imagine what that could entail.

Notes

"The Bravery of the Soldier" will be my contribution to NaNoWriMo 2013.

Starting on November 1, I'll post chapters as soon as they are written, hoping to complete 50k words by November 30.

The warnings are for future chapters, as there will be graphic descriptions of John's time in Her Majesty's service and any injuries he may have received in the line of duty. There'll be a lot of PTSD, Hurt/Comfort but also incredible BAMFiness from a certain doctor!

I appreciate any con crit you might have for me and I live for kudos and comments.
I'd like to point out that I've got no medical knowledge except for basic first aid and I am not affiliated with any armies, so I'm researching as best I can for it all to be plausible but I might make use of creative license on occasion.

Should the muse strike you and you want to create art based on this, please let me know, I'd love to see it!! I'd love to see this translated into other languages, so if you want to translate, please let me know and credit this original!! :)

I've lived in the UK so I'm pretty confident regarding British vocab and slang words etc., but if you notice any glaring discrepancies please say so. Sometimes my mind reads what it wants to read and I don't spot if I accidentally used the wrong word here or there.
The sun was shining through the window when John Watson woke up. The shower was working just fine, he whistled along to the radio as he got ready and he was in an exceptionally good mood, feeling happy and relaxed as he descended the stairs to the living room. There was nothing at all that would have suggested what kind of a turn this day was about to take.

For all intents and purposes, it was an ordinary, quiet Saturday morning at 221b Baker Street. Sherlock was sitting in the kitchen, fully absorbed in his latest experiment and absentmindedly sipping at the cup of Yorkshire tea his flatmate had just shoved in front of him.

John, clutching a cup of tea of his own and a plate with scrambled eggs and toast, walked over to the living room, took a seat on the sofa and flipped open The Guardian. Both men were enjoying the peace and quiet that had descended upon their lodgings.

They had completed their latest case the previous day, both got a decent night’s sleep and for once there were no injuries to treat. Considering how battered they usually ended up after cases, this was a bit of an oddity.

“Hoo-hoo!” Mrs. Hudson called into the flat before stepping into the living room.

“Morning, boys.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Hudson,” John replied for both of them.

“I was making scones this morning and must have got the recipe wrong. I made way too many, so I thought I’d bring some up for you, dears,” she said and put a plate full of freshly-baked scones down on the table in front of John.

“Mrs. Hudson, you’re a saint!”

Even though both John and Sherlock knew it was a white lie and that she had intended to bake for them all along, they were both utterly grateful and played along. Smelling the baked goods, even Sherlock abandoned his experiment and joined John and their landlady in the main room.

John got up, poured an extra cup of tea for Mrs. Hudson, took a pot of clotted cream and some jam out of the fridge and decided not to tell Mrs. Hudson what exactly had been stored next to the cream. It’d be better if she didn’t know.

Munching their scones in blissful silence, John was flipping through the newspaper. Almost imperceptibly, he tensed, adjusted his sitting position and started reading a feature in earnest.
Every few paragraphs, John’s eyebrows would rise a little. Sherlock didn’t want to ask, but he’d have to skim-read the paper later to satisfy his curiosity and find out what had caught John's attention like that.

Judging by the fact that John had evidently adopted a stance that meant he sat ‘at attention,’ the detective deduced it had something to do with Afghanistan.

After breakfast, John excused himself and went up to his room where he stayed for more than an hour while Sherlock resumed his experiment, and later went to pick up the violin. But before he brought the instrument up to his chin, his eyes landed on the neatly folded Guardian John had been perusing earlier.

He flicked it open and didn’t have to search for long. A feature about a government cover-up, hostage situation and multiple injuries leapt out at Sherlock from pages six and seven. The feature was accompanied by photos of British soldiers (judging by the uniforms), though their faces had been pixellated, awaiting formal identification.

The article stated that in 2009, a British unit had been ambushed and taken hostage by the Taliban somewhere in the far reaches of Helmand Province. When this unit failed to make contact with the base, a tactical team and a medic had been sent after them. The report went on to say that this tactical team was overpowered as well, and the soldiers taken hostage.

Ransom demands had been sent out and the release of captured insurgents requested in exchange for the men’s lives. When none of the demands were met, the captors sent one of the British soldiers back in a body bag. A week later, another British soldier died as an apparent suicide bomber after he’d been sent into the local town’s square at gunpoint, strapped into a bomb vest.

A raid was ordered on the compound the troops were being held prisoner at. A firefight ensued; the insurgents were killed or captured. Eyewitness accounts suggested that one of the soldiers took charge of all the prisoners and organised them so that they could be as efficient as possible during the siege.

The same man, it was alleged, suffered severe wounds while protecting his unit, trying to get all the injured soldiers out of the line of fire during the stand-off. The identity of the man remained a mystery, but the eyewitnesses concurred that he was a hero and deserved to be recognised as such. According to all accounts, he had single-handedly saved the lives of all remaining prisoners and suffered greatly for his act of bravery.

Sherlock sat back deep into the sofa. ‘2009,’ he thought. ‘That’s when John was serving in Afghanistan. Maybe he had heard about this? Maybe he knew some of them or treated the prisoners at the field hospital he was stationed at. I need to find out.’

Behind him, Sherlock could hear John’s footsteps coming down the stairs to the living room. Sherlock looked up and saw that John had got changed. Where he had been sporting his favourite worn pair of jeans and the oatmeal jumper he seemed so fond of earlier, he had now changed into a dark pair of jeans, a plaid shirt, a dark blue cardigan and his brown leather shoes.

Sherlock took it all in with one look, one eyebrow slightly raised. John cleared his throat.

“I'm going out for a bit, Sherlock. I’ll order us some takeaway for later. Anything else we need, text me, okay? I can go past the shops.”

“Fine, John.”

With that, John grabbed his coat and bounded down the seventeen stairs.

In one swift motion, Sherlock was back on his feet, in front of the large window, violin and bow in hand. Just as he was about to play, he caught a glimpse of John as he walked out the front door. He was greeted by an imposing-looking man. John saluted and sprang to attention. The man returned the salute and motioned for John to follow him.

‘Military training,’ Sherlock thought, amused by how easily and seamlessly John had snapped to attention. ‘Once a soldier, always a soldier.’ The detective had no doubt left that John was involved in the news story in one way or another. He’d have to ask John more about it tonight.

Sherlock turned back towards the window and the melody of God Save The Queen soon wafted through the air at Baker Street.

Across London, Mycroft Holmes had been called into a secret Whitehall meeting. He knew it was about the Afghanistan story that had appeared in the papers today. He had already secured the so-called proof the Guardian had cited as its source for the story.

Although there had clearly been a government cover-up, Mycroft himself had not worked on this issue in 2009. He had been responsible for Korea at the time.

His superiors demanded answers as to what had happened and who had been involved. The agent who had dealt with the issue initially had been assassinated in 2011, so the task of establishing timeline, identification, protocol and verification of authenticity had been transferred to the older Holmes brother.

His lovely assistant, known as Anthea to the outside world, had handed him a DVD only moments before he had been called to the meeting, and Mycroft disliked not being able to review the information beforehand. In this matter, though, he didn’t have much choice, so he asked...
Anthea to run facial recognition against the video from Afghanistan and contact him via her trusted BlackBerry once she had more information.

The impeccably dressed man didn’t outwardly show his nervousness to anyone. After years of working for Mycroft Holmes, Anthea could tell her boss was anxious, though. She quickly squeezed his hand once. Mycroft looked at her gratefully, inhaled deeply, pushed open the heavy wooden doors and entered the lion’s den.

When John stepped out of 221b Baker Street, he wasn’t at all surprised to find his old commanding officer, Colonel Mark Carlyle waiting for him. In fact, in light of the story he just read, he had expected it and had wisely changed into more suitable civilian clothes than the comfortable ones he’d been wearing earlier this morning.

As soon as he spotted his CO, Captain Watson snapped to attention, saluting as if the last three years of his life as a civilian GP and blogger had never happened. They’d been on first name terms out in the desert, but some habits died hard.

“Captain John Watson! So good to see you again. At ease!” Colonel Carlyle beamed.

“May I have a word with you? I trust you know what this is about?”

“Of course, Mark. And it’s good to see you, too.”

“Walk with me, John,” Carlyle said and started making his way down Baker Street. John fell into step by his side.

“Of course you were debriefed at the time. I’ve known you long enough to trust that you didn’t leak this to the press.”

“That’s right. Debriefed as soon as my condition was stable. I’ve not told a soul about this. What would I have to gain? I just don’t understand where those pictures came from, sir. It’s definitely us, it’s definitely the compound, but none of my men were carrying Audio/Visual equipment.”

“That’s what I thought, John. And believe me, we, the entire British Army, are grateful for everything you and that unit of yours did. I just regret that given the diplomatic red tape we’ve never been able to adequately show our appreciation and gratitude”, Carlyle said and stopped, fixing his gaze on the pavement at his feet.

John tensed a bit. Of course he understood that it would have created a major incident, had the truth been found out at the time. The army was trying to save face. But John couldn’t help but think that a little appreciation would have gone a long way.

While they had all recovered from their injuries, all but two were invalided home like him. They had all wound up in depressing little bedsits provided by the Ministry of Defence, but thinking back to his life in London before Baker Street, John didn’t think it had been worth all he and his unit had been through. But that is life in the army for you, and John knew what he had signed up for. He straightened up and looked at his CO. That easy smile he was known for on his face, an unassuming, almost apologetic look.

“For Queen and Country, Mark, above all else. You know that as well as I do. There’s a reason I still live by the RAMC’s motto In Arduis Fidelis,” John acknowledged.

“Faithful in adversity. How true, Captain.”

With that, they walked side by side in silence for a few minutes. Both men had their hands clasped together behind their backs like they were on a leisurely stroll through Hyde Park.

Eventually, they reached a little pub called The Gunmakers.

“Well, John, I’m not sure what the Ministry of Defence or the British Army will or will not do in light of this article. I hope they’ll do the right thing, the decent thing and own up, finally showing respect where respect is due.”

“That’s very kind, Mark. I would like to see my unit honoured for the way they dealt with their ordeal. You know me; I don’t like fame and I wouldn’t want anything for myself. We did our duty, followed our training. But it shattered our careers in Her Majesty’s service. If there is any way I can help secure treatment or housing or anything to set them up properly for civilian life, I’m happy to do what it takes. They are good men, trusted friends and colleagues.”

“That they are indeed”, Carlyle agreed, still a bit perplexed by John’s modesty although he’d never seen John ask for anything for himself in all the years they’d served together.

“Well, I don’t know what official course of action will be taken, but I insist that you at least let me buy you lunch and a pint, for old time’s sake if nothing else and a little towards showing my own appreciation. And you can tell me all about your life here and any news you might have of your unit.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can be persuaded. This is my local, after all. Though please don’t call me Captain in here. I’m just Doctor Watson these days. I left Captain Watson behind… that day. No disrespect, sir.”

“OK, then, Doctor Watson. What will you have?”

John smiled and placed his order. They talked for close to two hours, about deployments, mutual
“Nurse Montgomery is on home leave now, I’ve heard. She’s pregnant! And Corporal McLeod got married last year,” Colonel Carlyle said halfway through his second pint.

“Bastion is still the same, a few more barracks, maybe, but the place is still as big, red and sandy as ever. Field hospital’s gone a bit downhill, though. They need more people like you. You’re a damn good doctor and a fine soldier!”

“Was…” John corrected.

“Still a bloody good doctor, though.”

“Well, I’m a locum GP, a far cry from what I used to be.”

“I read all about your crime-solving in the papers, though. With that… What’s his face? That… Sherlock Holmes guy.”

John chuckled.

“Yes, it’s rather fun and Sherlock keeps me on my toes! I’m seeing London in a whole new light, now that I’m dealing with Scotland Yard on a regular basis. We’re never bored. Sherlock’s the one solving most of the crimes, even though we’re both accredited consultants. I think I’m mainly considered bodyguard and walking medical encyclopaedia. I just write the cases up and see to it that the genius git doesn’t get himself into too much trouble. Between that and my locum work, I usually have quite a tight schedule.”

The Colonel listened intently, as John told him all about their adrenaline-fuelled cases. He never realised that he hadn’t mentioned his locum work even once during their entire conversation.

[1] Actual pub. The Gunmakers, 33 Aybrook Street, Marylebone, London W1U 4AP, located within walking distance from the real Baker Street (0.5 miles) and the set location on North Gower Street (1.1 miles)
The Mysterious Video

Chapter Summary

In a secret meeting in Whitehall, Mycroft and his peers get an insight into frontline action in Afghanistan.
A rescue mission, a siege and resulting carnage.

Trigger warning: Contains blood, graphic injuries, flashback of war.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who had commented and left kudos so far.
I hope you’ll enjoy the story.

The Mysterious Video

Mycroft and his superiors were still watching the DVD Anthea had procured. For the most part, the picture was shaky and grainy. So far, they had established that a unit of six soldiers from 4th Battalion The Rifles had failed to make contact while clearing a stretch of highway in a mountainous region of Helmand Province.

They had been tasked with securing the road and clearing improvised explosive devices. Two days later, a unit of six from 5th Northumberland Fusiliers, a medically trained officer, two bomb disposal experts and two snipers were sent after 4th Battalion. One of the soldiers from 5th Northumberland Fusiliers was wearing hidden GPS equipment. They had been captured by the Taliban and taken to a compound known to be a Taliban stronghold. That’s where the GPS tracker remained.

From the thick files on the mahogany table in front of them, the men at Whitehall learned that the Captain in charge of 4th Battalion was killed after a ransom demand had not been met. He’d been executed and sent back to Camp Bastion in a body bag. On the body, a note had been found.

It read: “5 Rifs, 6 Fus, 1 Doc, 2 bombs, 2 snips. Alive + well. 20 in den + 2 birds in nest, armed. Road = mountain tunnels. SOS.”

The note had confirmed what the commanders at Camp Bastion were suspecting. All but the Rifles’ Captain were alive. The road from which the soldiers had been taken hostage was served by tunnels hidden in the mountains running alongside it. Twenty insurgents on the ground, two snipers located higher up within the compound. All armed to the teeth. The soldiers requested back up to get to freedom. It had been a short note, but it had provided all the necessary info about the size of the enemy, locations and state of the prisoners’ welfare.

More ransom demands had been made, the release of captured insurgents requested. None of the demands were met, due to the British government’s stance on negotiations with terrorists.

Within the week, the Captain in charge of 5th Northumberland Fusiliers had been strapped to a bomb vest and sent into the local town’s square. When he had reached the centre of the square, the bomb had detonated. A video had been sent by the Taliban claiming that another two soldiers would die every week until they were either all dead or the demands had been met.

The government’s stance did not change.

A rescue operation was mounted, but the public had not been informed. If the men were killed, the public would be told that they had died in an explosion as their trucks hit IEDs. A corresponding press release had already been drafted. After all, the media would print the official story no questions asked seeing as they weren’t over there, on the ground, in Afghanistan, but instead relying on official statements concerning the war effort.

The British population would never know that the lives of fifteen British soldiers were deemed unimportant in the greater scheme of things; that the lives of fifteen hard-working men of the British Army were not worth the exchange of ten insurgents, not even worth negotiations for their own release.

Three days after the Captain died as an apparent suicide bomber, the Ministry of Defence orchestrated a rescue mission. One of the team members had been instructed to wear a helmet
camera to gain an insight into the compound. Far off, explosions could be heard. They were deliberate missile hits just outside the far end of the complex, to provide a distraction so the rescue team could get in unnoticed.

They had approached via the tunnels which led straight into the compound and had quietly subdued and disposed of the sentries that guarded the tunnel entrance. The tip-off about the tunnels' existence proved to be invaluable. As the rescue team descended into the compound, mission control was set up at the entrance, just outside the line of sight of the enemy.

Upon storming the compound, the rescue team found that the two army units had joined forces under the command of the remaining Captain, who had taken charge of the situation. Over the course of their captivity, all of them had been able to sneak weapons away and conceal them on their persons. They had quietly studied their captors' movements, knew the guard changes, knew some of their weaknesses and knew where the ammunition was kept. They'd been playing the waiting game. They were ready.

“You here for us? About bloody time!” a hoarse voice hissed close to the camera.

The tunnel ended in a basement room of the building next to the temporary prison the soldiers had been kept in. The video showed several soldiers, who, although they looked a bit haggard, dehydrated and some of them bruised, all seemed to be in good spirits.

“Got any flash bangs by any chance? We want to get them all in the yard. Surprise them with these fresh ‘reinforcements’. They won’t know what hit them! Thirteen are in the building opposite, two guards somewhere on their rounds between us and the tunnels, five on the floor above us and two across the yard in the tower.” A young man, Lance Corporal judging by the uniform, brought the newcomers up to speed.

“We took care of the two guards. The rest is fair game as far as we’re concerned,” a member of the rescue team answered. A Lieutenant cut in.

“Anyone gets hurt, holler for the doc. Keep the extra kit by the door, he’ll be grateful.” The response team nodded their understanding.

They handed out all the flash bangs and extra weaponry they brought with them. The camera trained on a figure crouching by the doorway. The uniform said Captain and all eyes were trained on him. He held up his hand to signal for quiet, glanced left and right around the door again, nodded and gave the signal to attack.

And then all hell broke loose.

For a minute, the video only showed grey smoke and red sand. Voices that were distorted by white noise were shouting, gunshots rang out. The two army snipers had spent their time watching the insurgents and knew exactly where the Taliban sniper nest was. They trained their sights on the tower that looked a lot like a minaret and squeezed off four rounds. There was no return fire from the nest. Once the smoke cleared, the insurgents stormed.

Their attack was uncoordinated at best, and they were blindly shooting into the prison building. The insurgents were caught by surprise when they encountered the extra manpower and the ground was stained with blood soon after.

The Lieutenant was the first of the British soldiers to go down. His scream pierced the air as he took a bullet to the leg. The doctor immediately turned his head around to pinpoint the source of the scream. Gripping his own gun and squeezing off two shots which killed two insurgents, he crouched down and made his way to the soldier on the ground. Completely trusting his comrades to have his back, he went to work dragging the Lieutenant towards the entrance of the tunnels and then wrapping his wounds.

Two rescue team members had been instructed to stay there, assist with field triage and get the wounded to safety. Within moments, the doctor emerged again to join the fight, but a grenade thrown by one of the insurgents on the upper floor sent the military men flying.

The medic was the first one back on his feet and once again didn’t waste time to get straight to work.

“Med-kit!! Someone get me more kit!” the doctor yelled over the gunfire. There really was a lot of blood but too many people still lay bleeding and dazed on the floor, too close together to clearly determine where one blood pool started and another stopped.

Unfazed, the doc worked tirelessly while bullets kept flying by. Pressing down on wounds and bandaging them as well as possible, dragging his colleagues to safety. More shots rang out and instead of stopping, the doc just crouched down further, kept steady pressure on the wound he was trying to staunch and shielded the soldier he was working on with his own body.

Another grenade was thrown and one of the Lance Corporals collapsed, bleeding profusely from his leg. The doc was instantly at his side.

“Secure the yard! Get my men out!! Where the hell is the chopper? Please tell me there’s a medevac on its way!! We need to get everyone to the closest field hospital. NOW!!!”

“Chopper ETA five minutes, sir!”

“Corporal Adams, secure the upstairs. Make sure we got them all, no more nasty surprises!” The Corporal nodded and could be seen hurrying away.
“Someone, get one of the spare medical kits. Start applying pressure to the wounds. Mercer, Eatons, move it!!”

The screen was a flurry of activity, the tone of voice the doctor had used brook no arguments and was instantly obeyed.

The soldier with the helmet camera was kneeling in the yard, clearly helping an injured colleague. At the edges of the picture, which was focused on a rather nasty wound to the right side of a chest, the doctor could be seen dashing from casualty to casualty, quickly assessing, helping, moving on. Despite the clipped tone he’d used and the threat, they were still under, the doctor examined his fellow brothers in arms with practiced calm and efficiency. While working as fast as he could, he still took the time to assess each wound correctly, speaking soothingly to the injured and his steady hands ghosting over flesh and blood.

From far off, the chop of an approaching helicopter could be heard, and there was a sigh of relief from the cameraman once it came into view. It was touching down just outside the yard when Corporal Adams called out “All clear!”

Those who could still move of their own accord started dragging and carrying their friends towards the gates to get to the chopper and continued to provide first aid. The medic knelt next to a still body. The soldier was barely breathing.

“This one needs to get to the chopper, stat!”

He got up and clutched his gun as he looked around the yard, tense and on full alert.

Dismissing the feeling of unease because they’d been declared all clear, he started to walk over to the young officer lying near one of the buildings.

Time seemed to stand still as a single shot rang out across the yard.

Instead of diving for cover, the medic instinctively lunged himself forwards and threw himself across the young soldier to protect him from further harm. One of the insurgent snipers in the minaret must have survived. Ten army guns immediately trained on him and returned fire. The doctor gave one blood-curling scream of pain – and didn’t get back up.

“Shit!! Doc!! Captain!! Talk, damn it! Come on, sir!”

The cries of his men were frantic. Someone rolled the doc over and checked for a pulse.

“He’s alive! Move, move, move!!”

Only now did the unit realize that their doctor was bleeding profusely from his shoulder and chest. His trouser legs were smeared with blood. His arm was almost definitely broken, sticking out at a weird angle from when he had thrown himself over his colleagues over and over again to protect them. The man with the camera took a closer look, the picture still grainy and blurry thanks to sand and dust, but for the first time the face of the man in charge was revealed.

Mycroft Holmes’ jaw dropped and he raised one of his eyebrows ever so slightly.
Shoe Polish And Secrets

Chapter Summary

Polishing shoes can be therapeutic, especially when you can’t talk about what troubles you.

Chapter Notes

John is a BAMF, in case you didn’t know already!

I have no idea how recipients for military decorations are selected so the procedure is blatantly fictitious.

Enjoy!!

On a side note: 1000 hits already! You guys rock!

13th Nov 2013 + 9th Dec 2013: Corrected a few mistakes that have been pointed out to me

Sherlock had behaved himself while John was away with his army buddy. Only one experiment had leaked onto the kitchen floor and he’d actually remembered to put a wash on. John came back to Baker Street after a late lunch and went straight to the bathroom, rummaging through the cabinet under the sink.

“Is there anything, in particular, you are looking for?” Sherlock asked from behind him.

It startled John so much that he banged his head on the sink above him with a resounding ‘clang.’

“Black shoe polish,” he groaned, rubbing the rapidly forming bump at the rear of his head.

“How about mine,” Sherlock said, went through to his bedroom and returned seconds later with a brand new tube of polish.

“You do realize that your shoes are brown, though, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know, you dipstick! I’ve got more than the one pair, you know?”

“Just checking.”

He handed John the shoe polish, who took it and went upstairs to his room. A few minutes later, John returned holding an old shoe box and sat down at the coffee table. Sherlock watched him out of the corner of his eye. Gingerly, John placed the shoe box on the table, like putting down a treasure. He carefully lifted the lid to reveal a maroon-coloured cloth.

Unfolding the cloth, he revealed a black military-issue dress shoe underneath. With the same care John usually reserved for tending to patients’ wounds and cleaning his Browning, he picked the first shoe up and examined it in the light, before picking up the polish and a brush.

As he began cleaning the leather, John’s movements were practiced and precise and he went about the task in hand as if he was in a trance. Cleaning kit and shoes had been ingrained into his muscle memory, the movements coming to him without much conscious thought.

Sherlock meanwhile had resumed playing the violin. First a piece by Bach that John vaguely recognised, then one of his own compositions and then he launched into a stylized and adapted version of “Here’s a Health unto his Majesty,” the RAMC quick march John was all too familiar with. Recognising the tune, John snapped out of his reverie and shot a sideways look at his flatmate.

“Why are you playing this particular march, Sherlock?”

“Why not? It’s the quick march of the Royal Army Medical Corps, is it not?”

“I bloody well know what it is, I had to march to this on parade plenty of times. The question remains: why are you playing it?”

“I just thought it was fitting, somehow. You, polishing the shoes of your parade uniform on a day on which a major news story about Afghanistan breaks, a story from 2009 and which you are somehow involved in – don’t give me that look, that part was easy to work out by your behaviour – it can’t be a coincidence. I thought, given all I know about your time in Afghanistan, the RAMC march would be something you’re familiar with. I’ll play something else if it bothers you that
much."

“It doesn’t bother me as such; I’ve just not heard it in a while. It brings back memories, a lot of
which I’d rather forget…”

“You were there though, weren’t you? You were involved in this hostage slash government
cover-up situation somehow. You would have denied it if you had no knowledge of it.”

John put down his shoe. By now it was shining so much; John could see his own reflection in it.

“Oh hell, what’s the point denying it? You’re right. I was there in 2009 and involved in this. You
would have deduced as much anyway.”

Sherlock nodded.

“But it was all kept secret and I can’t talk about it.”

“Why not? It’s out in the open now.”

“That doesn’t matter, Sherlock. Until the Army or Ministry of Defence releases an official
statement, there’s nothing I can say or do. And even then, depending in the statement, I might still
not be able to disclose in how far I am connected to this. Just leave it for now, please.”

“Fine. But don’t think this conversation is over, John.”

More in an attempt to escape the interrogation than anything else, John got up, stretched and
walked over to the kitchen to put the kettle on. He fixed two mugs of tea on auto-pilot and dodged
one of Sherlock’s experiments. Lost in his thoughts, John nearly jumped and knocked over the
beaker containing God-knows-what when the kettle started to whistle.

Sherlock, Mr. Observation that he is, noticed.

“John, are you sure you’re alright? You’re much jumpier than usual and you’re easily distracted,
both not attributes I’d usually associate with you under normal circumstances. I do actually have a
very high-security clearance, courtesy of my brother. I’m sure he’d confirm it for you if you
wanted to check. Either way, you should know I’d not tell anyone, or don’t you trust me? The
story clearly affected you. You’re polishing your uniform shoes. I bet it’s because one way or
another there’ll be some sort of public display in which you might be required to partake, wearing
your parade uniform. You’re anxious because of it, but ever the soldier, you want to be prepared.”

“To be honest, Sherlock, I’m not alright.”

John handed the detective his mug, who just put it on the counter behind him, grabbed John by the
shoulders, and looked his friend in the eye. John steadied himself under the scrutiny.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you or your discretion, Sherlock. But I’m under orders. Until I get the
go-ahead, I cannot talk about this. I’ve never spoken to anyone about it all. But the article brings
back memories, most of them painful. And I think I should warn you: I will most definitely have
nightmares tonight. So you might want to invest in some ear plugs. Whatever you do, don’t hold
me down to wake me up. You might end up with a bloody nose and you wouldn’t be the first.
And you’re right. I am anxious. This could be a big thing if properly acknowledged. I’m not
holding my breath, though. It all got swept under the carpet in 2009 and everyone who had
anything to do with this got told what to expect. Cleaning my shoes… well, it’s kind of
therapeutic. It’s like cleaning my gun, something we did in the barracks to take our minds off
things. I realized it’s been a long time since my dress shoes saw sunlight, so I thought, why not? It
gives me something to do, you know?”

John looked down. Sherlock could tell he was clearly troubled and would have loved to talk in
confidence with a friend but couldn’t. Sherlock would have to go back to the article again, read
between the lines and factor in John’s body language.

John took a sip of his tea, wrapping both hands around the steaming mug, interlacing his fingers
and soaking up the warmth it gave off even though it was a warm and bright spring day outside.
With a sigh, John walked back over to the sofa and started working on his other shoe. Sherlock
sipped his tea and made a decision. As much as he hated it, he would have to ask for help. The
detective pulled out his mobile phone and typed in a familiar number.

“I NEED TO SEE JOHN’S ARMY FILE. – SH”

A few minutes later, his mobile chirped.

“I’LL BE OVER LATER. NEED TO TALK. – MH”

Sherlock frowned. That wasn’t the answer he’d expected. And worst of all, he’d have to deal with
Mycroft face to face. Way to ruin a Saturday!

John, sitting on the couch, made fast and efficient progress, his shoe-shining skills honed by years
of practice. Sherlock sat down at his computer. If John and Mycroft couldn’t provide the answers
he craved, maybe the internet could. He started by typing “Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers”, the
regiment mentioned when John had been introduced at Buckingham Palace for that Woman case,
into the search bar. A page loaded, he leaned back and started reading.

In Whitehall, Mycroft and his peers were just discussing what had happened to the soldiers in the
video after the shoot-out. Their medical files were extensive. The youngest officer had suffered severe blood loss and his leg had to be amputated below the knee due to the damage received. But experts agreed that if the medic hadn’t got to him when he did, he could have bled out or needed the whole leg to be taken off.

Several of the others suffered leg, arm and shoulder wounds. All of them were wrapped immediately and none of the soldiers caught any infections. While two more soldiers had to have limbs amputated, the quick thinking and action on the doctor’s part meant they survived. One soldier, who had taken a bullet to the back, was paralysed. He had been lying out in the open yard when the doctor had dashed out and grabbed him and dragged him to safety. The jerk of the movement had further damaged the spinal cord and one of the bosses was quick to blame the medic for the soldier’s predicament.

But the soldier would have been an easy target and would have almost certainly been killed. As it was, everyone who had been at the siege had survived. And in no small part was this down to the repeated self-sacrifice of the medic, who put himself between the bullets and his patients.

Two of the soldiers were still on active duty, serving in Afghanistan. The rest had been honourably discharged and invalided home or had requested transfers to desk duty on UK soil.

A handful of them, mainly members of the rescue team, had escaped with mere scratches. But the doctor himself was another matter. After saving fourteen people, the medic was the one who came closest to dying. And it was a very close call. Only when he had been rolled off the young officer did all his injuries become apparent. His whole left shoulder was destroyed, the bullet was a through and through that had entered from the back, through the joint and exited at the front at an angle, just above his heart.

He’d broken his right arm as he dove to the ground protecting one of his fellow men. A bullet had hit his thigh and the right side of his face had blistered when the grenade had gone off not far from him. Out of all of them, he came closest to bleeding out, there, at the old, disused mosque that had been converted into a Taliban base.

Nobody had noticed how severely he was injured because he kept moving quickly and confidently while the adrenaline was pumping through his veins. He was unconscious by the time his unit got him into the medevac chopper. With none of the other soldiers on the ground being a medic, they tried to stop the blood flow from the shoulder with rags.

The doctor himself had used up all the clean bandages tending to their injuries first. By the time he reached the hospital at Camp Bastion, the doctor wasn’t breathing. While the base staff managed to resuscitate him, he slipped into a coma after surgery. His shoulder had to be reconstructed, which caused his mobility to lessen.

The doctor developed enteric fever, because ironically, the rags that had been used to save his life and dam the blood flow had been dirty and contaminated, and were causing a life-threatening infection.

Only six weeks after the rescue had the doctor pulled through for good; for the first three weeks it was pretty much touch and go. Once he was awake and fit to travel, he was invalided home to the UK. As brave and qualified a man as he was, his shoulder wound meant that his hand shook and his mobility in his left arm, though improved through months and months of physiotherapy, would never be back at one hundred percent.

His shoulder joint had been destroyed and he would most probably retain a limp from the wound to his leg but worst of all, while he had fought off sepsis and enteric fever, he’d had several seizures. That was what sealed his fate. He would never go back into battle to fight alongside his men.

You weren’t fit for duty if you’d suffered seizures. The same applied to him reverting back to being a Medical Officer – he’d be a liability to the army. And just like that, two distinct and distinguished army careers came to an abrupt halt.

Mycroft read out from his file that all invalided personnel who had required it had been given a one room bedsit by the Ministry of Defence and his predecessor had arranged for them all to receive physiotherapy and trauma counselling. After they had been debriefed and told that the British public would not hear of this story, each had been given £500 per month on top of their army pensions to cover their health care.

As far as Mycroft could tell, that was it.

“Are you telling me that we took fifteen war heroes and hid them away in dingy little flats? Did any of them receive any honours for their actions and sacrifices?” Mycroft’s boss asked, his voice incredulous.

“Yes, sir, as far as I am aware from the notes left by my predecessor. He noted that some of them did receive honours for other actions during the Afghan campaign. But none of them received anything but a cold handshake for this situation, pardon me saying.”

“No even the doctor?”

“Sir, he is already the recipient of the Military Cross for actions he took in 2008 which ensured the survival of his unit. He’s not just a doctor, he is also a commissioned, combat soldier. That is why he was sent in with the tac team to start with. Some of the others received Distinguished Service Medals, but again, not for this,” Mycroft explained.
“That won’t do. Someone get me the Palace, Downing Street and the Commanders of the British Army on the line for a conference in an hour! I think we should let the public know about the hostage situation, but not mention the ransom demands. Go big on the heroics of everyone involved. Nothing like heroes to boost public morale and the nation’s stance on this war. Although we obviously still need to confirm officially, I think all 15 should be awarded the Military Cross for Gallantry. Make that the Military Cross and Bar for the doctor. But I’ll also need to see whether the medic can be decorated even higher. I’m thinking one of the other crosses for bravery and valour. He not only saved everyone’s lives but as senior Captain, he also took charge of 4th Battalion The Rifles, his own 5th Northumberland Fusiliers and helped orchestrate the rescue team.”

Everybody present at the meeting nodded in agreement. “Right, then. This shouldn’t be too difficult, especially as we have the proof on DVD.”

With that, Mycroft’s boss left the room to prepare for his talk with the Queen, the Prime Minister and the Army Commanders.

Mycroft felt strangely proud, especially given the decorations that were to be discussed. They were well and truly deserved. And from his point, he would see to it that the soldiers’ monthly Ministry of Defence allowance was increased dramatically.

One and a half hours later, Buckingham Palace, Downing Street, Whitehall and the Army Commanders reached a conclusion. They were sure everyone involved would be satisfied with the outcome.

Mycroft Holmes looked down at the picture of the smiling, unassuming army doctor in front of him. ‘Silent waters do indeed run deep’ he mused, as he placed the photo back in its protection and closed the file.

The file of a certain Captain John Hamish Watson, of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers.
Ribbons

Chapter Summary

Sherlock stumbles across John's military decorations - which are more than he'd anticipated.

For John's CV according to my headcanon, see the notes at the end.
And yes, I believe he is actually that awesome that he's had not one but two distinct careers in the army!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ribbons

Once John had finished with his shoes, he'd gone around the flat collecting used dish towels and his laundry before heading to the washing machine in Mrs. Hudson's basement.

Sherlock took the opportunity to inspect John's shoes and was nearly tempted to give John his own footwear to clean too – he'd never seen shoes this immaculate and he'd grown up in a world where perfectly polished footwear was an essential part of a gentleman’s attire.

Not that he'd cared, of course.

Carefully lifting the shoes back out of the box, Sherlock noticed that there was more hidden in the depths of the shoe carton, underneath the maroon cloth. When he pulled the fabric away, it revealed a navy blue beret with a red over white plume, no doubt part of John's parade uniform, as well as a dark blue beret with the RAMC cap badge attached to it.

'The RAMC doesn’t have a designated colour; the navy blue must be the colour of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers. But why does he have two berets?'

Sherlock had learned online that the RAMC wore the colours of the regiment they were attached to. Inside the plumed beret, John kept his parade gloves. They were pristine, brilliantly white and neatly folded. He held one up against his own hand and noted that although they were too short for him, John’s fingers were actually longer than he had realized.

When he tried to replace the glove, Sherlock noticed something fall out of the box and hit the floor. For a second he just stared at the unassuming, small items lying there on the rug in the middle of 221b: John's dog tags and his decorations. And John had a lot of those, which between them told the story of a very distinguished career.

Of course Sherlock had known that in more than a dozen years on active duty, John would have seen action in more than one campaign and on more than one tour of duty. Afghanistan was just the last of many places in which he’d seen frontline action.

Just as Sherlock was picking the medals up to inspect them further, John came back up the stairs.

"Sherlock! Get away from my things!"

"What are these?" Sherlock asked and held out some of John’s awards on an outstretched hand.

"They are my military decorations, Sherlock," John said with an eye roll for dramatic effect.

"Yes, thank you, doctor, I gathered as much. Have you been hanging out with Anderson? No, I meant, what do they stand for? I only recognise two of them."

John walked over and looked at the ribbons.

"Well, this one here is my Afghanistan Campaign Medal," he explained and pointed at one striped ribbon.

"That just means I was on active duty there." Sherlock nodded.

"The one next to it is the Iraq Campaign Medal. Again, that means I saw active duty there. Then this one means I am an accomplished marksman," John picked up the badge of two crossed rifles.

"That means, you know, I know how to shoot people." John grinned, this time Sherlock gave him the mocking eye roll.

"Don’t laugh. I was top of my class at Sandhurst and during the Combat Infantryman’s Course. I’ve seen your aim and it’s appalling, you couldn’t hit a broad barn sideways!"

Sherlock gave an amused but petulant huff as John picked up another ribbon.
“I got this Distinguished Service Order back in 2007 for leadership. Our GPS systems had failed and I led my unit through enemy terrain back to base. I made Captain again on the back of that.”

Sherlock could tell by John’s voice that it was a proud memory for his friend, especially since Captain was the rank when he left Afghanistan. But then he noticed the phrasing of John’s statement and looked up startled.

“Again? You got demoted?”

John blushed slightly; suddenly hyper-aware of Sherlock’s scrutiny and the attention he gave John’s awards.

“Er, no. Actually, it was a kind of voluntary demotion. I used to hold the rank of Major while I was in the RAMC, but that was mainly administrative. It’s just because as a trained and registered medical professional you expect a certain pay grade, I suppose. But once I passed out of Sandhurst and was commissioned, I had to work my way back up from Second Lieutenant, but at least then I actually had people under my command and wasn’t setting broken bones and treating heat stroke all day.”

Sherlock had never had an interest in military structures, procedures and hierarchy, and for once failed to deduce all the ramifications. He, therefore, failed to understand that John had just told him that he hadn’t just been an army doctor but a career soldier, a combatant who saw eight years of frontline action, as well. And from the amount of ribbons in front of him, John had seen a lot of action in both of his roles.

John, however, assumed that his genius flatmate capable of making mental leaps a mile wide had made the connection and carried on going back to his decorations.

“The Operational Service Medal for Sierra Leone was the last I got in the RAMC. The OSM for Congo was my first deployment after Sandhurst. Again, these medals mean I was on active service there for a certain number of consecutive days. In 2002, I got the Queen’s Golden Jubilee Medal, like everyone who had been in the army more than five years by then,” shrugging his shoulders as if they’d not been a big deal.

“And then there’s this…” John picked up the last medal and traced the outlines reverently with one finger. It was a silver cross on a white and purple ribbon.

“This is the Military Cross. I got this in 2008 for gallantry but really I think I got it more for stupidity than anything else…”

Sherlock took that in for a moment.

“What happened, John? Even I know that a Military Cross is not easy to come by.”

“Well…”

John sat back down, across from his friend who had taken a pew on the coffee table.

“My unit and another were out on exercise. The truck in front hit an IED and went up in flames. Before we knew it, snipers were picking us out one by one. My mate Murray covered me while I grabbed a first aid kit and went to work on the survivors. We lost three men that day in the explosion. I was able to save everyone who got shot, dragged them behind our truck and bandaged them up the best way I could. It’s lucky we got out of there alive. Someone higher up thought that saving my friends and shooting at the enemy warranted the Cross. I’m still not convinced.” John shrugged his shoulders again.

Sherlock studied him for a moment, then got up and went into his bedroom without a word. John blinked, a bit taken aback by Sherlock’s lack of response but not really surprised by his behaviour anymore. He’d long ago got used to Sherlock’s antics.

Carefully, John picked his medals up and placed them back in the shoe box, fingers lingering on the plume on his beret for a few seconds. The consulting detective searched around for a few minutes until John could hear a faint “Aha!” coming from the general direction of Sherlock’s room. Sherlock returned to the living room, a triumphant grin on his face.

“Well, someone must have thought that you deserve a medal for being you. And I agree! John…”

Sherlock said

“… I know this doesn’t compare to your rather extensive – and impressive I might add – military decorations, but for continuously running after me, stitching me up and generally making sure I don’t kill myself, plus putting up with me on a daily basis without having strangled me, which is more than I can say of my own brother, I present you with the … er…. 221b Medal of Bravery.”

He grinned like the Cheshire cat and unclenched his fist, revealing a smiley-face clip-on button which he presented to John.

John actually had to laugh out loud at this but did sit still and allowed Sherlock to pin the smiley to his lapel anyway. ‘Mission accomplished, managed to cheer John up’ Sherlock thought to himself. Maybe this caring lark wasn’t such a disadvantage after all, as long as nobody else knew about it.

“My… thank you, Sherlock. It’s… an honour… I guess?”

He grinned up at his lanky flatmate. They shook hands once the smiley had been attached and both cracked up laughing.
"I'm reserving the right to throttle you in my thoughts, though", John added once he'd managed to catch his breath again.

"I'd be disappointed if you didn’t. Hungry?" Sherlock asked.

"Starving," came the immediate reply.

"Dim sum?" they both asked at the same time. They just knew each other too well, after several years as flatmates.

John placed the order by heart and smiled down at the smiley button. 'How fitting' he thought and looked up to the spray-paint smiley on the wall.

Twenty minutes later their food arrived and they sat in amicable silence while they ate. Even Sherlock had a few mouthfuls and stole a few of John’s mini spring rolls. But John didn’t mind. He’d got an extra portion of the spring rolls on purpose, believing in what he had dubbed his “ninja-feeding-technique.”

If Sherlock was distracted enough with a problem or filing through his Mind Palace and John had extra food on hand that he ate deliberately at a slow pace, Sherlock would steal bits and pieces thinking John wouldn’t notice.

Sometimes not even Sherlock was aware he was doing it. Of course John did notice – if you started out with five spring rolls and suddenly there’s only one left, you tend to notice – but he was glad he managed to get Sherlock to eat at all, and always ordered an extra side just in case.

Chapter End Notes

In TBB we can see a part of John's CV. However, the dates are either wrong, or John is meant to be 10 years younger than he is... there is no way he only got his A Levels aged 28!!

So here's my version of John's CV:

Born in 1971 (like Martin Freeman who portrays him)
He went to Grammar School in Chelmsford, according to what we see on the show,, and would have left at the age of 17 in 1988.

1988: applied to medical school and joined the army on a Medical Cadetship, which helped pay for his studies. With the Cadetship, he had to sign up for 7 years of duty once he finished med school.

1988 - 1991: Intercalated BSc (Hons) Medical Science at King's College, London
1991 - 1995: MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery) at King's College, London
He would have spent time training on rotation at Barts and graduated with a University of London degree.
The MBBS is his doctorate. A M.D. or PhD would have taken more research and time, which wasn't necessary for the army.

1995 - 1997: Post-grad training as member of the Royal Army Medical Corps in at least 6 different military hospitals, anywhere in the world, starting with a short compulsory training course for non-combatants at RMA Sandhurst. In my headcanon he worked in England and Germany at least and could have been at other UK or NATO bases.

1997 - 1999: Specialise as a RAMC GP while working for the army on different bases. (John has to have specialised as a GP or he wouldn't be able to get the locum job as a GP at Sarah's surgery).

Until 2002: Work as RAMC Medical Officer on army bases. During this time he could have been placed in Sierra Leone. I'm counting his 7 contracted years in the army from 1995 when he finished med school and became available to them full time. Once fully qualified, he would have held the rank of Major but purely administrative. He would have only worked in hospitals.

2002: 44 week officer training course at Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, commissioned as an officer and combatant soldier, rank of Second Lieutenant. Probably excelled at marksmanship.

2002 - 2009: Front-line action, Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers. He could have been in DR Congo in 2003, Iraq and Afghanistan. A tour of duty lasts around 6 months (only extended in 2013 after he was invalided), so in 7 years he could have accumulated several tours in both countries. 2 promotions to reach rank of Captain.

2009: Invalided home to the UK
The only way he could have been injured in a fight is for him to have been a career soldier. Army doctors do NOT see front-line action and they get basic weapons training.

So yes, John is such a BAMF, he's not only an army doctor but also a fully blown soldier!

And yes, by having him see action in Africa, the Middle East and Europe I just legitimately made him "Three Continents Watson".

You're welcome.
The Lifting Of The Red Tape

Chapter Summary

Mycroft wants to tell John what the official story will be.
John tells Mycroft what the story was actually like.

Chapter Notes

A long chapter (by my standards) for all you lovelies who have left kudos and comments so far. Seriously, knowing you all read my story and comment on it to see more of it, is so encouraging it's keeping me focused to get this story written by the end of the month!

For John's CV, refer to the footnotes on Chapter 5.

The Lifting Of The Red Tape

Just as they had finished their dinner and moved the empty boxes to the kitchen, there was a knock on the door downstairs. They could hear Mrs. Hudson greet Mycroft and making a fuss, before they heard his sure footsteps accentuated with the unmistakable tapping of his umbrella coming up the seventeen stairs.

“Evening, brother,” Sherlock said in the general direction of the door without turning around.

“Good evening, Sherlock. Good evening, John.”

“Hello, Mycroft. What can we do you for?” John asked.

“Actually, I’m here to see both of you, but especially you, John, this time round.”

“Me? Why me?”

John already had an idea where this was going.

“I think you know why, John. And I just want to inform you that the vow of secrecy has been partially lifted. I’m here to tell you the story that was agreed on… and how this situation will continue,” Mycroft explained.

“Have a seat then, Mycroft,” John said while pointing in the direction of the armchairs.

The older Holmes brother strolled over to Sherlock’s chair from where he’d been standing on the threshold. Sherlock took up his usual position on the leather sofa while John sat down in his own armchair.

“If you don’t mind, Mycroft, I’d like to tell the story. Sherlock’s been nagging me for an explanation and seeing as I was there, I think he should hear it from me.”

“Of course, John, do go ahead. I’ll amend when necessary.”

This earned him a fairly pissed-off glare from the former Captain. Wisely, Mycroft chose not to comment further at that time and just smiled at him, thin-lipped. John steeled himself for what he was about to divulge, took a deep breath and started to tell the biggest secret he’d ever kept.

“Well, first off, Sherlock, you were right. The Afghanistan story in the paper today did have to do with me. As you know, I was Captain of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers. I had 120 people under my command. I was a combat soldier, but I started my army career with a medical cadetship and went on to become an army GP. Due to the cadetship, I had signed up to serve seven years as an army doctor. After that, like I just told you, I applied to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst and received my commission as an officer once I graduated. Because I was not only a combatant but also a trained doctor, even though, strictly speaking, I was no longer part of the RAMC, I was chosen as the medic they sent in after 4th Battalion The Rifles got themselves ambushed as they might have required medical care.”

He paused and looked up at Sherlock.

“We weren’t any better, though. They literally came out of nowhere, out of solid rock and had us trapped before we even realized what was going on. Along with 4th Battalion, we were taken prisoner. When their ransom demands weren’t met, they first killed Captain Featherton who was
in charge of The Rifles. When that went unanswered, they killed Captain Cooper, who was our unit leader. Although we shared the same rank, I was sent in to function primarily as a medic if you like, so Cooper had command of the unit. But they needed someone who could diagnose and offer first aid and so they strapped a med-kit on my back. That’s probably what saved me.”

At this point, Mycroft interrupted.

“John, you need to know that the official Ministry of Defence line will be that there were no ransom demands. They will say you were prisoners of war. Before you say anything…”

Mycroft saw John trying to interject and held up a finger to stop him.

“I know what you are thinking, but you were debriefed. You know as well as I do that we do not negotiate with terrorists. If the public knew that you were left there as casualties of war, there’d be riots. We know that Cooper and Featherton deserve more and believe me, they will now finally be honoured properly, but I urge you to go with the official line on this one.”

A sharp intake of breath could be heard from John’s armchair.

“Did anything else change or is the Ministry of Defence just omitting the ransom demands?”

“Just the ransom demands. Everything else was caught on video and will be used as evidence.”

“Just answer me one question then, Mycroft. Back then… was it you?”

John looked the older Holmes brother square in the eye and spoke quietly, but with a dangerous edge to his voice. Sherlock had learned long ago that a shouting and screaming John Watson was unpleasant but relatively easy to deal with, but once he’d gone quiet, glared at you and smiled, you’d better take cover. Mycroft sensed as much.

“Was it you, who made the decision not to negotiate and to keep quiet about us and what we went through? Was it you, who’d decided we were not worth the effort and left us there to rot until we got a message out? Was it you, who sent us home like damaged and forgotten goods?”

John became more and more enraged. Mycroft held out his hands with a calming gesture. When he replied, he rose to John’s challenge and looked John straight in the eyes.

“No, John. I honestly had nothing to do with this. Today was the first time I heard about this situation, and until I saw the video, I had no idea you were even involved. As you may know, your records have been heavily redacted, I’m sorry, John. I truly am. My predecessor had a knack for handling delicate situations somewhat… shall we say, bluntly.”

John gave Mycroft a curt nod.

“Okay. Thank you.”

Getting a heartfelt apology from one of the Holmes boys was rare, but it was best not to dwell on it for too long. John continued with his account. How they had been treated, how he had been allowed a bit more freedom because he spoke the language somewhat and had helped patch one of their captors up. How he’d managed to sneak the message out with Featherton’s body.

“That was you?”

“Yeah… not the most original or coded message but time was of the essence. I saw an opportunity and I took it. As the doc, they allowed me to check that he was actually dead. There was no doubt, he was executed in front of us with a shot to the head, but they trusted me enough, apparently.”

The cold, detached tone with which John spoke of execution nearly sent a chill down Sherlock’s spine.

“So we wrote a quick note and I managed to wedge it in Featherton’s mouth where they wouldn’t be looking.”

“That was ingenious, John! Alerting us to their number and how you were taken from the road gave the rescue team the element of surprise.”

“Ta. Even though it was a crude way of doing it. It just didn’t feel right, but we had no way of knowing whether anyone would be coming for us. We were already meant to be a tac team rescuing 4th Battalion and we were taken hostage as well. Unless we could send a clear sign of life, nobody would risk a third team to get us out of there.”

John glanced at Mycroft, who just nodded, confirming John’s theory.

“It says in the article that a Captain took charge of the prisoners. That was you, John, wasn’t it?” Sherlock had been quiet until now.

“Yeah,” John sighed.

“I was second in command of that unit, so when they killed Featherton and Cooper, I was highest ranking. Had I still been a member of the RAMC, I would have had to relinquish command to whoever was the highest ranking of the combatants, medical officers don’t issue orders on the battlefield. But since I was a full combatant myself at the time, I was in charge. 4th Battalion
didn’t object and the Fusiliers were under my command anyway. Our captors assumed that
because I had a first aid kit on me, and my men had given me the nickname ‘Doc’ ages ago, that I
was simply a medic. I even told them I was the ‘komak’. They assumed I was non-combatant – as
a doctor would be – and that my Red Cross band had been ripped off in the skirmish when we
were taken. But I wasn’t just there as a medical professional and I wasn’t wearing the Red Cross
badge to start with.”

“And you were the only one with medical training in all the units there?” Sherlock asked.
John nodded in reply. The detective got The Guardian out again and opened it to the article.
“So, all of this. That was all you. You’re the medic they’re talking about.”
It wasn’t a question. It was a statement.
“Yup. Well, it nearly killed me, though… Actually, it did kill me, for about two minutes…”
This was legitimate news to Sherlock, who looked up at John with a startled expression that the
doctor couldn’t quite place but did resemble shock, panic, surprise and awe in equal measures.
“What? You died?”
“Yeah… I got shot, remember? I had made sure that all my men had received medical treatment as
best as I could provide at the time. I was the only doctor and I went down last. My own wounds
were bound with rags they found around the compound instead of sterile bandages. I’d lost a lot of
blood. By the time they got me back to the hospital at Camp Bastion, I was in cardiac arrest…
They managed to resuscitate me, obviously, just in time. Ironie, isn’t it? The army doctor who
saved his entire unit is the only one to die…”
He paused, chuckled nervously and looked at his flatmate.
“Do you remember the day I came to view the flat? During Lestrade’s pretend drugs bust? You
asked me to imagine what I’d say in my last moments…”
Understanding dawned slowly on Sherlock’s face. “You said you didn’t have to…”
John nodded.
“I thought that was due to your Church of England upbringing. Something you’d think you’d say.
Pleading with God to let you live is religiously motivated, after all. I didn’t know you meant it
literally.”
“Sherlock, I was in a coma for more than a week. I developed enteric fever. The makeshift
bandages they used on me on the way to the hospital were contaminated and the wound turned
septic. I seized on them more than once. And once I made it through all of that, my career was
over. You can’t be on active duty if you are known to have had seizures. That alone would have
caused my discharge. They can’t risk having someone command a unit and lead them into battle
when they could seize up at any point. My shoulder was shot and it took months of physiotherapy
for me to regain the use of my dominant arm. I’d left the RAMC years before, would have had to
rejoin yet again. While they do allow doctors sick leave to recuperate should they be wounded,
they don’t usually take a wounded doctor on again… So after all of that and two distinct careers in
the army, I wasn’t fit to continue either. I got invalided home. You know the rest….”
“So… your nightmares? They are about this, aren’t they?” Sherlock asked quietly.
He actually cared. He’d known the basics, deduced a bit about John’s service, but never had he
anticipated that his friend had lived through such horrors and, for all intents and purposes, died.
“Yes, most of the time. Naturally in fifteen years in the army, eight of which on the frontline, you
do collect a few bad memories.”
“John, I know it’s almost too late and it’s no excuse, but there have been serious discussions today
about not only helping you, but all of your men. And believe me that this is not going to be swept
under the carpet again, I give you my word,” Mycroft assured.
“Thank you, Mycroft.”
“One thing remains, though. You single-handedly saved fourteen soldiers’ lives that day, John.
It’s taken this long, but the Commanders of the British Army have finally agreed to award all
fifteen of you the Military Cross. In your case, the Military Cross and Bar.”
John was speechless. He just gaped at Mycroft, mouth open and eyes blinking as if to try to lift the
veil of sleep. Eventually, he found his voice again.
“Are you serious?”
“I would not dream to make fun of this, John. The services you have shown for your country and all
the sacrifices you have made are finally being honoured properly. I insisted on telling
yourself, if you forgive my indulgence. Monetary rewards have also been discussed as we have
finally come to understand that we as a nation did not show you or any returning war veterans the
respect you rightfully command.”
Mycroft gave John a look and a slight nod, which John interpreted as Holmesian for ‘should I
kidnap you in the future we’ll meet at my office and not in a disused warehouse’.
“Mycroft, it was never about any money. You don’t join the army because of money and fame. For me, the army enabled me to go to university and study medicine which I couldn’t have afforded otherwise. So I had to sign up for seven years. And when they were over, I stayed because I liked being in the army, liked the structure, the excitement and I wanted more of it. We serve Queen and country; first and foremost as I’m sure you can appreciate.”

Sherlock’s brother nodded, after all, he knew all about patriotism in his line of work. He too had to take an oath to protect the monarchy and the integrity of his country with everything he has to offer.

“I felt the day I was sent home would break me. I was a soldier and an army doctor and was told I couldn’t be either ever again. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve accepted it and the crime-solving with Sherlock is my new life. I’m happy now, I really am. I might just be a locum GP and blogger these days, but it’s given me purpose when the army took it away. But right after I woke up in hospital and realized my shoulder had been shot, I’d been in a coma and how serious my situation really was, there were times when I wished I’d never woken up again at all.”

Suddenly hyper-aware of what he’d just said, he blushed and studied the floor intently, too embarrassed to look at the brothers. He realized that this was a bit more of a heart-to-heart than either of the Holmes boys would be entirely comfortable with. He wasn’t even comfortable with it himself, but he’d waited years to talk about this. He risked a look around.

Oddly enough, Sherlock looked at him with obvious care and compassion written all over his usually stoic face. As soon as John noticed, though, Sherlock schooled his expression back into the detached mask he usually wore. And the fact that Mycroft, who for all intents and purposes was the British government, was admitting to their massive cock-up and apologizing for it made John feel pretty good.

He’d get the Military Cross and Bar. John was still letting that sink in. It may not buy him much as far as rent or food went, but as for military honours, this was pretty high up.

Good thing then, that he’d already started to polish his dress shoes. It looked like he was going to need them after all.

“Mycroft, I still don’t feel like what I did was special, though. Saving peoples’ lives was in my job description as a doctor and as a soldier. I was a Captain. Leading a unit was my job too.”

“Doctor Watson, you are a war hero.” John visibly cringed at the word.

“It’s true. Yes, all those things would have been expected of you in your career but what you did that day during the siege went well and truly above and beyond the call of duty. You kept your team calm while all of you were being held prisoner. You led them in such a way that they were ready as soon as the rescue team got there and you managed to alert us regarding your position and the conditions you were held in. You fought off insurgents while putting your life on the line and making sure all in your team had been assessed and treated as well as possible under the conditions you were in, all while your position was still under fire.”

Mycroft twirled his umbrella in his hand.

“Believe me, only doing half of those things would have been enough to call you a hero. Now, I realize you probably don’t want the attention, but in this case, it really can’t be helped.”

John winced. While he liked the attention his blog got, he was happy enough to stand in the shadows instead of the limelight. This was another thing entirely, though. This was much, much bigger. This would go national, probably international too.

Ever since Mycroft had first said that the Ministry of Defence would be making a statement, he’d had a feeling that he wouldn’t be able to escape the media. They had all but identified him already. His face was still pixelated in the photos printed today but someone somewhere was likely to drop a hint or run facial recognition software and it was only a matter of time before they arrived at his name, if they hadn’t done so already.

“John, please believe me that absolutely everything will be taken care of. I’ll see to it personally. Anthea will call later to get an official statement from you for the press. Please try to avoid talking to them on your own unless sanctioned by me. The Ministry of Defence will be handling this officially.”

Mycroft got up, closed the button on his suit and was getting ready to go. John just nodded, thoughts swirling around what he was supposed to say in the statement. Just in time he caught a glimpse of the older man about to leave.

“Mycroft, there’s one more question, though. Where did the pictures in the Guardian come from? None of my team was carrying audio-visual equipment.”

“One of the officers on the rescue team did. We couldn’t risk losing a third team without anything to go on. However, we are still looking for the culprit you leaked this footage to the press.”

“Is there… you know… is it just pictures or was it filmed?”

John’s voice was almost a whisper. He’d relived that afternoon countless of times in his head, usually in the throes of a nightmare and in amazing technicolour. While one part of him had problems enough reliving the images in the dead of night, the other half of him wanted to see it, to reassure himself that the nightmares were wrong.
“There is a video, yes. I’ll leave it here, but only watch it if you’re up for it,” Mycroft said and handed over a slim DVD case.

“Thank you, Mycroft. For everything.”

“You are most definitely welcome, John. And please don’t think me terribly clichéd, but it really is a privilege to know you, Captain Watson.”

John gave a little chuckle as he walked Mycroft to the door. While Sherlock’s mind was busy filing away all the additional data he’d just received about his best friend, the detective’s text alert chimed.

“I SUGGEST YOU WATCH THE DVD WITH HIM. YOU MIGHT UNDERSTAND HIS NIGHTMARES THEN. HE NEEDS A FRIEND TONIGHT. – MH”

A few seconds later, Sherlock received another text.

“ONCE HE’S SEEN THE DVD, GIVE HIM THE WHITE ENVELOPE ON YOUR DESK. – MH”


“YES. HE WILL OFFICIALLY BE A HERO. TREAT HIM TO A BETTER DINNER THAN MR. CHAN’S DIM SUM ONCE IN A WHILE. – MH”

Sherlock just rolled his eyes. Settling down in his armchair, Sherlock waited for John to come back upstairs.

“That was… Ummm… a bit much, I guess. Military Cross and Bar, bloody hell!”

John stood in the doorway and shook his head.

“Mind if I open that bottle of Balvenie Lestrade gave us for Christmas? I think I need a drink and I feel like tonight warrants bringing out our best bottle of Scotch.”

“Go ahead, John. In fact, pour one for me as well. Can’t have you drinking by yourself,” Sherlock replied.

John disappeared into the kitchen and came back carrying two whisky glasses and the bottle, all of which he placed on the small table by his armchair. Sherlock leaned forward and poured them both a liberal amount.

Sipping the liquid, he studied his flatmate for a while.

“Are you sure you want to watch this?”

He was playing with the DVD case and his voice carried actual concern.

“I’ve got to, Sherlock. For my own sanity. I’ve played this over and over in my head so many times, I’m not quite sure anymore what was real and what was imagined. I need to know.”

“If you say so. I’ve already put the DVD in; you can press play whenever you’re ready.”

John took a sip of his Scotch. ‘I’m going to have nightmares tonight anyway. Might as well get it over with,’ he thought. He inhaled deeply and took another sip of his whisky, steeling himself, quite literally, for battle.

Sherlock didn’t know what he expected to see. He’d never taken an active interest in the war. Obviously, he knew John had been to Afghanistan, had just learned his friend had been fighting in Iraq too, but he’d never seen pictures of John in combat dress or his parade uniform. There weren’t even photos of John in the RAMC uniform anywhere.

Every now and then, he’d got a glimpse of John, the soldier at crime scenes. The way John would stand, the eye-contact or lack thereof he maintained. John had a real knack for spotting authority figures and knew instinctively who actually demanded and deserved respect and who was full of hot air.

With a smirk, Sherlock remembered how John told him about how he first met Mycroft – and had promptly told him to sod off and mind his own business.

But John, quiet, kind-hearted John, could also demand respect and obedience. When he started to bark orders or assist in first aid, nobody dared to question him. Everyone springs into action immediately once given an order by John Watson. Sherlock had also seen John as a doctor before. God knows he’d stitched Sherlock up more times than the detective cared or chose to remember.

“A marksman, a crack shot, acclimatized to violence. History of military service and nerves of steel. Strong moral principle.”

That’s what Sherlock had said about John to Lestrade before he’d figured out that John had shot the cabbie on the night the doctor first came to view Baker Street.

‘Healing hands, sharpish intellect, sarcastic, slightly dubious sense of humour. Swears like a sailor. Well-mannered. Troubled and wounded. Easily the kindest, most compassionate man I know;’ Sherlock mentally added to his list of John-attributes. He thought about this for a while and realized that John was still a walking contradiction to him.
He’d had no idea of the extent of the horrors John had endured during the war. Of course, he’d noticed the tremor in John’s hand when he got too bored. The partially psychosomatic limp. How John rubbed his shoulder to relieve it of pain when the weather turned cold and windy. And after years of living with him, he’d woken John up from enough horrid nightmares, the ones that left his flatmate panting for air, covered in sweat and waking up screaming his lungs out.

And yet, if you looked at John Watson, you wouldn’t see any trace of the trauma he’s lived through. Even John’s eyes usually had a carefree sparkle to them that gave John that unassuming nice-guy-next-door look.

With a sudden pang of guilt that Sherlock took longer than he’d care to admit to identify as such, he realized that they were just about to watch John’s darkest nightmare. Literally. Whatever was on that DVD, it was John’s deepest, darkest secret, so intrinsically personal that Sherlock almost felt like he was intruding on a matter that John should be allowed to share freely when he was ready. John’s lessons about tact had stuck after all.

Sherlock glanced at John sitting in the armchair opposite him.

“John, you don’t have to do this…”

“No, Sherlock. I really do. Just give me another minute, alright? This is… hard for me. I know what’s coming, I was there, but because of this experience and all the flashbacks I’ve had, I just need to prepare myself, okay?”

“John, you know I don’t deal with sentiment or emotions. But even I know that you shouldn’t watch this by yourself. You don’t have to talk to me or explain anything… I just… er,... want you to know I’m here if you need me. As a friend… That’s what friends do, isn’t it?”

John gave him a sad smile.

“Yes, it is, Sherlock. And thank you, I really appreciate this. I mean it. This is stuff not even my therapist knows about so I might get… emotional. And I know how much you hate that, but I could really do with a friend tonight and seeing as you’re my best friend…” John’s voice trailed off.

Contrary to popular belief, Sherlock did understand feelings and emotions. Most of the time, he was able to ignore them. He did feel like he should make an exception for John tonight, though.

It still baffled Sherlock sometimes that he actually had a friend, after years and years of solitude, of being an outsider and misfit nobody wanted to put up with. And it baffled Sherlock even more that John considered him his best friend. This was something that Sherlock was secretly immensely grateful for.

Sherlock got up and stood next to John, putting his hand on his flatmate’s shoulder.

“I’m here, John. Not going anywhere. Whenever you are ready…”

John’s eyes met Sherlock’s and the doctor nodded. The detective saw the worry in his eyes and the way he swallowed hard.

John grabbed the remote and pressed play.

“Here goes…”
His Darkest Day

Chapter Summary

John has to relive the day his life changed forever, and Sherlock gets a glimpse of what his flatmate is truly capable of. A certain consulting detective might also have to re-define the word "hero".

Trigger warning: Graphic descriptions of injuries

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His Darkest Day

The video started in a tunnel and John knew where it led although he’d never been in it himself. They had been ambushed and then marched into the compound at gunpoint, along the road.

Two guards came into view at the end of the tunnel, who were subdued quickly and quietly. Eventually, there was daylight and the rescue team dashed about, quickly finding the makeshift prison and John could hear himself say “You here for us? About bloody time!”

The faces of his fellow men were all so familiar, but John felt himself strangely removed from it all. The quarters they’d been held prisoners in were cramped. At the time, it hadn’t seemed that way. John saw himself giving the order to storm the yard, heard the hiss of the flash bangs and as the grey smoke started to fill the yard on screen, his nightmares came rushing back.

All he could hear were his friends’ voices. Shouting for someone to give them cover, shouting for more ammunition. The gunfire from semi-automatics filled the silence in the room.

On screen, John stood, clutching his weapon, taking aim and squeezing off one shot, two shots, calmly and focused. Each shot hitting its mark, not wasting time or ammunition.

Two insurgents go down. Sherlock watches and is quietly impressed. John stares at the screen, his fingernails digging into the front of the armrest. He looks calm, but his white knuckles give away the building tension.

More shots ring out and John closes his eyes, turns his face away slightly. Then he forces himself to open his eyes and watch. On screen, the shaky camera catches glimpses of 4th Battalion and 5th Northumberland. John’s voice calling out above the noise, asking for his kit. He keeps breaking away from relative safety to drag people away; crouches in the open yard, completely unprotected, and dresses wounds, calming his soldiers. John is dashing back and forth, pulling, dragging and carrying wounded colleagues indoors and out of harm’s way.

Sitting in his armchair in 221b Baker Street, John sees red. Literally. All he sees is blood; so much blood! Seeing the entire scene from a different perspective feels weird to John. His own mind filled in the blanks, everything John had seen that day with his own eyes.

Every now and then he had to shake his head sharply to focus on the DVD once more.

While Sherlock was watching the video, he came to several conclusions. The first was that he’d never join the army, no matter what. The second was that the John in the video looked like he belonged. He was calm, his movements sure. He was authoritative and competent. He went from shooting an insurgent to saving a life in under five seconds flat and the way he moved it seemed like John had been born to be both, army doctor and soldier.

Sherlock also thought that whatever he’d previously seen and deduced about John’s skills as a marksman, he’d have to re-evaluate. But now that he was getting a glimpse of one 47 minute period of John’s life in the army on active duty in Afghanistan, he realized the full scale of the trauma John must have endured. He’d been in the army nearly fifteen years. Not all that time had been spent in war zones, but John had been on his fourth tour of duty in Afghanistan when the siege currently playing out on the telly occurred.

If one hour, on one afternoon, could literally scar a man like this, what must the rest of it have been like? John had said this wasn’t the first time they’d been under attack.

Across from Sherlock, John sat watching intently. The glass of Scotch was empty; Sherlock filled it again, watching his friend’s face. Tears were streaming down the doctor’s face, but he didn’t seem to notice, his gaze was glued to the screen. His breathing caught every now and then on a sob and in tense situations and it reminded Sherlock of John during one of his more violent nightmares. And now John was reliving it for real.

Sherlock sat back down in his armchair and steepled his hands together under his chin. Onscreen,
the siege continued. John shouted something about a chopper and needing a medevac immediately. The man in the armchair was trembling now, cold sweat covering his forehead.

But John’s eyes remained glued to the TV screen. Another grenade exploded and John instinctively ducked, even though he was sitting in a flat in London. One hand shot up to his face, tracing a burn pattern and scar tissue on his right cheek that had long since healed. He could still smell his singed hair.

In the video, Captain Watson kept dashing about the casualties, instructing everyone who was able to help bring their comrades to safety and to apply pressure to their wounds. The ground was stained with blood.

Sherlock watched his friend closely; both of them tensing for the one thing they both knew happened that day that they had not seen yet.

“Parker!” John calls out as he sees the young officer being hit on screen.

While sitting in his armchair, John mirrors his motions from that day. Kneeling next to him, applying pressure to his leg, avoiding the sharp piece of metal that had lodged in his thigh. He knew he couldn’t pull it out; knew the risk that he’d bleed out. He used the last of the gauze and bandages on him.

On screen, John stood up when he heard “all clear.” He looked around, looking for a medical kit. In Baker Street, John tensed even more.

Shaking, but rigid, his fingers dug into the armchair while his toes pressed into the carpet. He knew what was coming. This was the moment. The moment his life changed. The moment that had turned him from being Captain Doctor John Watson into plain Doctor Watson, with no way back.

Sherlock deduced what was about to happen. He got up again very quietly so he wouldn’t startle John. Then the detective went to stand behind his best friend and gently placed his palms on the top of John’s shoulders.

For a second, John didn’t even realize. Both men’s attention was on the TV screen. It all went eerily quiet. And then there was a single gunshot that echoed through the yard in Afghanistan just like it echoed through the flat in London.

John lurched forward and the cry he gave made Sherlock’s blood run cold. In the video, John collapsed on top of Parker, half protecting him using himself as a body shield, half not being able to keep upright.

Sherlock started to gently massage John’s shoulders, all the while his gaze was fixed on the TV screen. John let out a shuddering breath.

“I don’t… I’ve never seen what… what happened… after…” he eventually got out. After John had been shot, ten of his men returned fire. Then someone grabbed John and rolled him off of Parker.

In London, John winced when he saw himself. Half his face was burned and scratched. He’d broken his arm in the fall. He was bleeding heavily from an injury to his leg that he hadn’t really noticed before.

But then the picture filled with a close up of John’s shoulder wound and the blogger had to try his best not to vomit.

“Oh God!!” John had clasped his hands in front of his mouth and tried hard to breathe through them.

“Jesus, John!” Sherlock gasped, shocked at the extent of John’s injury.

“I had no idea…” Sherlock watched the scene with an open mouth.

Almost involuntarily, John’s hand reached up to his scar and rubbed it, while Sherlock kept massaging both shoulders. The TV screen filled with blood, John’s blood, gushing out of him at an alarming speed.

John’s entire shoulder is destroyed, Sherlock can see bits of muscle and bone in the wound. Of course, he’d known that John must have sustained a horrific injury for him to be invalided home. However, John had always been so private; Sherlock had never even seen the scar in all the years of sharing a flat with the man.

On screen, John was desperately trying to cling on to consciousness. His eyelids fluttered, his tanned face had become impossibly white and he was quickly losing the fight. Half his unit was next to him, shouting things like “Stay with us, Doc!” and “John, can you hear me?” and “We need bandages, get him to the chopper, the doc’s been shot!! Move, move, move!!”

Someone was kneeling next to John and they were calm.

“John, look at me! Look at me, Captain! You’ll be fine; we’ll be out of here in a jiffy, you’ll see, just keep your eyes open!”

John’s reply was faint; it was an obvious struggle for him to speak.

“Not… gonna make it…”
“No, John! Don’t you dare close your eyes, damn it!”

And then, barely audible, Sherlock heard John say the words he’d said during that drugs bust all those moons ago.

John’s voice was a whisper: “Please… God… let me live…”

And with that, the John on screen lost consciousness. He would not wake up again for a week.

Sitting in his armchair, John was quietly sobbing, the images on screen together with the pain memory and flashbacks his mind provided too much for him to take. He’d curled up on the seat but had grabbed hold of Sherlock’s hand which was still on his shoulder.

The detective was at a loss regarding what to do. These were precisely the sort of situations he usually avoided. He had no interest or experience in emotions and usually didn’t care. But this was John, and he would make damn sure he’d do his best tonight to be there for his friend.

The video ended with John, Parker and another soldier being carried out of the mosque complex and towards the waiting chopper. Sherlock sighed in relief when the screen finally turned black, not because he was glad to be rid of the images, but because he was glad that John wouldn’t have to endure any more of it.

“John… I…” for once, Sherlock didn’t know what to say.

He searched his mind. ‘What would John do in a situation like this?’ It took him a minute until his mind supplied ‘Tea. John makes tea when people are upset.’ Sherlock cleared his throat and tried again.

“Erm… I’m making tea, would you like one as well?”

He could have slapped himself silly. ‘That wasn’t very original.’

“Yes, please. Thank you, Sherlock…”

John tried his hardest to get his emotions under control. Sherlock excused himself to the kitchen, while John got up and went to sit on the sofa, wanting to put distance between himself and the DVD. The gunshots and screams were still echoing in his ears, his shoulder was throbbing and his leg shaking.

It was the first time he’d seen himself getting shot and also the first time he saw the full extent of his shoulder wound. Of course he understood the medical terminology, what with being a doctor and all, but seeing it was different. When he’d woken up from the coma he’d slipped into after suffering cardiac arrest on the way to the hospital, the wound had already been operated on and wrapped. Not for the first time, John thought ‘How am I still alive?’

Sherlock was rummaging through the kitchen, looking for teabags. As he never actually made tea himself, or used the kitchen for its intended purpose, it took him until the kettle was almost boiling to spot the big box of Yorkshire tea bags sitting on the counter, right next to the toaster.

John didn’t see Sherlock dash into his bedroom to retrieve a packet of sleeping pills, just in case. Sherlock had started leaving sleeping pills and a glass of water for John or even mixed them into his tea when his nightmares got too much for the soldier to handle. There was no way John wouldn’t dream about Afghanistan tonight if he managed to sleep at all, so Sherlock wanted to ensure that John got as restful a night’s sleep as possible under the circumstances. Sherlock placed the pills on the kitchen counter so they would be handy if needed.

John had retreated to the sofa where he now sat with his head between his knees, willing the images, sounds and tears away.

“John?”

He looked up to find Sherlock standing in front of him with a steaming mug of tea. He wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands and reached for the striped mug his friend was holding out to him.

“Thanks, Sherlock. Well, now that you know what my nightmares are about, you must think I’m pathetic. A soldier, afraid of the sights and sounds of war…”

“I would never think that you’re pathetic, John! Moronic maybe, for joining up in the first place, but never pathetic. You lived through a major trauma. And what I’ve just seen is probably only the tip of the proverbial iceberg of the things you have seen and endured. You were held captive, but you kept calm. You kept your men calm. You fought your way out of there and you sacrificed your own well-being to ensure everyone made it out alive. Never, ever think that the effects all this had on you made you pathetic in any way!”

John looked up a bit startled. He’d not expected Sherlock to care this much, despite the concern the detective had displayed throughout the evening. The cup of tea was already more than he expected, but he was glad Sherlock was there just the same.

Sherlock could read the thoughts on John’s face.

“I may have to amend a statement I made ages ago, John. I said that heroes don’t exist. But tonight, you showed me proof that that’s not the case. You may not wear a cape or some other ridiculous outfit that the majority of the population believes is needed to be heroic, but you, John
Watson, are a hero nonetheless. It’s just taken me this long to fully comprehend.”

John had to laugh at that while he wiped the remaining tears away. Trust Sherlock to delete the solar system from his memory but remember the proper attire of comic superheroes.

“I’m really not a hero, though. I did my duty, followed my orders.”

John took a sip of his tea and was surprised to find that Sherlock had remembered he took his tea with a liberal dash of milk and one spoonful of sugar.

“I’m glad, in a way that this video exists. It confirmed my nightmares for the most part. At least now I know the images are real and I’m not actually going mad. Even though seeing it unravel from a different perspective made it all a bit surreal. I watched myself and kept thinking ‘Keep your head down, you idiot’ and ‘that bullet impacted two feet away from you, get out’. But I know that while it was happening, I didn’t think at all. I just reacted. None of the sounds, the sights, all the blood and gore – it never really bothered me while I was still out there. I’ve treated wounds like mine and I’ve seen friends get shot and killed. I just don’t know why this out of all the things I’ve seen, keeps repeating itself in my head over and over again…”

“Maybe it was reaction, maybe it was instinct. John, you strive on the danger and adrenaline. Otherwise, you wouldn’t still live with me or accompany me to crime scenes. We’ve chased criminals, got injured, were shot at and even kidnapped. And yet, you stop in your tracks as soon as someone needs medical attention. You’ve killed a man to save my life without hesitation or remorse and you barely knew me then. Moreover, at the pool, you kept calm, signalled S.O.S. by blinking Morse code like you’d been trained to do and tackled Moriarty to give me a chance to escape. You’re not pathetic at all John. You’re courageous beyond compare. And I for one am proud to know you! I’ve known Doctor Watson for ages now, but I mean it, it’s an honour to have finally seen Captain Watson in action.”

John chuckled and shook his head. His breathing had returned to normal and the tea had definitely helped. He got up to make his way to his bedroom to get changed.

“Before you go, John, there’s one more thing.”

Sherlock turned towards the desk to retrieve an item.

“Mycroft has asked me to give this to you.”

He handed over a crisp white, heavy envelope with a red wax seal, addressed to Captain John Hamish Watson, MBBS, of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers.

Sherlock had a fair idea what it would contain. John thought he did too, after Mycroft had told him he would receive the Military Cross and Bar.

John held the envelope in his hand, weighing it. He turned it over to inspect the seal, traced a finger across the outlines in the wax and then across his name on the front. Sherlock handed him a letter opener and John carefully opened it.

Inside was a heavy card. He read it, his eyes growing wider and wider with every line he read. When he got to the bottom, he read it again.

“Sherlock?”

“Hmm?”

“Could you just pinch me? In the arm? I just want to make sure that this is actually happening.”

“Sure, if you want me to…”

Sherlock pinched John’s left arm and his fingernails left indentations in the flesh. He added an Indian burn as well, just for the sake of it. It had been entirely too long since he’d last tried that on Mycroft as a child and he had always enjoyed it immensely.

“ Nope, still here, this must be real then…”

John’s face had gone white, his eyes still wide and a look of disbelief and incomprehension still on his face. He dropped heavily back down onto the couch. His hand was trembling as he looked up to Sherlock and held out the card to him.

Sherlock took the crisp card from his flatmate and muttered under his breath as he read the finely printed words inscribed on it.

“Her Majesty The Queen requests the honour of the company of Captain John Hamish Watson, MBBS, MC at Her Majesty’s Birthday Honours reception, during which he will be invested with the Victoria Cross for conspicuous acts of valour and extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy in Afghanistan in 2009…”

Sherlock looked at John, his expression dumbfounded for once.

“This is an invitation for your…”

“Victoria Cross Investiture… Yeah.”

Sherlock returned to the card which further stated that the investiture ceremony would be held in a week from Friday at the Ballroom in Buckingham Palace.
“John… I don’t know what to say! Congratulations! This is a huge honour!”

“I know, Sherlock!! The Military Cross was big enough. But the Victoria Cross? Me? Is this some sort of elaborate prank Mycroft’s trying to play? I don’t believe this, Sherlock…”

He looked up at his ebony-haired flatmate who had already turned around and refilled their Scotch glasses liberally, that was to say, to the brim. Sherlock was beaming across his entire face, genuinely pleased and John grimmed back when the importance and meaning of it all started to sink in. The detective handed John his glass.

“A toast! To you, Captain John Hamish Watson, of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, Victoria Cross recipient, hero and the best friend and flatmate a consulting detective could hope for! For Queen and Country!” Sherlock raised his glass.

“In Arduis Fidelis – Quo Fata Vocant”, John replied, clinked his tumbler against Sherlock’s and sipped his whisky.

“Faithful in adversity, where destiny takes me?” Sherlock translated the Latin without skipping a beat.

“The mottos of the RAMC and the Northumberland Fusiliers. They fit quite nicely, don’t you think?”

Sherlock hummed in agreement around his Scotch glass. His regimental mottos described John perfectly.

Just then, John’s text alert chimed.

“CONGRATULATIONS, CAPTAIN WATSON. WELL AND TRULY DESERVED. – MH”

“How the hell does your brother know that I’ve just read the letter?”

John looked up at Sherlock and then around the flat, trying to spot any cameras.

“You know what? I probably don’t want to know the answer to that. I’m gonna wake up tomorrow and find that this was all a dream, won’t I?”

“I somehow doubt that, John. Although there will probably be quite a bit of media focus on you now, especially after the news story today.”

“Oh shit! I hadn’t really thought about that at all! Damn it!” he groaned.

“I don’t want the attention. This has been a secret for so long; it doesn’t feel right that it’s all coming to light! And I maintain, I only did my job that day and every other day I was out there. What do I do?”

“Well, I can always lend you the Death Frisbee. That might throw them off for a while ….”

Even though John shot Sherlock a look that said ‘You’ve gotta be kidding me’, he still smiled at the thought. He noticed Sherlock had sat down across from him, shot him another look and both men began to break into uncontrollable giggles. Sherlock felt genuine relief that he seemed to have managed to cheer John up despite the evening he’d had.

John’s phone rang and he groaned when he saw the caller ID. It was Anthea. She needed to get quotes from him for the press statement they were preparing as the media demanded to hear from John himself.

Diligently, John answered her questions, explained how he felt and what an honour it was to receive not only the Military Cross and Bar, but also the highest honour in the land. However, always modest, he once again pressed the point that all he did was his job and that his entire team deserved recognition.

She made him confirm the official operations he’d been part of, where he had been based. After what seemed like an eternity to John, she finally rang off, saying she had everything she needed for now.

While John had been on the phone, Sherlock had studied him as he’d paced up and down through the living room. Obviously the limp John had had when they’d first met was only partially psychosomatic. He’d now seen proof that there was an actual injury to his leg when shrapnel from a grenade had lodged in his thigh. Sherlock was still amazed that this kind, caring man with his love for tea, jam on toast and woolly jumpers could shrug off the absolute trauma he’d been through so successfully.

Sherlock had always known something big must have happened as the army doesn’t send soldiers or doctors home permanently when there was a chance they could recuperate from their injuries in due time. And yet, John insisted it wasn’t that big a deal, even after Sherlock had seen the video and John had been told he’d get the highest military honour of the United Kingdom for his actions.

When looking at John, most people saw the nice guy next door who held the door open for ladies, who had a charming smile he knew how to use and that country doctor air about him.

Men saw a down to earth bloke who’d meet up for drinks at the pub, who’d be up for rugby or five-a-side football and a few laughs.
Women saw a man who made them feel safe and who their mothers would whole-heartedly approve of.

Sherlock and Lestrade had seen him chase criminals, shoot with impeccable aim, always standing his ground in a fight and never shying away from helping someone in need. They’d also seen him in medical emergencies keeping a calm head and a steady hand, zoning out all background actions and noise to focus entirely on his patient.

John knew how to follow orders and how to give them. Sherlock had always assumed John was half mocking him when he ordered the detective to clean up the flat, dispose of the body parts in the fridge or buy the milk.

But now that he’d seen Captain Watson rather than Doctor Watson quietly and confidently taking charge of three units, all of which followed his command immediately and unquestioningly, Sherlock couldn’t help but look at his friend with even more new found respect.

And just like Mycroft earlier, Sherlock thought that silent waters run deep. He made a decision and sent a quick text to his brother.

“I'D LIKE TO SEE HIS FULL SERVICE RECORD. ALSO, BOOK A TABLE FOR THREE AT GALVIN AT WINDOWS FOR 7.30PM TOMORROW. WILL THAT DO, BROTHER? – SH”

The reply came almost instantly.

“CONSIDER THE TABLE BOOKED. I'VE GOT MORE TO DISCUSS WITH JOHN, I WILL BRING THE FILE BY TOMORROW. –MH”

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, you guys rock! Love all your comments and kudos!

I have no idea whether the etiquette outlined below is even anywhere near the actual deal, but nobody could tell me, so I’m rolling with it.

While I try to base 5th Northumberland Fusiliers on the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (Northumberland and 3 other regiments were united as the RRF in 1968), the motto is that of the historic 5th Northumberland.

RRF’s motto today is "Honi soit qui mal y pense" (evil to him who thinks evil) but I felt "Where Destiny Takes Me” fitted better.

There was a real life John Watson who received the Victoria Cross and commanded troops during the Second Afghan War, in which ACD canon John Watson also served (John was wounded at the Battle of Maiwand, 27 July 1880), so this is coming full circle, in a way!

"In Arduis Fidelis” - Motto of the Royal Army Medical Corps

"Quo Fata Vocant" - Motto of the historic 5th Northumberland Fusiliers. In 1968 they were put together with other Fusilier regiments to form the current Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. Their new motto is “Honi soit qui mal y pense”

ACD canon and BBC John Watson is Captain of the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers which don’t exist anymore. I am using the historic motto because it’s authentic.
John still sat on the sofa, letting everything that had happened during the day sink in. He’d get the Victoria Cross! ‘Bloody hell’, he thought, not for the first time that day. Absentmindedly, he rubbed his damaged shoulder, which Sherlock noticed.

“Would you rather have a heat pack or ice pack for that?”

John looked up startled, a confused frown on his face.

“Your shoulder. You’ve been rubbing it. It clearly bothers you.”

“Oh, erm, heat pack. There’s a microwaveable gel pack in the bathroom cabinet.”

Sherlock went to retrieve it and heated it up while John sipped his whisky, savouring the taste. Within a minute, Sherlock reappeared at John’s side, holding the heated gel cushion, which he had wrapped in a towel, in his hand.

John got up and turned away from Sherlock to take off his cardigan. He loosened the top buttons of his shirt and tried to wedge the cushion between his shoulder and the inside of his button down.

“I’ve never…” Sherlock started, which earned him a puzzled look from John, who had turned around again to face him.

“…Can I see it? Your scar?”

Of course, people had seen his scar before. Doctors, therapists, girlfriends. He was still a bit self-conscious because of it, though. He kept himself covered when he could, stopped going for swims and if he went to the gym, he showered at home.

But his mind reasoned that Sherlock had just seen a video of the damage the bullet had caused in glorious technicolour. What remained now was clean scar tissue, even though it still looked angry and ugly.

John deliberated for a few seconds before he made up his mind, nodded slightly and turned around to face the windows again. He opened his shirt more and pushed it off his shoulders, letting it hang in the crooks of his elbows.

Sherlock was surprised. Judging from what he’d seen, he had expected a much bigger wound. There was a fairly round, indented spot the size of a twenty pence coin on the back of John’s shoulder blade, that was dark red, with raised edges, in stark contrast to John’s tanned skin. He was just about to say how that scar shouldn’t worry John at all, when his flatmate turned around to face him.

Sherlock sucked in a breath. The front of John’s shoulder was another matter entirely. The scar-tissue covered the whole of John’s left shoulder, from his collarbone to right above his heart.

Even though the scar was already several years old, it hadn’t faded to grey lines. A massive starburst pattern, at least six times the size of the entry wound, right in the centre with severe tissue damage around it showed Sherlock where the bullet had exited John’s body and what trajectory it had taken. Had the angle been off by even just two percent, the bullet would have torn through John an inch or two further down and left and John would have returned home in a body bag instead.

Whatever ammunition John’s captors had used, it had penetrated John’s body including the thick scapula and had not been from a small caliber gun.
Red, ridged lines, some thick like a pencil, some as thin as a hair, wormed their way outwards from the edges of the starburst at the centre. Sherlock couldn’t decide whether it looked like the scars were trying to crawl out of the centre and claim John, or whether they were being sucked into the black hole that was the exit wound. The scar wasn’t pretty. It wasn’t meant to be. It was a battle scar. It spoke of the circumstances under which it was received and the fight John’s body had put up against the sepsis that had been trying to destroy him.

Sherlock could tell that it had taken several operations to reset the damaged bone. With his usual complete disregard for personal boundaries, Sherlock got closer and poked the scar once.

John just looked at him, slightly amused, but didn’t say anything before lifting his gaze and staring into the middle-distance as if under inspection by his superiors. He knew he had basically just become another slide under the microscope. With feather-light touch, Sherlock was tracing one of the ridges. When John didn’t react, Sherlock looked up.

“Nerve damage. I can barely feel a thing there. I can feel pressure against it, but nothing else,” John explained.

Sherlock nodded and inspected the scar further. The angry darkened lines showed Sherlock the extent of the blood poisoning John had suffered and how much dead and damaged tissue had to be lifted out of the wound. While Sherlock was studying his injuries, John didn’t move a muscle and Sherlock noted that despite having left the Army several years ago, John maintained a trained physique.

Sherlock knew John tried to work out regularly, a habit retained from his army days. What surprised Sherlock was the amount of other scars across John’s chest and torso.

“I played rugby and spent fifteen years in the army. You tend to pick up a few nicks here and there,” John explained casually.

Once Sherlock had satisfied his curiosity, he helped John keep the heat pack in place while the doctor buttoned up his shirt again.

As John sat back down, Sherlock picked up his violin and started to play Land of Hope and Glory, as he thought it was strangely fitting. John smiled and waited for Sherlock to finish playing before he emptied his whisky glass.

“Right then. I’m off to bed… And thanks again, Sherlock, for being here tonight. I mean it.”

“Good night, John. Anytime.”

Sherlock watched the soldier retreat up the stairs to his bedroom. Then he went to the kitchen, put the kettle on and filled a thermos with hot water. He placed the thermos together with two mugs, tea bags, sugar and creamer, as well as the sleeping pills he’d retrieved earlier, on a tray and placed all of it on the coffee table.

He knew he wouldn’t sleep tonight anyway and he wasn’t fooled by John’s brave face and demeanour. He could almost sense the nightmares coming on and he knew it was only a matter of hours before John would be back downstairs, trying to clear his head with tea.

This was the way they’d always dealt with John’s nightmares at 221b Baker Street. Tried, tested and trusted. Now that Sherlock had seen the images that kept repeating themselves inside John’s head, he began to understand how John’s mind had to make sense of them, but Sherlock couldn’t fathom what it must have been like to live through.

About an hour and a half later, Sherlock was softly playing the violin, composing a new melody in the living room, when he heard John’s tentative footsteps on the stairs. When the detective looked up, John stood in the doorway, clad in his pyjamas and a bathrobe, hair dishevelled and the streaks of fresh tears drying on his face.

“Do you mind if I sit for a while? Can’t sleep…” John mumbled.

Sherlock looked at him and pointed his head towards the sofa and the tea set he’d put out.

“Cheers”, John said when he sat down and started pouring himself some tea.

“Care to join me for a cuppa?” he asked and Sherlock sat down while John poured the tea.

“What was that you were playing? I don’t think I’ve heard it before.”

“Hmm? Oh, that! It’s not finished yet. I just came up with it, still working it out. What did you think of it?”

“Oh, I’ve just heard a bit but it sounds really beautiful, Sherlock.”

“Thanks.”

Sherlock blushed slightly and turned away. John was well aware that Sherlock enjoyed the flattery and praise, especially when everyone else called his deductions and skills freakish.

They both sat in silence sipping their tea. Sherlock noticed how, little by little, the tension of the nightmare slowly left John’s body. They both knew why John had come downstairs, what had kept him from sleeping. But they also knew that the other knew what was going on and it was a testament to their friendship that they could sit next to each other in silence and let their body
language and actions say everything that needed to be said.

John was grateful that he didn’t have to repeat himself and Sherlock still felt awkward in emotional situations. But he had learned long ago that John was worth putting a bit of an effort in.

After they’d both finished their drinks and John had gladly taken the sleeping aid Sherlock had so thoughtfully put out for him, John asked, “Do you mind if I sit here a bit longer?” The ‘I really don’t want to be alone tonight’ was implied, but Sherlock heard it anyway.

“Course not.”

“Sherlock, could you, erm, do me a favour? Could you play for me? Anything you want, it just usually calms me down and I like hearing you play, so I thought if you don’t mind…”?

John knew he was rambling and closed his mouth.

Sherlock smiled at him, picked up his Stradivarius again and turned back towards the large windows. John smiled to himself when he heard Sherlock beginning to play The Lark Ascending. The detective knew it was one of his favourites.

John settled down on the sofa, lying on his back, trying to focus on the music rather than the images in his mind. Sherlock kept playing and started Gideon Klein’s Lullaby. Once the last note was lingering in the living room of 221b, he glanced over to his flatmate. There he was, John Hamish Watson, doctor, soldier and war hero, peacefully asleep on the leather couch.

Sherlock got out one of the shock blankets they’d nicked from a case a while ago, covered John’s sleeping frame with it, pushed the cup of tea away from the edge of the coffee table and resumed playing his instrument. He kept composing until the break of the new day.

When John woke up, there was a split second during which he didn’t know where he was. This was definitely not his bedroom. Then his eyes adjusted to the light and he recognised the skull on the mantelpiece.

‘Must have fallen asleep on the couch then,’ he mused. And then another thought occurred to him. It was quiet. Too quiet. He couldn’t hear Sherlock rummaging around.

He’d long ago adopted the same mindset around the lanky detective that mothers have around toddlers. If you can’t hear them, then they are definitely up to no good. But just as he was thinking that Sherlock stepped out of the bathroom, wiping shaving cream off his face with a towel and proceeding into his bedroom to get changed.

John admitted he should probably do the same. Shower, shave, shirt. Preferably in that order.

He retreated upstairs to his bedroom to grab a change of clothes and then made his way to the bathroom. When he emerged, fully dressed and with some sense of normality restored, he nearly stopped dead in his tracks when he entered the kitchen.

Sherlock had cleared away all of his experiments and laid the kitchen table for breakfast. He’d even got out a tablecloth John didn’t even know they owned – it was a white, fitted sheet – and just as John was about to ask what all this was for, his eyes fell on the white envelope Sherlock had placed near John’s chair.

All the events of the previous night came flooding back to John. He looked up at Sherlock.

“So I didn’t just imagine all of that then, huh?”

“If by all that you mean that everyone now knows about your heroics in Afghanistan, watched it all on video and you had two medals bestowed on you, then no, you didn’t imagine it.”

“Ah, okay. Didn’t think so.”

John sat down and grabbed the mug of tea Sherlock was offering him. He read through the letter again.

“I don’t think that this has sunk in yet… they’re giving me the Victoria Cross. That’s the highest honour you can receive in this country. And they’re giving it to me! Me! Out of all people!”

John shook his head and carefully placed the invitation back in its envelope.

Sherlock put a plate of food down in front of him and John stared at it for a second or two. For being a graduate chemist and all the complicated experiments Sherlock devoted his free time to, he still seemed to have a hard time following the science and instructions of basic cooking.

John smiled to himself. The egg was slightly too runny and the bacon slightly too cremated for his liking, but he ate it all because Sherlock had gone out of his way, made such an effort and John appreciated the thought behind it.

Just as they had finished their breakfasts, Mrs. Hudson appeared in the doorway.

“Good morning, dears.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Hudson,” John said on his way back past the table after having placed the plates in the sink.

“Oh, John! My dear boy!” she exclaimed and hugged John tightly.
Taken slightly by surprise, John stood for a second with his arms by his sides before embracing his landlady.

“Are you alright, Mrs. Hudson?”

“Of course I’m alright, silly!”

She stepped back slightly and held him at arm’s length.

“Oh you brave boy, surviving all that in Afghanistan, getting shot! Dreadful business!”

Now she was busy brushing a few crumbs of toast away from John’s shirt.

“You could have died! And nobody told me that my tenant is a war hero!”

She sent a scolding look towards Sherlock, who chose to ignore it.

“But congratulations, John! The Victoria Cross! You must be so pleased!”

“I… erm… Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. Nobody knew, it was top secret. And yes, I’m well chuffed though I don’t think I deserve it.”

“Nonsense, boy! You deserve it, I’m certain. And then you go off with Sherlock, putting yourself in danger….,” another pointed look towards the consulting detective, which also got ignored.

“Oh Mrs. Hudson, I just can’t help it,” John grinned.

But then he remembered something.

“How do you know about me getting the Victoria Cross? Did Sherlock or Mycroft tell you?”

“What? Oh, that! No, dear, it’s all over the news…”


“Bloody hell, Sherlock, Mycroft didn’t waste any time, did he?”

Mrs. Hudson looked at Sherlock, who wordlessly took out another mug for Mrs. Hudson while the landlady went downstairs to fetch the Sunday papers.

“I had no idea that story yesterday was about you, John! I mean, I know you were an army doctor, but I never expected you…. you know? I can’t even imagine, you being held prisoner, saving all those people….”

John just smiled at her.

“Well, there are some things I do not miss while working at the GP surgery…”

Mrs. Hudson handed him the pile of Sunday papers. John took one look and groaned.

“Where did they get that photo of me? And all the rest? Sherlock, The Observer, Sunday Times, The Independent and The Telegraph made me their front page story!! Tell Mycroft this has to stop! I don’t want this. I did my job and my duty. End of. Hundreds of doctors and thousands of soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq are doing pretty much the same thing. It’s bad enough one of the two of us gets recognised all the time!”

He opened up the Express.

“Oh great, here we go! Page 5… ‘Net ‘Tec’s hero sidekick’.”

Sherlock just grinned.

“Oh stop being so dramatic, John. The offer to borrow the Death Frisbee still stands.”

John buried his face in his hands.

“Nevertheless, I think celebrations are in order as John won’t just get the Victoria Cross, but also the Military Cross and Bar. Mrs. Hudson, would you accompany John and me to dinner tonight? We should make the most of John’s new hero status before the novelty wears off again.”

John and Mrs. Hudson looked at each other and then at Sherlock, puzzled.


“Yes, John, dinner. It’s when you eat food in the evening. I trust that the concept is not too hard to grasp, novel as it may seem. Do keep up. It’s an excellent restaurant; we’ll be picked up at 7pm.”

“Oh, thank you, Sherlock, dear. That’s very kind of you. I’ll leave you two to it for now. I’ll see you tonight,” Mrs. Hudson said and excused herself.

“So what brought this on, Sherlock?”

“Well, I’ve been given to understand that you might like something different than dim sum every now and then. And we do have something to celebrate.”
“Fair enough.”

John settled down to read the papers. He huffed and puffed a few times, obviously annoyed by the ‘official’ story that had been released by the MoD. In fact, he was more annoyed that they’d printed something about the medals before he had a chance to tell at least his sister Harry himself.

As if on cue, his mobile rang.

“Watson… Oh hi, Harry. How are you?”

There was a long pause.

“Yes, Harry, that was really me… No, I didn’t have a death wish; I was doing my job… Harry, I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone… I came back, didn’t I? Takes more than that to get rid of me, you should know, you’ve been trying since I was born… Yes, they’re actually giving me those medals… Thank you, Harry… okay, talk soon. Bye?”

John sighed. He’d never told Harry about any of his Afghanistan experiences. He’d kept his updates from the front light-hearted. When he’d been invalided home, she’d freaked and then accused him of abandoning his family.

Meanwhile, Sherlock was busy typing away on John’s laptop, after having guessed the doctor’s new password in less than a minute.

“John, you do realize that ‘sherlockuseyourowncomputer’ all one word, lower case, is not an effective password, don’t you?”

John just rolled his eyes.

The next call came about half an hour later. John glanced at his phone and saw the caller ID for Lestrade’s extension at Scotland Yard.

“Morning, Greg!”

“Oh, hi, good morning, John. How are you?”

“Not too bad, and yourself?”

“Can’t complain.”

“Um… is there a case? Do you want me to fetch Sherlock?” John asked after a couple of seconds’ silence.

“No, no case. Actually, I wanted to talk to you. To… er… thank you… I guess.”

“Thank me? Whatever for, Lestrade?”

“Well, everything you did over there, in Afghanistan. I had no idea, mate. Knew there was more to that nice doctor with a gun routine, though.”

“So you’re just calling to thank me for going to Afghanistan?”

“Pretty much…. yeah. I just wanted you to know that I appreciate everything you’ve done out of duty. My nephew is deployed over there, so I mean it! I had no idea you army doctors got so close to the action!”

“Thank you, Greg. Army doctors don’t go anywhere near the front line. I was there because I was a fully combatant soldier. I’ll explain the details over a pint, yeah?”

“Oh, okay. Oh and congratulations, by the way. Victoria Cross, aye?”

“Yes. It’s still a bit surreal to be honest. I take it you’ve read the papers then, or you wouldn’t call out of the blue at 10.23am on a Sunday morning to thank me for doing a tour of duty in Afghanistan.”

“Yes, Observer. Sorry, didn’t mean to disturb ya, just wanted to let you know that it’s good to have you on our side.”

“Thanks, Greg, I appreciate it. I really do.”

“Ok, good. Um… I’ll let you know if there are any cases we need you guys for.”

“You do that. Take care, Greg.”

“You too!”

John put his mobile back down.

“Well, that was Lestrade.”

“I gathered.”

“Of course you did. He’ll let us know if he needs help with a case.”

Sherlock abandoned the computer in favour of his experiments, which he quickly distributed all over the kitchen table again. John received a few more congratulatory phone calls on his mobile
from friends and colleagues throughout the morning, but the landline was ringing off the hook with reporters wanting to get an exclusive interview with John. It got to a point, where Sherlock simply pulled the phone out of the socket to solve the problem of it ringing constantly.

Eventually, John decided that he needed a bit of air and ventured outside to go to the shops. They were nearly out of milk and bread anyway and he thought he might treat himself to a few bottles of beer and some sweets for once as he usually wasn’t one to indulge.

But going to Asda was not as easy as it normally was. As soon as he stepped out of the door, he was surrounded by journalists and photographers, all of whom tried to get him to answer questions and look at the camera. He tried his best to ignore them and the camera flashes, saying “no comment” over and over again. Luckily, he had years’ worth of experience dealing with the press, thanks to some of Sherlock’s more high profile cases.

As he made his way down the street, he noticed a group of Mycroft’s agents swiftly moving in and moving the mob along in the opposite direction.

Even doing the shopping was not as straightforward as it should have been. He went through the shop swiftly and smoothly, keeping his head down as he knew where he was going. He didn’t linger, just grabbed the items he wanted and moved on.

The girl at the check-out, however, recognized him immediately. That got the people in the queue behind him talking, patting his shoulders and back, shaking his hand and wishing him the best of luck. The throng of people grew so large that the store manager eventually intervened.

He beamed about having a hero shop in his store and gave John his items on the house, while John grimaced and dryly thought that he should have picked something more expensive than a selection of real ales, milk, bread and a few blocks of chocolate. Luckily, John had got out of there just before several pensioners could get started on their own war stories.

What should have been a simple, twenty-minute shopping trip took him the better part of one and a half hours. John was relieved to see that the group of journalists around Baker Street had been kept at bay and sagged against the door once he was safely back inside 221b.

“Oh John, there you are! Mycroft’s upstairs, looking for you,” Mrs. Hudson said as she spotted him at the bottom of the stairs. John sighed.

“Thanks, Mrs. Hudson. Today just keeps getting better and better…”

He smiled at her before he slowly made his way upstairs.
Sherlock and his brother sat across from each other in the armchairs, both sitting with their legs crossed and fingers tapping away at the armrests, apparently in the middle of an intense staring contest.

John decided to put the groceries away first. Mycroft didn’t look like he was going to leave anytime soon.

“Hello, Mycroft. Thanks for the press statement, much appreciated! All of Britain knows me now and believe it or not, I still don’t want to talk about that day, let alone with complete strangers!”

John huffed as he entered the lounge.

“Ah yes, John. We had to release a statement, you know that. After all, my lovely assistant spoke to you yesterday to get quotes from you for it. We received the information that The Daily Mail had managed to identify you from the pixelated photographs and we made the decision to issue an official confirmation before the rumours could spread.”

“Yeah well… I wasn’t exactly thinking straight when I spoke to Anthea last night. A little heads up that this was going to appear today would have been nice. I couldn’t even tell my sister or Mrs. Hudson in person. Next to getting shot, this is the biggest thing to ever happen to me and I couldn’t even tell the ones closest to me myself! I’d like to think that I’ve known you Holmes brothers long enough to expect that sort of courtesy, at least. I don’t think that’s too much to ask for, do you?”

Mycroft tried his best to look suitably chastised for a second, but John held up his hand and continued. He had to get a few things off his chest, after all.

“It’s all a bit much, don’t you think? Yesterday, I had to watch and relive the worst day of my life. Then you dropped a bombshell by telling me that I’ll not only get the Military Cross, but also the Victoria Cross for the actions I had to watch myself take. Do you have any idea what it’s like to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder? I know you believe I never had it to start with, but let me tell you, as a doctor, that it’s real and it’s debilitating! I’d got better over the last few years. Yesterday tore all my effort and hard-worked-for progress to shreds; it was like I was there again, experiencing it all again. That day, that afternoon, is playing on repeat in my mind, Mycroft, and now I have strangers come up to me asking for all the gory details!”

“John, while I understand your view, you know we didn’t leak the story. We had to release an official statement and it was best to identify you and get quotes from you as well, rather than have the nation speculate, eventually work it out and have half the press in this country camp on your doorstep to get a comment. Please believe me that I am not in the habit of divulging information about top secret operations freely, nor do I have any interest in making your long term medical condition worse.”

“It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think, Mycroft?”

John sat down on the sofa with his back ramrod straight and his hands between his knees.

“John, I know you have been through more than that video showed.” Mycroft held up a thick manila file with John’s name and rank in bold lettering written across the cover.

“Mycroft! Bloody hell, are those my service records? What are you doing with my file?” The former soldier wasn’t just agitated anymore, he was downright furious.

“I came by to give it to you. You can choose how much you feel comfortable sharing, of course, it is your own information after all, but if the recurrence of your PTSD-induced night terrors is anything to go by, I suggest that you either tell my brother about the rest or you let him read your
file. I guarantee he has the necessary security clearance."

"Mycroft Holmes, who I share my entire life story with and when is none of your bloody business! How would you like having to share your entire career with me in detail, hm? All the bad decisions, everything you have seen, done, had to endure?" John looked at Mycroft expectantly, but the government official chose to remain silent.

"Yeah, didn’t think so! And as for PTSD – there are many things that can trigger panic attacks. Reliving and watching my worst nightmare just happens to be one of those things for me as I found out last night, but it could just as well be a car backfiring or the kettle whistling!"

John was desperately trying to keep his voice calm and steady, and he clenched his hands into fists to keep the tremor away. Of course, both Holmes brothers noticed.

"John, I didn’t come here with the intention of upsetting you. You need to understand that."

"Then what did you come here for, Mycroft?"

"Yes, Mycroft, to what do we owe the disputable pleasure of your company, on a Sunday no less?" Sherlock had been quiet until then, watching John intently.

"I came here to congratulate John on the Victoria Cross. I knew they’d make the right decision. It was a toss-up between this and the George Cross for a while, but in the end, John’s actions were the very definition of what the Victoria Cross stands for – daring valour, self-sacrifice and extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy – and the final decision was unanimous."

Mycroft smiled tight-lipped at John. "While checking your military records, though, I have come across a matter that I’d like to discuss with you."

John looked up at Mycroft, intrigue and worry equally visible on his face.

"I know you left the Royal Army Medical Corps in 2002, became an officer and you were invalided home in 2009 when you received an honourable medical discharge. However, just like you are a registered GP with the General Medical Council, you also retained your membership of the Medical Corps Register."

John took that statement in and thought about it for a few seconds. His brows knitted together in confusion.

"Are you saying what I think you’re saying, Mycroft?"

"I’m afraid so. For some reason, it appears you were kept on the reserve register as an army GP."

John gasped, a million emotions playing across his face within seconds. But shock and disbelief were the ones that remained when he found his voice again.

"What? Come again?" he asked, incredulous and with wide eyes.

"That’s got to be illegal! Mycroft, take me off the bloody register! I left the RAMC years ago and I was invalided home… I received a medical discharge because I’m not fit to command troops in battle anymore, thanks to the seizures I suffered. And I would have to join the RAMC again. Even if I felt fit to go, my superior would have to take responsibility for me. But who would do that? Who would take me on, given my medical history, hm? The army has a very strict policy on this, so why are they breaking their own rules? If I’m kept on the register, they could call me up again at any time and I would have to go! The army made it abundantly clear that they had no use for me anymore. I served my country for fifteen years; I will not risk being redeployed, no matter how small the chance might be! I had no say in this, wasn’t even informed! Take me off the register today, Mycroft, or I swear if I get called up I’m taking you with me to see how you like life in a war zone!"

John’s face had gone red in anger, he was furious.

"I thought so, John. That’s why I felt it best to bring it to your attention! Consider yourself discharged once and for all. I will put the paperwork through personally.

"I can’t believe you’d do that to me… Or rather your predecessor," John was quick to add.

"It’s hard enough adjusting to civilian life after such a long time in the military. The last time I was a civilian, I was finishing med school, and even then I already had ties to the army due to the cadetship. It’s even harder to adjust when you can’t physically move and have to come to terms with the fact that two careers you worked your arse off for are over. Why was I kept on the register? I have a tremor in my hand, as you pointed out the very day we met, and I never regained full mobility in my shoulder. It’s good, but it’s not perfect and it never will be because the damage was too extensive. I’m a GP, not a surgeon. My skills as a doctor are not that rare or special that they would make me invaluable to the army. They don’t need me to diagnose heat stroke or dehydration. Due to the tremor in my hand, my dominant hand I might add, I would not be able to assist in surgery if someone was severely wounded…. The slightest slip of the scalpel and I could kill my patient and I would be responsible. And I wouldn’t go back out there just to be a triage nurse or to clean bedpans… I’m too qualified for that!"

"John, it really wasn’t my decision and I assumed you’d know, as it was in your file.

Sherlock’s lips twisted up at the corners into a smirk as he shook his head, slightly amused.
"You of all people should know never to assume, Mycroft," he teased his brother.

"Well, I didn’t know. What would have happened, had a letter arrived one day with my new orders, telling me that I’d ship out in three weeks’ time even though I had been medically discharged? I would have to go. If I didn’t, I’d be court-martialled for insubordination and would most likely still have to serve a minimum tour."

Mycroft nodded.

"How many more are there? Retired, invalided or discharged personnel kept as reserves without their knowledge even though they deserve their hard-earned civilian life? Did whoever made the decision even look at medical files? Sending soldiers with severe injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder back to the front line… That’s ridiculous! After the way they treat invalided soldiers, telling us we’re no good to them anymore. And the audacity to assume we’d just up and leave again on a surprise deployment we shouldn’t even be drafted for in the first place?"

John had got up and paced back and forth in front of the sofa, desperately needing an outlet for his anger. Suddenly, he stood still and turned towards Mycroft.

"Mycroft, have you ever seen the sort of flats the Ministry of Defence provides to returning personnel who don’t have anywhere else to go?"

"No, John, I can’t say that I have…"

"They are bedsits, Mycroft." John interrupted before the older Holmes could say more.

"It’s just the one room, maybe half the size of this living room," John pointed around the room they currently occupied at Baker Street.

"There’s a tiny stove, a bed, a wardrobe and a desk. The one I was in was horrible. I had to share a toilet and bathroom with everyone else on my floor. I’m used to cramped quarters and shared facilities, but that flat was taking the piss! My Captain’s quarters in Kandahar were more spacious than that! And the flats are on the outskirts of major cities. Mine was right next to the railway line; you could hear the trains go past at all hours of the night. You’ve got my previous address on record - you should swing by sometime. There were no proper shops, not even an express shop anywhere within easy walking distance and it was a long walk to the nearest tube station. We got dumped in those flats with a pension that’s borderline minimum wage and an extra £500 a month for health care and maintenance. I was one of the lucky ones, I could still walk, but others had lost their legs or needed wheelchairs. They couldn’t really get out and into London proper by themselves."

John had to take a breath to slow down a bit. He got quieter again and sounded subdued.

"No wonder then, that many returning soldiers decide to top themselves. Two from my building did in the two months I lived there, one of them right in front of me. Just took his gun out and shot himself, and I could do nothing but look on. And believe me, there were days when I first got back when I thought about it myself…"

Both Sherlock and Mycroft gasped at John’s whispered confession that he had contemplated suicide before he’d moved to Baker Street.

"John… I didn’t know…” Sherlock started, but the soldier cut him off.

"I never went through with it, never did anything. I just thought about it from time to time. But I simply couldn’t go through with it. It would have been a coward’s way out and I didn’t survive the war and going into cardiac arrest just to kill myself in London. Getting killed in action would have been honourable, and we’re all prepared for it. It’s not a safe occupation, after all. I had just lost my purpose, everything I had worked for had been taken away and I was dumped back in London by myself with nothing to do and nobody to talk to. But now I have a purpose again, mainly thanks to Sherlock. And I’m happy now with the way my life is going, I truly am. And I’m not at risk," he assured the brothers.

"But if the Ministry of Defence thinks that they can treat us like crap, put us away in dingy little flats and expects us to jump in joy at surprise re-deployments, then your bosses are mistaken, Mycroft!"

Mycroft cleared his throat. "Once again, John, I had no idea. I do thank you, though, for bringing this to my attention. Rest assured, this will get sorted immediately!"

John only nodded at him, still pacing through the living room, alternating between clenching and unclenching his fists, trying to release some of the built-up tension and adrenaline.

"What I came here to tell you, John, is that there will be a review regarding the amount of maintenance pay invalided soldiers such as yourself will receive. There will be an increase, but a sum hasn’t been decided on yet. In addition, the Victoria Cross comes with an annuity of £ 1,500. As for the housing situation, we will have to look whether anything can be done."

"Ok. Great. Thank you." John glanced at Mycroft and nodded.

"Well, now that that's sorted, there is the matter of your Victoria Cross Investiture to discuss."

Sherlock’s brother changed the subject, swiftly moving on. "You'll be allowed to bring up to three guests...."
"Well, that's easy. Sherlock, Mrs. Hudson and my sister."

"I will put those names forward. Anthea will be in touch with Ms Watson and Mrs. Hudson regarding appropriate formal dresses they will be required to wear. I will also take care of the bill, so do not worry yourself about that. Now John, were you ever issued or did you ever order a No. 1 dress uniform?"

"No, you don't tend to wear them in Afghanistan. I have got a No. 2 dress uniform, which still fits," John explained. After all, No. 1 uniforms were expensive and he had not had cause to purchase one, nor did his regiment participate in any regular public parades that required they'd be issued a new uniform. The one time he had to wear one, he'd hired the uniform. After all, he couldn't spare nearly a thousand pounds. He did, however, buy the beret with red and white hackle, as a proud display and memento of the regiment he had called his family.

"In that case, I will have a tailor come by tomorrow to get your measurements, you will be required to wear full dress uniform. Sherlock, dig out your morning suit, you know the Palace drill."

The consulting detective scoffed at that and John had to wonder just how privileged the Holmes upbringing must have been if Sherlock was as familiar with the procedures and protocol at Buckingham Palace as Mycroft was implying. And realization hit him that their visit to Buckingham Palace during that Irene Adler case - the one with the sheet incident - might not have been Sherlock's first. Mycroft was definitely familiar with the Palace if he was allowed to move around unescorted. A suspicion Mycroft confirmed.

"John, there are certain Palace protocols you should know about, but they will be taught to you closer to the time. During the Investiture, you and your fellow honourees will be called forward one by one and you will salute. Her Majesty The Queen will then give a short summary, outlining what you are receiving your award for. She will then attach the medal to your uniform; you will salute again and retreat with a quick turn. After the ceremony, there will be a banquet, attended by all honourees, their guests, the Prime Minister as well as several members of the Royal family. Cars will be provided by Buckingham Palace, although I do suggest that you have your sister meet you here so you can all travel together."

John hummed in agreement. So far, everything made sense, and his participation during the investiture didn't sound complicated, he would just have to keep his nerves under control.

"Any questions so far?"

"None at all."

"Good. As far as the Bar for your Military Cross is concerned, we will deviate slightly from standard procedure. As you should wear your full honours during the Victoria Cross investiture while you meet our monarch, you will receive the Bar beforehand. Unfortunately, this will not be a big affair. As you are already the recipient of the Military Cross, you know the scale these ceremonies usually take. It is likely that only your commanding officers will be in attendance. However, there will be a celebration on the Saturday after your visit to Buckingham Palace. During this, your unit members will receive their Military Crosses, and you will be re-issued yours if you wish. Once again, full dress uniform is required and although it will be an army affair, you are allowed to bring as many guests, military and civilian, as you may choose. This celebration will be held at Rickerby Hall."

Sherlock's head jerked up at that. John just looked at the brothers, he had never heard of the place but by the sound of it, he wouldn't be surprised if he found himself standing outside a Tudor mansion.

Sherlock kept his eyes fixed on his older sibling, eyebrows slightly raised in that Holmesian fashion John knew too well. The doctor looked at Sherlock first, then at Mycroft and back at his flatmate trying to work out what they were communicating with glances alone. Eventually, he gave up.

"What is it? I've never heard of the place. Is it a hotel or something? It's not in London, is it?"

"Oh, it's in the countryside, just past Windsor. I'm sure you'll find it adequate. I'll be an afternoon and evening celebration with High Tea, dinner and drinks. Those who require to do so will be invited to spend the night. And as the guest of honour I'll have to insist that you stay, spend the night and enjoy the hospitality."

At that, Sherlock actually snorted, although he quickly schooled his features back into a mask of indifference when his brother shot him a murderous glance.

"Sherlock, you're staying too."

"Oh, will I?"

"Yes, brother, you will."

John watched this exchange slightly puzzled, but then barely anything a Holmes did was comprehensible to mere mortals. But with a sinking feeling realisation hit John, that for the next two weeks at least, there'd be a lot of media attention on them, more so than usual.

"Oh, John? I know you are familiar with this, so it's just a reminder. Once you receive the Victoria Cross, you will receive salutes first, out of courtesy. As you know, the award takes precedence over rank, so don't be startled by it."
John had turned back towards Mycroft.

"Yes, I know, thanks, Mycroft. Fifteen years in the army, you pick up on these things," John chuckled.

"Quite right. Well, I really need to get back. Once again, John, I will handle the situation with the reserve register. I honestly thought it had been your informed decision."

"Actually, Mycroft, I'd like you to cross-check the names of all invalided personnel and those with medical discharges against the register and then write to them, make them aware that they are still on the register despite what they might think and give them the choice to either re-enlist if their condition allows for it, or to live a civilian life without the army interfering. Some might want to go back. I'd still be there had I not been shot and invalided - the army was all I knew. There's a difference between being medically discharged and going on sick leave, and I think it's time the army learned that."

"I agree, John." With that, Mycroft rose out of the armchair and swiftly left 221b with nods towards his younger brother and the doctor as his greeting.

As soon as his brother had left, Sherlock had got up and reclaimed his spot on the couch, in which he was now sprawled in his usual fashion.

"Hm, Mycroft must really feel guilty now that he has uncovered how his department treated people like you. He is trying to make it up to you. My brother has always had tremendous respect for titles and war heroes, so he will actually try and overhaul the way soldiers are treated. That might have been the most genuine thing Mycroft has said in he last several years."

The detective steepled his hands under his chin.

"I doubt they'd organise celebrations at Rickerby Hall for just anyone. In fact, I know they don't and the Hall isn't usually open to the public."

"What is Rickerby Hall? I've never heard of it before."

"There is no reason you would have. It's a place out in Berkshire, just past Windsor, further along the Thames," Sherlock explained and left it at that.

"Oh. Okay, then. I guess I'll find out soon anyway."

"Indeed."

John got up and moved to the kitchen to put the kettle on. Without even asking whether Sherlock would like a cup of tea as well, John automatically filled two mugs.

Only when he looked down at the mugs to stir in the milk did he notice that he'd grabbed his old RAMC mug for himself. Smiling at the cup, he stepped back out into the living room, handed Sherlock his tea who took it without even opening his eyes, and sat down at the desk. He decided to type up a blog post about the medals, Afghanistan and his involvement as a pre-emptive strike before the media felt the need to camp out at Baker Street for the next two weeks.

"You know, Sherlock, your brother and his people really have some nerves! Keeping discharged military personnel on the reserve register without their knowledge! Can you believe it? That's unacceptable! I could have been called up any day.... after everything that happened to me. I left the war and the army behind.... I left it behind.... I did! Your brother has a real knack for dropping bombshells!"

"Well, you know my brother. He's never been one for doing things by halves."

"Yeah, that trait must run in the family...” John muttered under his breath.

"I heard that."

The doctor rolled his eyes. Of course, Sherlock had heard him. As John sat at the desk, slowly typing out a blog post carefully explaining that: Yes, it really was him in the pictures and news stories; and no, he didn't miss Afghanistan or the war; yes, he was beyond flattered to receive such prestigious awards and he still couldn't quite believe it but no, it wouldn't change his life as part of the crime-solving duo from Baker Street.

Sherlock went back to playing the violin, composing some more. While listening to his flatmate play his instrument, John decided to write another post on his blog in light of his earlier conversation with Mycroft. He knew that some of his old army buddies were following his blog and that word of mouth would travel fast and far, especially if the information came from him. He was trusted and had a reputation for not indulging in gossip.

So John typed out how he'd found out that he'd been kept on the reserve register and urged each and every retired or invalided soldier to double-check their status if they didn't fancy getting re-deployed out of the blue.

Feeling rather snug and accomplished, John snapped the laptop shut and went to the kitchen to make something to eat. Rummaging through the cupboards, he finally decided to use up what they had left, which turned out to be a bag of frozen summer vegetables, some pasta and chicken breast pieces he'd bought two days before.

John busied himself preparing the food, mentally adding various items to the shopping list. When
everything was cooking and simmering away, John returned to his laptop.

He’d previously seen some people commenting on his blog, some of them journalists out for an exclusive no doubt, and he wanted to read through the comments while he had the chance.

But when he opened his laptop up again, the last published post displayed on his blog was the one confirming his involvement in Afghanistan and not the post about having been kept on the reserve register.

He was startled for about two seconds before a knowing feeling settled in his gut and he let out a frustrated sigh. John double-checked his blog archive and found the post set to permanently disabled, as well as an email waiting in his inbox.

“Dr. Watson, you should know better than to divulge this information on your blog. The situation is being handled. –MH”

“Oh sod off, Mycroft,” the doctor muttered under his breath.

“There’s something called freedom of speech, you should check up on that sometime.” John licked his lips and was quietly fuming as he stabbed the keys on his phone. He proceeded to send the government official a text suggesting he’d look up ‘freedom of speech’ and ‘censorship’ in a dictionary, just in more colourful language and using a few choice expletives.

Sherlock couldn’t hide his amused smirk.
After lunch the detective sat down across from John and fixed him with his x-ray stare. John knew that he was being deduced.

“What, Sherlock?”

“Hmmm….”

“You know, you could just ask me. I’m sitting right here.”

“Hm. Asking. Boring. This is more fun… You were in the RAMC for seven years, we’ve already established that. And you showed me medals that confirm you served in Iraq and the Democratic Republic of Congo before Afghanistan.”

“Well, yes. One tour in Congo and two in Iraq, though I was in Afghanistan between those tours in Iraq. Why?”

“You couldn’t wait to finish your contracted time as an army doctor. You couldn’t wait to be deployed ‘properly’, as a soldier rather than a doctor.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like being a doctor. But I was young and wanted action. I didn’t sign up just to sit around. As a doctor, I worked my way up from a staff member to being in charge of the day shift at the base hospital in Sierra Leone. That was my last stop with the Medical Corps. Then once I was out of Sandhurst and got my commission, they basically gave me an extra first aid pack whenever they sent me somewhere, so that I could patch people up in case something happened, but I wasn’t sent out there purely as a medical officer.”

“I knew from that very first case you weren’t just an army doctor! I bet there aren’t that many army doctors who could shoot a man through the heart, through a window, from several hundred yards away, using a handgun. You’re a crack shot! In fact, you showed me the medal last night. You’re a decorated marksman.”

“Yes. You knew that, though. And no, there aren’t that many doctors in the army that are as proficient with a gun.” John smiled smugly. He seemed to deliberate with himself for a few seconds, before drawing in a deep breath.

“When I did my short course at Sandhurst as a doctor, they showed me how to fire a gun but we didn’t get much training. As medical personnel, we’re not meant to engage in firefight. But it turned out I had a sort of knack for it, if you will. I made up my mind then that once I got out of the RAMC, I wanted to join up as a regular soldier. So I did.”

“You showed potential even then, though.”
“That I did, yeah. I was a very good army doctor, don’t get me wrong. But when I went through the full course at Sandhurst it turned out I was rather good with weapons of any kind. I was one of the best shooters in my class. And in hand-to-hand combat my years on various rugby and wrestling teams did come in handy.”

Sherlock scrunched up his face in disgust at the mention of such plebeian sports.

“Don’t look at me like that. I grew up working class and I am damn proud of that. We didn’t have much, but we still had fun! I skinned my knees playing football and rugby in the cobbled alley behind our house and the park down the road more often than I care to remember. We can’t all grow up shooting clay pigeons and riding unicorns like you probably did”, John teased with an easy smile on his face.

Sherlock just let out a huff.

“It was regular horses, I have you know,” he exclaimed somewhat petulantly.

John grinned from ear to ear.

“Besides, if there were any to start with, Mycroft probably broke all the unicorns before I came along” the detective deadpanned and John couldn’t help but snort at the mental image of a ten-year-old Mycroft playing Polo while riding a unicorn.

“Anyway. Once I passed out of Sandhurst I was… approached… for lack of a better word. They must have seen my scores because they asked whether I’d want to further my skills. I was young and cocky, of course I said yes. I received sniper training and excelled at it, and eventually my training included reconnaissance as well. To everyone, I was just the former army doctor. People overlooked me, thought of me as unassuming. They thought that as a doctor, I’d be way out of my comfort zone but the truth was I was smack bang in the middle of it. I never felt better. Under the pretence that someone with medical knowledge was needed – and I remained a registered GP after all – I got sent in with recon teams and special ops more and more.”

Sherlock studied John for a while and John could feel the glasz-coloured eyes, which today looked more light grey than blue or even green, on him without looking at his flatmate.

“Even so, you only killed when you had to. Only when you or your units were in mortal danger.”

Having lived with the man for several years and having been protected by him every other week of their acquaintance, Sherlock knew that John would never discharge his weapon without good reason. John had killed a man to protect Sherlock from a murderer after only knowing the detective less than twenty-four hours. He had kept calm and collected and seemingly felt no remorse, but Sherlock knew that killing someone was only ever a last resort for John in order to protect the people he cared about.

John nodded.

“Yes, well, I have taken an oath after all. You know? First, do no harm? As long as I could disable the enemy and dispose of the threat that was fine. Plus, capturing them alive gave us the chance to interrogate them. But I saw a lot of things, a lot of blood, a lot of death. I lost good friends. That video last night… it’s what most of my nightmares are about. I don’t know why though… I’ve seen and been through so much worse…” John’s voice trailed off as he ran a slightly shaky hand through his mousy hair.

The detective noticed this and narrowed his eyes, letting his searching gaze wander all over John and take in his body language. He replayed the video from last night before his mind’s eye. His brain immediately started processing all the different sets of data John was emitting. Sherlock’s eyes widened slightly when it all fell into place.

“Last night… that video… It wasn’t the first time you were held hostage. That’s how you kept your men calm; you knew how it could play out. But it didn’t happen in Afghanistan, it must have happened in Iraq. And they nearly killed you.”

All John could do was nod in confirmation as Sherlock voiced his deductions matter-of-factly. After all, Sherlock, in typical fashion, had hit the nail right on the head. The soldier’s shoulders slumped slightly and Sherlock was concerned again. He leaned in closer to his friend, hesitated a second before placing his hand on John’s arm.

“John. What did they do to you?”

“We were captured.”

John spoke calmly, but his eyes betrayed the inner turmoil he felt as he looked from Sherlock’s hand on his arm up to his friend’s face.

“Not even hostages; there were no ransom demands that time. We were prisoners of war, a recon team. A top-secret recon team. Nobody knew where we were, nobody would miss us. And most importantly, nobody would come for us. Command had to deny any knowledge of us, our mission and whereabouts. Of course, that’s standard procedure for top secret teams and we all knew that this would be the case should we be discovered. We were left for dead. They had us for about five weeks… We were beaten daily. They broke a few of my ribs, snapped my arm in two places. When they got bored, they cut us, just to make us squirm and bleed. You saw some of the scars last night. For days on end, they’d leave us tied to a wall in the blaring sun. The more we fought, the more noise we made, the less food and drink they’d give us. There were seven of us in that team. I was the lowest ranking one, even though I wasn’t the youngest. We knew that if we
wanted to live, get out of there, then it was down to us. No outside help. We learned pretty quickly to shut up and bide our time, preserving our strength. Eventually, we all started to pretend to be worse off for wear than we actually were. After a while, our captors withdrew some of the guards, thinking that after four weeks in the sun with minimum food and water we wouldn’t pose too much of a threat anymore.”

Sherlock was listening to every word as John told his story, watching his friend for the signs of distress he’d learned to recognise. He was quietly impressed and surprised that the kind doctor he knew and shared a flat with could possibly be the same man as this remarkable soldier telling his story.

John drew in a slightly shaky breath. “We thought we could wait it out, bide our time until we could overpower one of them by surprise and flee. But something must have spooked them; to this day I don’t know what. One day, they dragged us out and lined us all up in that courtyard, tied us to the wall. I was the first one in the line. One of our captors, we’d nicknamed him ‘Che Guevara’ because of his looks, came over and pointed an old Russian revolver at my head…. And pulled the trigger.”

John swallowed hard, closing his eyes and trying to shake the memory away. Sherlock’s breath caught.

“I thought that’s it. Goodnight, Vienna. You know? I froze, waiting for it to be over.” John laughed nervously while all Sherlock could do was nod.

“He… Guevara just grinned. He then moved on to my friend Tim who stood next to me. Again, he pointed the gun and pulled the trigger… They were playing bloody Russian roulette with us! Once we realized, we started counting, knowing that there would be a bullet eventually. We could tell by the look in their eyes they weren’t teasing. This was life or death. We knew the Nagant M1895 they were using had a seven-round cylinder. If they pulled the trigger on every one of us, that meant the last one out of the seven of us would die there. They still pointed it at all of us, but we suspected that we knew who would die. If they’d started at the other end, it would have been me. Corporal Falcon was begging for his life when the gun was turned on him. He was the last one. But Guevara just grinned and pulled the trigger one last time…” John’s voice was trailing off again. He had to concentrate on breathing for a few seconds and Sherlock didn’t push him.

“I don’t think any shot ever sounded as loud before that day or since. Guevara shot him point blank. He was a good man, had a wife and kids, he was on his second tour out there, a really decent guy. They left us there with him for a long time, trying to exhaust us by withholding food and water. One by one we went slack in our bonds, pretending to be weak and exhausted. When they attempted to untie us and take us back to the room they were holding us in, we attacked. Just fought, kicked, bit… whatever damage we could inflict. The Captain and I managed to wrestle with our captors and we gained their guns… And then we shot our way out of there. I’ve never liked having to take a life, but that day I really, really didn’t care. Eventually, we made it out of that hellhole and into the nearby hills. From there, it was a fifty-mile trek back to base. They looked at us in utter disbelief when we got there. We had been declared Missing in Action and presumed dead, so the six of us dragging ourselves into base with the last of our strength caused quite a stir.”

While telling his story, John had subconsciously started to rub his shoulder wound again. Sherlock noticed but didn’t comment on it. Instead, he looked John in the eyes.

“You received one of your medals for this.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah. I did.”

“Well done.”

Sherlock wasn’t mocking him. On the contrary. John knew it meant so much more than that. It meant ‘I know you’ve been through hell, but you made it through’ and ‘I’m glad that you got out of there’.

“Well, after I had proven myself like that, as it was, I was chosen for more and more ops, on one mission I was even briefly attached to the Commandos. And let me tell you, those green berets are bloody hard-earned. They needed a sniper and a medic at their Forward Operating Base. Being both sniper and trained medic, I was the logical choice, instead of sending two people. I received extra training with them – not the full-blown Commando training because I was there for slightly different reasons – just enough to hold my own with them, but it was still gnawling. It also meant I was right on the front line. Had to patch my friends up every day, broken bones, gunshot wounds, shrapnel and explosions – I saw it all. The worst were landmines and IEDs though. When you can see that utter terror in someone’s face who had just stepped on a mine and you know that there is nothing left you can do, no way to save your friend. I lost friends that way.”

John barely whispered that last sentence and shook his head to get rid of the images. Sherlock kept watching him, silently deducing God knows what. He could see how affected his friend still was and he had learned long ago that apparently even events that are in the past can still affect a person decades later.

The first time he had questioned this logic, John had told him that his way of looking at it was ‘a bit not good’ and Sherlock had made a mental note of that. He did occasionally still slip up and sometimes couldn’t care less about the feelings he’d hurt in the process. But by now he had a pretty good idea of what John would consider to be a bit not good in his book, so Sherlock kept his mouth shut and didn’t question why the deaths of friends that he could not have prevented still troubled him.
John was still exhaling shaky breaths after a minute, keeping his eyes fixed on a scratch mark on the coffee table.

“There is more. One more traumatic experience from Iraq that stands out for you. It happened when you were with your unit, the Fusiliers. It was a routine job, not a special mission. You lost someone. And you blame yourself for their death. Why?”

Sherlock fixed his gaze on John and John could feel the ice blue eyes on him without having to look up at his flatmate.

“Yeah. You’re right.”

He let out another shaky breath before he collected himself enough to look at the detective and hold his gaze.

“I’m not even going to ask how you knew that… Probably something about the way I held my tea mug this morning that gave it away” he chuckled and saw Sherlock smirk fleetingly.

“On my second tour there, my unit was on patrol in a tiny local village. It was about lunchtime and there were civilians everywhere. There were women chatting while they sat outside doing the laundry, children playing ball games, a normal village, regular people going about their everyday life. While we were busy checking the houses we passed for threats, an RPG hit the house two doors down from where I was. Next thing I know there is carnage all around us. We all hit the deck upon impact, but from somewhere, someone opened fire on us. But not just us. They were also picking out civilians at random, even the children.”

Sherlock watched as John began to fiddle around with his empty mug, looking for a distraction, something to keep his fingers occupied. The detective knew that John cared, especially when children were involved.

“I saw the glimmer of the sniper scope reflected by the sun. So I asked my mate for cover as I set up, training my sights on him. I fired, but whether or not I killed him, I don’t know. Even in the middle of all that, I felt strangely calm. I knew my unit had my back. After I had shot the sniper, I grabbed the small medical kit I carried everywhere and dashed towards the nearest casualty. I kept moving from one person to another. I’d never really been trained in field medicine and emergency response. I can patch someone up and I had done a stint within the A&E department during rotation, but I usually only got the patients once they reached the hospital, after the medical support officers had done their jobs and provided first aid. But in field medicine, especially on the front lines, you learn quickly that you have to prioritise. The categories I divided all those around me in were ‘Walking Wounded’ or what they call ‘White’ or ‘Green’ in triage, ‘In Need of Attention’ or ‘Yellow’, ‘Requires Immediate Treatment’ also known as ‘Red’ and ‘Too Far Gone’ or ‘Black’. It sounds harsh, I know, but in those situations you can’t save them all. You focus on those that need medical attention the most.”

Sherlock got up and went back to the kitchen, refilling their cups with fresh tea. He could tell that John would appreciate the thought, as a hot drink always seemed to calm him down.

While he was waiting for the kettle to boil, Sherlock addressed John.

“I take it the Walking Wounded are those with scrapes and bruises, maybe a concussion but otherwise unharmed and able to get out of there under their own steam.”

John agreed.

“Yes, Whites have minimal bruises if any, while Greens will have to see a doctor for broken bones and such but can wait a while.”

“‘In Need of Medical Attention’, knowing you, would be those with compound fractures or similar injuries that needed to be treated but could wait five more minutes.”

He glanced over his shoulder back towards the couch in the living room where John still sat. Seeing his friend confirm this analysis, he continued.

“That would make those requiring immediate treatment those who are losing a lot of blood due to their injuries and those unconscious who cannot tell you the exact amount of pain they are in. They’d need immediate surgery or life-saving intervention. And ‘Too Far Gone’ are those who cannot be saved.”

He stirred sugar and milk into the brew he had just made and returned to the living room.

“Yes. You’re right. As hard as it is, you can’t waste time or resources on the ones you know are not going to make it. You can give them something for the pain, if you can spare it, so they don’t have to suffer in their final moments, but you know that whatever you do, they won’t make it to the hospital alive. We call them ‘Expectants’ sometimes, because they are not expected to make it. To be honest, I’m still surprised that I got rescued in Afghanistan… If there had been another medic there, they might have left me. By the time I reached the hospital, I was in cardiac arrest and later developed sepsis. Both of those I would have classified as ‘Black’…” the doctor trailed off as he grabbed the mug Sherlock was holding out for him and blew a breath over the top to make the brew cool down a bit before taking a sip.

“There was this little girl. She can’t have been older than eight. Beautiful little girl, her dark hair almost bleached copper in colour by the sun. She had been standing close to where the RPG had struck the building. The girl… She had a massive hole in her chest, debris had hit her hard, and
you could see her ribs and bits of rock embedded between them. But she was still breathing raggedly. Her mother saw my medical kit and kept shouting at me to do something, anything, and pointed at her daughter. I knew she wanted me to help, even if I didn’t speak her language. I didn’t even have pain medication left to give her. We were miles away from help and she was loosing too much blood. So I held the girl’s hand as she took her last breath, it’s all I could do. Her mother screamed and cried and yelled at me, pouldered her fists into my chest as she sat there and mourned her little daughter. I can still see the girl’s eyes. They were almost turquoise, a real rarity out there…"

John shuddered and blinked away tears. Sherlock wasn’t as oblivious to the emotional response he had just triggered in John as others might like to think him to be. He knew John cared about all his patients and that it hit him hard when he couldn’t save someone or had to diagnose a terminal disease. So for him to have lost a child, a wholly innocent life, under such horrific circumstances, was weighing heavy on his friend’s conscience. Sherlock grabbed John’s file and pulled it towards him.

“I’m sorry, John. I didn’t know. You don’t have to say anything more about it. But with your permission, I’d like to read your file.”

“Go ahead… I’m surprised it took you so long to figure half this stuff out anyway. And thanks, by the way… I’ll just… go and get myself cleaned up a bit.”

The soldier quickly added and stood up, heading past the kitchen and into the bathroom where he locked himself in. Sherlock could hear the old pipes groaning as John turned on the water to splash his face.

It took John several minutes and several splashes of cold water to his face to calm down and get his emotions under control again. He had not thought about the girl in ages and that made him feel ashamed.

When he finally returned to reclaim his seat on the couch, Sherlock was engrossed in his records.

Sherlock read about John’s placements while still at university and during his house officer placements. Saw a list of all the places in the world John had been as a doctor and as a soldier. His friend’s scores impressed him; the proficiency he’d demonstrated during his sniper training was impressive but not entirely surprising. John had been attached to and working with several highly prestigious and well-known regiments, first as part of the Royal Army Medical Corps and later during special operations before he was permanently attached to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers.

He’d received basic training as a parachutist during his brief stint with the Commandos. He had also been trained in reconnaissance and retrieval, his file showed his skills as a fighter, both with a firearm and in hand-to-hand combat. It listed all of his medals, showed how quickly he rose through the ranks once he’d been commissioned as an officer.

Sherlock flipped through the thick file, skim-reading over John’s career. Several photographs of John at various stages of his career were attached to it as well. Sherlock took in every detail and committed them to memory as he had never seen his friend in uniform. There was one of a much younger John in a beige shirt, dark trousers, a wide maroon, navy and yellow belt with a massive round buckle and a stethoscope slung around his shoulders grinning into the camera.

Another one showed John in desert combat dress, while yet another picture showed him in No. 2 dress uniform, the three stars on his epaulettes that marked his rank as Captain clearly visible and the cap badge of his beret exactly one and a half inches above his eyebrow.

But one section made him stop and read in earnest. He read and re-read one page, looked up to John and then back to the file.

“It says here you were officially listed as Missing in Action four times,” Sherlock stated and looked at John, his eyes wide in wonder. “Yeah, I know. They once erroneously listed me as Killed in Action as well… but that was a bloke named Jeffrey Hugh Watson. Took me a white to clarify that I am a different J.H. Watson and not actually dead,” he chuckled.

“I had no idea, John. I mean, of course I knew about Afghanistan, and given your age and rank it was unlikely that it was the only place you saw action. I know you’re a crack shot, I’ve seen you shoot and I saw you kill the cabbie to save my life. During the last few years I’ve watched you fight with suspects and gain the upper hand even when they had a good foot or more on you in height. You’ve patched and stitched me up enough times for me to know you’re an excellent doctor; there is a reason after all, why you are listed as my emergency contact rather than my own brother. But this? I don’t think that ‘Army Doctor’ is even beginning to cover it!"

John actually had to laugh. All of what Sherlock had said was true. As he settled back on the couch, he crossed his legs and grabbed the mug of tea, gulping some of it down and revelling in the warmth before he looked back up at Sherlock, smug grin on his face and a spark in his eyes.

“Well, you’re the one who insisted on calling me army doctor, remember? I was in the army and I am a doctor, so you jumped to the conclusion. And I had been an army doctor, once upon a time. But you were on a roll and then we had our first case and I just never saw the need to correct you. I sometimes miss being a soldier. You don’t spend so many years on active duty if you don’t like it, believe me. But once I was shot, that was it; can’t have a cripple blundering around the front lines. Now I’m just plain Doctor Watson, dealing with sciatica and the common cold. But yeah, initially, you got it wrong.”
He grinned and took another sip of his tea.

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

John just kept grinning as Sherlock pouted.

“I admit I did not have all the facts back then, but it was an accurate description based on the clues you displayed. And it turns out that army doctor was your title after all, so I stand by my deduction,” he huffed with the slightest air of superiority.

“You just tell yourself that.”

“But you are wrong as well, John. There’s nothing plain about you. This whole file is proof. You’ve still got all your skills and your tremor is barely noticeable these days.”

Sherlock took a sip of the rapidly cooling tea he’d completely neglected until then.

“You’re welcome, by the way.”

John did a double-take. “Beg your pardon?”

“You live for the thrill of the chase, the danger. You were a soldier, you need the adrenaline. Good thing then that I require an assistant…” John cleared his throat noisily “…fine, ‘partner’, who knows how to get out of tricky situations and can patch me up, too.”

“Gee, thanks, Sherlock. So you’re basically saying that all my military training was just so I could survive living with you?” he asked with raised eyebrows and a mischievous grin on his face.

“Well, no, of course, you didn’t receive your training just to deal with me. I think that’s even beyond Mycroft’s abilities.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Then again…” he trailed off and shrugged his shoulders again, grinning back at John.

“But you and I, we both need the adrenaline. Admit it, you love solving cases. And you still get to be a doctor and you still carry your gun. What more could you want? Therefore, I’ll say it again: you’re welcome.”

Sherlock smiled at his friend, a rare, genuine smile, which John returned although the doctor still shook his head.

John had to confess that his military training and medical expertise were definite advantages when it came to dealing with the world’s only consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes.

“Sherlock, I need you to understand, though, that my military records are highly confidential. The story about Afghanistan is out in the open now, but I’d prefer if nobody else knew what I did, what I’ve been through and what I’m capable of.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Sherlock. Maybe because I know you? You won’t consciously say anything, but knowing you, you could blurt it out when you’re deducing something or you’ll mention it at the Yard for some one-upmanship over Lestrade or Anderson.”

Sherlock actually had the decency to look mildly offended at this but quickly controlled his facial expression again into a more petulant one.

“John, my brother assured you that I have the relevant security clearance to read your file. Given how high your own clearance is, you should know that this requires the ability to keep secrets. Besides, as my only friend, you should know I’m not the gossiping type. The only one who keeps forcing me to talk about trivial things is you.”

This was something John couldn’t argue. Sherlock never gossiped. He deduced and spoke whatever came to mind regardless of his audience, which sometimes came close to gossiping, but he never intentionally said anything behind someone’s back. And if Sherlock was cleared to read John’s highly classified file, then Sherlock himself had to have at least the same security level as John, if not slightly higher given that his older brother basically runs the British government.
Mycroft Holmes had to admit it. Reading John Watson’s service record, he was more than a bit surprised. There was much more to the good doctor than he had been able to deduce. Once again, Mycroft found himself thankful that such a capable man was looking after Sherlock’s wellbeing.

His little brother had become easier to deal with, had kicked his addiction, actually helped the police and finally had a friend and moral compass he so desperately needed. And if said moral compass came with military training and a first aid kit, even better.

A quick press of a button and Anthea appeared in the doorway to his office.

“Sir?”

“Ah, there you are, Anthea. Please make sure that we send a car to Baker Street at 7pm, to pick up Mrs. Hudson, Doctor Watson and my brother. And also transfer the usual amount to my brother’s bank account; it’s for a good cause, after all. Also, I want the surveillance team outside 221b to keep the press at bay as long as it takes. Understood?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get right onto it, sir.”

With that, his assistant excused herself again and returned her attention to the BlackBerry in her hand. As the doors closed, Mycroft settled back into his leather chair and with the press of another button, started a video conference. He leaned back, crossed his legs and placed his interlaced fingers on his chest.

“…So, gentlemen. I think it’s time for a rethink about how our returning war heroes like Captain Watson should be treated. Don’t you?”

“John! Come on, get dressed! We’ve got dinner reservations!”

Sherlock’s voice was somewhat muffled by the fact that he was in the bathroom while John was upstairs in his room.

“Yeah, alright. Calm down. Why do I need to change to go to Angelo’s?”

“We’re not going to Angelo’s, John. We’re celebrating. It’s a nice restaurant so put on a suit! And we’ll need to get Mrs. Hudson.”

John looked down at himself. Chequered shirt and jeans. Apparently that wouldn’t do.

Sighing, he went back to his wardrobe and pulled out a suit. It was graphite in colour, a three piece suit. He’d not had much occasion to wear it but he thought under the circumstances, it would do.

He fished out a white shirt and his dark blue regimental tie of the Fifth Northumberland Fusilier. He fastened the tie and pulled out the silver RAMC cufflinks with the Staff of Asclepius his father had given him as a present when he’d received his first commission in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

He checked his reflection again and headed downstairs to the bathroom to fix his hair, casually closing the buttons on his suit jacket as he descended the stairs.

Sherlock had disappeared into his own bedroom and John thought that he should really get his hair trimmed back to crew cut as he stood in front of the mirror trying to reign in his slightly unruly hair.

Deciding that this was as good as it was going to get, he stepped back out and waited for his flatmate in the living room.

Sherlock emerged a few minutes later, wearing a black suit and light blue shirt. Although the
detective usually wore tailored suits, even when it wasn’t for a special occasion, John was still a bit envious of how effortless Sherlock made it all look, while he himself was still fumbling with this hair.

“Ah, you heard me after all,” Sherlock said as he approached the living room and John.

“Excellent, that suit looks much better than your hideous jumper. Now, let’s go and get Mrs. Hudson.”

Sherlock said and crossed the threshold to bounce down the seventeen steps before John had a chance to retort and defend his choice of comfortable clothing.

Their landlady was already waiting for them, dressed in her Sunday Best. She opened the door the second John knocked.

“Oh, look at you, my lovelies! Don’t you look dashing!” she said and straightened John’s tie for him.

“Aw, thank you, Mrs. Hudson. You look lovely” John responded.

“Oh, thank you, dear. I wasn’t sure what to wear, Sherlock was all mysterious.”

“You look fine, Mrs. Hudson” the detective agreed although he wasn’t even looking. As Mrs. Hudson was locking her door, John turned around and said “Sherlock, don’t you think you could get us a taxi? Seeing as one always magically appears just when you need it?”

“No need,” Sherlock said and grinned at the two of them.

“My brother sent a car.”

He opened the front door with a flourish and revealed a black town car.

Sherlock held the door for Mrs. Hudson and climbed in after John and their landlady. Mrs. Hudson spent the entire ride fussing about her outfit and the boys’ suits, while John still had no idea where exactly they were headed.

Allowing for London evening traffic, they found themselves near Hyde Park corner thirty minutes later. John helped Mrs. Hudson out of the car and looked up in disbelief.

“Galvin at Windows? We’re celebrating at Galvin at Windows? How?” John was incredulous.

“Mycroft went to university with the owner” Sherlock shrugged.

“And you got the table just like that? When I graduated from university, my dad wanted to take us here but they were fully booked months in advance!”

“Well, I believe Mycroft had a favour to call in. Now, shall we?” Sherlock said and swooped over to the door, while John offered Mrs. Hudson his arm and accompanied her inside.

Sherlock had not only secured a table, but a window table with the most spectacular view across London in the evening sun. As soon as they stepped into the restaurant, Mrs. Hudson was praising the view of the Thames and the London Eye and how London really was pretty from above.

Sherlock held her chair for her as she sat down, both men deliberately giving her the chair at the head of the table so she could enjoy the view.

John looked around wide-eyed. The 1930’s interior, floor-to-ceiling windows, classy bar – he felt a little out of place until he remembered that he was wearing a suit and opened his button to sit down.

Within seconds, a waiter appeared at their side.

“Ah, Mr. Holmes. So good to see you again.”

“Good evening, Maurice. Excellent table, thank you. We’ve got something to celebrate tonight, so I think we’ll start with sherry as aperitifs and then a bottle of your best Cabernet Sauvignon for the table.”

Sherlock looked around for confirmation from John and Mrs. Hudson, who both nodded in agreement.

“Excellent choice, sir,” Maurice said and retreated to get the sherry.

They sipped their aperitifs in silence, contemplating the menu. Both John and Mrs. Hudson looked worried when they saw the prices. Sherlock studied them with a slightly insulted look on his face.

“Oh stop being ridiculous. I am inviting you both out for dinner and you can choose whatever you like. Don’t even think about going for the cheapest item, John, I know you are not particularly fond of Caesar Salad. We’re here to celebrate and both of you can order whatever you want. I insist, Mrs. Hudson. Starter, main, dessert, coffee, tea… it’s on me.”

“Oh Sherlock dear, that’s very sweet of you… but…” Mrs. Hudson began but was cut off.

“Mrs. Hudson, believe me, it’s all taken care of. Our latest client just paid. And if you don’t believe that, then see this as my treat for the acid burn in the kitchen floorboard…” he smirked.
"Acid burn?" Mrs. Hudson shrieked and John chuckled.

The stain had actually been there for two months now, but it had been cleverly covered up by moving the rug two inches to the left.

"Ah, look. Our wine is here" Sherlock smoothly changed the subject. Once Sherlock had tested and approved of the wine and they all had their glasses filled, Sherlock raised his glass.

"A toast!" Both John and Mrs. Hudson raised their glasses.

"To Captain John Watson, who is not only a war hero and one of the bravest men I know, but also the recipient of both, the Military Cross for which he will receive the Bar and the Victoria Cross for his actions in Afghanistan!"

John felt himself blush but approved of the toast.

"To John!" Sherlock repeated and Mrs. Hudson joined in. John clinked glasses with both of them before taking a sip.

"Uh…er….. thank you, Sherlock. That was… a bit more moving than I expected" John confessed.

"Oh, John my dear boy, I’m so proud of you!" their landlady said and hugged him with tears in her eyes.

"Well, I mean it, John. I called you a war hero during that first taxi ride to Lauriston Gardens and I had no idea of your service record back then, nor did I know the exact definition of the word. But I’ve seen you in action, chasing criminals and caring for your patients and you deserve the awards that are about to be bestowed upon you."

"Wow. Thanks, Sherlock." Sherlock just grinned.

"But then again you put up with me and you’re still my flatmate, so there’s a slight chance you might actually be insane."

Both John and Mrs. Hudson laughed and their landlady patted Sherlock’s arm.

"Yeah, maybe, but at least I don’t run after villains by myself and unarmed!"

"No, but you invaded Iraq and Afghanistan."

"I think we’ve established that that wasn’t just me, though."

"Well, I don’t go running after criminals by myself either!" Sherlock exclaimed.

"You don’t?" John sounded surprised.

"No! You’re usually right next to me!"

"Fair point" John conceded, and raised his glass in a silent salute again, before both men succumbed to their laughter.

They ate their starters and watched the sun slowly set while chatting about this and that. Before the main course was served, of which even Sherlock had ordered some, the manager of the restaurant approached the table.

"Sherlock! When I saw the reservation for Holmes, I assumed it was Mycroft. How are you?" he shook Sherlock’s hand and turned towards Mrs. Hudson.

"Pleasure to meet you, ma’am."

Then he turned to John and stared at John’s tie and the cufflinks and then back at John’s face, before saluting him.

John, feeling a little awkward about the situation and not wanting to cause a fuss, got up and returned the salute. Half the diners had noticed this little exchange and were now staring at John.

"Sir, I had no idea you were here tonight or I would have introduced myself sooner. Gerard Galvin, owner of this restaurant and formerly Corporal in the Duke of Lancaster’s. I read about you in the paper, you’re Captain John Watson. It’s an honour to meet you, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Galvin," John said as he took his seat again.

"My son is currently out there, serving with the Queen’s Dragoons. He’s been patched up by RAMC doctors a few times now. And let me tell you, I appreciate everything you guys do. Is it true you were actually a combatant as well?"

"Yes. I left the RAMC to fight for my country."

"When I was serving, there was this medical support officer who kept dashing out to patch us up, even under fire. And you did both! You must be crazier than a Commando, and they do some crazy things! You have my utmost respect, sir."

John chuckled.

"Thank you, Mr. Galvin. And I’m sure your son is in good hands."
Mr. Galvin excused himself after that and Mrs. Hudson patted John on the back.

Throughout the evening, fellow diners who had witnessed the meeting of the two former soldiers or who recognised John from the article came up to the table to congratulate him and show their respect.

Mrs. Hudson noted with a pleased smile that not just men from her own generation, but young, business-type men who looked to be even younger than Sherlock, came up to speak to John.

While this made John uncomfortable, Sherlock just sat back, grinned and then proceeded to spout out deductions about everyone who approached, much to John’s and Mrs. Hudson’s amusement.

After dessert and coffee, Maurice brought over three glasses of whisky for the table and Mr. Galvin reappeared and presented John with a bottle of Laphroaig Single Malt Scotch.

“On the house, from the entire staff here at Windows” he declared, as John tried to decline.

“I insist, Captain Watson. Please take this as a small token of our gratitude for your services and to celebrate your achievements and decorations. It’s not every day we have a recipient of the Victoria Cross dining with us.”

“I don’t know what to say, Mr. Galvin. You served yourself; I did what I had to do. I am sure you understand. But thank you for this” John slightly shook the bottle of expensive whisky. “I really appreciate it!”

They saluted one another again and John turned to offer Mrs. Hudson his arm and accompany her outside. He had not even realized that Sherlock had left, presumably to settle the bill. John was busy trying to hail a cab when Sherlock stepped out of the building and another black town car magically appeared at the kerb.

John mumbled something about Mycroft’s drivers and how they should be able to recognise him after God knows how many kidnappings, before he got in the car.

Arriving back at Baker Street, Mrs. Hudson hugged both her boys and thanked them for a lovely evening. Upstairs, John put the whisky aside and immediately went to the kitchen to fix them both some tea without even thinking about it.

“Thank you, Sherlock. That was actually really nice of you. And you invited Mrs. Hudson, she was thrilled. What brought all this on, though?” John asked as he handed the detective his cup and finally shrugged off his suit jacket, loosening the tie and vest.

“I’ve been told that you might want to eat something other than dim sum or Italian sometimes. And that maybe I should sometimes show you that I truly do appreciate your friendship. And because there was a genuine reason to celebrate your extraordinary achievements, I thought that Angelo’s wouldn’t quite do in this case.”

“Uhm... right. Well, that was very thoughtful. Thank you. I had a great time and I’ve always wanted to go to Galvin at Windows. But you don’t have to go out of your way for me, Sherlock, you should know that by now. Believe me, I would have complained or left long ago if I was inclined to take offense at ordering the same take-out or going to the same restaurant over and over again. But I really appreciate the thought behind this, so thank you, again.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Sherlock waved it off like it was nothing but he was secretly pleased that John had liked it. He’d never put much effort into maintaining friendships or acquaintances, most people left after a few weeks at the latest, so he was glad that he could add this to his mental list of things he’d done right.

“Right. I think I’m gonna hit the sack once I finish my tea.”

They sat together in silence while both finished their drinks. Eventually, John got up and stretched before taking the mugs through to the kitchen. He brushed his teeth and shouted “Night, Sherlock” into the main apartment before retreating up the stairs to his room.

Even though Sherlock got changed too, he wandered back into the living room once he heard John’s door close. John had been calm and rather collected today but retelling his entire military career and being repeatedly approached by strangers about his front page news story, would no doubt cause his nightmares to resurface.

So Sherlock filled the kettle, got the mugs ready, picked up his violin and started to play.
John could hear screams. He heard sniper fire and the deafening boom of an RPG hitting home closely nearby. He is surrounded by yellowish dust that makes it hard to breathe and he cannot see a damn thing.

He can feel the heat of the sun and a trickle of blood flowing down his side. There are more screams from somewhere and someone is calling for help.

John grabs the first aid kit and runs towards the screams. He cannot see where he is going, just knows he has to make it there. He can make out some words now, but can’t tell whether a man yells “Get down” or “Man down.”

He assumes it is the latter and pushes on.

The yellow haze lifts a bit and is replaced by blood red sand. Not just blood red, but blood stained. Gunshots continue to crackle around him; he can catch a glimpse of a muzzle flash. Without conscious thought, he has trained his sniper rifle in the direction from which he saw the muzzle flash and fires. Bullets hit the ground around him; kick up dirt that pelts into his skin like needle pricks. He keeps shooting until there is no return fire.

More screams and dead eyes of comrades and blood everywhere.

And then there is a little girl, half her chest missing but still alive, with eyes so full of pain, pleadingly silently for help. Another warhead hits, there is another boom, blackness, eyes and a blood-curling scream.

John sat bolt upright, heart pounding loud in his chest, breathing way too rapidly, covered in sweat and with a sore throat. He slumped back down into the mattress, shaking all over. The scream that woke him up had been torn from his own throat.

While trying to will his heart to stop jumping out of his chest, John listened out for any noises coming from the flat below. As he reached over to the bedside table to flick on the lamp, his eyes fell on the small pill and glass of water that had definitely not been there when he had gone to bed.

So Sherlock knew. There was no way he had not heard the scream and deduced where it came from if it had been loud enough to wake John up.

John swallowed the sleeping aid and sat up on the side of his bed. He knew this spiel. Even with help, he would not fall asleep again for a while. As his breathing slowed down again, he could hear a soft melody being played on the violin. So Sherlock had definitely heard.

There was nothing for it. He would need a cup of tea anyway – tea always made everything better in his eyes and it was a very British thing to do, after all – so he might as well go downstairs and face the music, as it were.

John got up and put on his dressing gown, pulled it tightly around himself and made his way downstairs into the living room. He was still shaking and his limp was more painful and noticeable than it had been in months.

It was 2.37am when Sherlock heard the screams. He stilled and listened, hearing John thrash around in his bed, trapped in another nightmare he could not shake.

Shortly after John had gone to bed, Sherlock had placed the sleeping pill and glass of water on John’s bedside table, like he always did when he thought it would be a nightmare night. He mused to himself how the situation was almost laughable if it wasn’t so serious.

On his own danger nights, John tried his best to keep Sherlock as far away from drugs as possible, even confiscating the aspirin pack. Yet on nightmare nights, Sherlock was the one providing John
with the chemicals needed to calm his mind.

The last of John’s screams nearly froze Sherlock in place. He had heard, seen and helped John through many of these nightmares since they became flatmates, but this scream was so full of pain and desperation, it made Sherlock’s hairs stand on end.

When he heard John move about his room, footsteps audible on the old wooden floorboards, Sherlock put the kettle on and returned to the violin. He could hear John’s uneven footsteps on the stairs, and flinched slightly at how noticeable the limp had become. He had nearly forgotten all about it.

Without saying a word, John entered the living room and sat down on the couch. Sherlock played a few more notes, pretending not to have noticed John’s entrance so the soldier had time to collect himself. Sherlock carefully placed his Stradivarius back in its case before retreating to the kitchen to finish making tea. John watched him, as he put the instrument down, looking at it almost reverently.

Of course, John knew that the violin was Sherlock’s prized possession, but he had no idea it was actually one of the Stradivari. Sherlock’s grandfather had left him the instrument, known as ‘Provigny’ and dating back to 1716, in his will after Sherlock had proven his aptitude at playing the violin.

Next to his microscope, it was the only thing Sherlock had returned to his childhood home for, the only thing he had actually wanted from his former life, once he had kicked his addiction.

Once the kettle had boiled and he’d added the required amounts of milk and sugar to both mugs, Sherlock returned to the living room and handed one of the mugs to John who accepted it without so much as looking up. The former soldier just kept staring down into the milky beverage, letting it cool down a bit before taking a sip.

“You didn’t dream about getting shot.”

Sherlock’s voice was calm and low, stating a fact, nothing more.

“No. It was… the girl I told you about.”

“Ah.” Sherlock acknowledged and blew on his tea, watching the ripples dance across the surface.

“I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Wasn’t asleep.”

“Oh, good. Okay.”

John cleared his throat and ran a hand through his blond hair before lifting his mug again for another sip of his brew.

“I thought it wouldn’t be so bad, after yesterday… But I was wrong. It was a different nightmare, one I haven’t had in a long time…”

He looked up at Sherlock, who had sat himself down on the coffee table to give John space to stretch out on the couch.

“I’ll just sit here for a while if you don’t mind.”

Instead of a reply, Sherlock opened his violin case again and began to play. He deliberately played several tranquil pieces, some of them his own compositions, but John couldn’t tell. He just sat there, on the couch, slumped back and with tired eyes, clasping his mug and trying his hardest not to fall asleep yet so the images would not return.

It was close to 5am when Sherlock finally heard John’s breathing even out, interrupted every now and then by a light snore. He put the violin away again, grabbed the old throw that John kept over the back of his armchair, covered John with it and then went into his own bedroom to grab and hour of sleep himself.

Two hours later, Sherlock heard John shuffle through the flat and into the bathroom, then upstairs and back down again to the kitchen. He could hear John going through his usual breakfast routine and decided to join him in their kitchen for coffee. When John left for work, Sherlock thought that his flatmate still looked a bit haunted, but not as defeated as the night before.

Mycroft’s men were really doing a good job keeping the reporters away from 221b Baker Street, but some did manage to approach John after all. He waved them off, explaining he would be late for work and that all he had to say was on his blog and in the official statement released by the Ministry of Defence.

Most of John’s colleagues had read the weekend papers, of course, and were surprised when he came into the GP surgery to start his shift. They had fully expected him to call and not come in that day, at least until the attention died down a bit.

“Wasn’t expecting to see you, John,” Jane the receptionist greeted him.

“Why not? I haven’t mixed up my days, have I?”

John was momentarily confused. He was sure he had written today down as one of his shifts.
“No, no, I meant because of, you know, you being in the paper and all. Thought you might not come in today after that, that’s all.”

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s my shift and you would be a doctor down. Besides, that story doesn’t change who I am or what I do for a living. Might as well continue as usual,” John shot her a quick grin and then leaned in a bit.

“Listen, the media might try to get hold of me here, so please try and keep them away? I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course, Doc. No worries. And congratulations, John.”

“Thanks, Jane. Right then, who’s my first patient?”

Keeping the press away from the surgery worked well for an hour or two, until they had caught on that no calls would be patched through to Doctor Watson today. A few journalists actually came down there in person, having called early and made an appointment just in case. Even though Jane did a good job to weed them out, two reporters still ended up in John’s examination room, bombarding him with questions, notepads and dictaphones at the ready.

Getting slightly more agitated by the minute, John threw them out of the surgery with no uncertain words as to what would happen should they try again.

“Bloody press, aye?” one of the other doctors commented and smiled at him sympathetically.

“Yeah… they’re blowing it all out of proportion. I did my job, end of.”

“But they are giving you the Victoria Cross?”

“Yeah.”

“You might have done your job, John, but under those circumstances? Were you really held prisoner?”

“What circumstances, Beatrice?” John asked.

“I was a soldier. All that came with the job description. And yes, I was, but as you can see, I made it out of there. If you don’t mind, I really don’t want to talk about this right now with anyone.”

John let the door at the surgery slam shut as he retreated into his examination room.

By the time John returned to Baker Street, he felt drained. The little sleep he’d had didn’t do him any good and people asking him about Afghanistan, even though they meant well and were only curious, brought all the images back up that John was trying his hardest to forget, at least during his waking hours.

He hadn’t been back home for even half an hour, just long enough to sit down in his armchair with a cold bottle of the beer he’d bought the day before, before there was a knock on the door downstairs.

Neither he nor Sherlock much cared about getting up and opening the door, so the two men just sat there and waited for their kind landlady to take pity on whoever was outside the flat, to let them in and into 221b.

It wasn’t long before they could hear Mrs. Hudson’s footsteps on the stairs, followed by another, heavier set of feet.

“Oh hello, boys. I wasn’t sure whether you’d be in. This gentleman is here to see you, John,” she said by way of greeting and stepped aside to reveal a slender, older man who was perfectly dressed.

Sherlock looked at him and made his deductions in milliseconds. The older gentleman wore a suit that was clearly tailored yet functional, and carried a small case.

“Sherlock, look at his hand. You’re the tailor Mycroft hired for John’s uniform. You have worked in fashion all your life; your fingertips are covered in tiny pricks made by safety pins and various other needles. Your suit is clearly one of your own works, but it’s functional. You have to be able to wear it comfortably all day, including crouching and bending down to adjust various fabrics and measurements. The sleeve of your suit jacket has a slight crease on the left wrist, indicating where you usually wear a pin cushion around it so you can work faster. You are proud of your profession and the quality of your work. Even though you’ve been in the shop all day, your trousers still look freshly creased at the front, as if they’d only just been pressed into shape. Your entire attire is bespoke, suggesting you work on Savile Row and cater to an equally bespoke clientele and have done so for a long time.”

As Sherlock drew in a breath, he turned towards his friend.

“John, you might want to get up and not keep this gentleman waiting.”

John looked up at the older man, who nodded first at him, then at Sherlock and set his case down on the coffee table. He opened it to reveal tape measures and safety pins and pin cushions of all sizes. John sighed and got up.

“Right then. Let’s get this over with, shall we?”
“As you wish, sir. I will just be taking your measurements; Mr. Holmes has ordered a Number 1 dress uniform for you. You will only be required to attend one fitting in about a week’s time, just to make sure it fits you exactly,” the tailor assured him and was already measuring his arms.

John had never had a suit tailored to his specifications before, and found the whole measuring process slightly awkward. Until now, all suits he had ever owned had been straight off the rack, and his Number 2 uniform had been second hand, as he couldn’t afford a new one at the time.

Luckily, the man knew what he was doing. He kept quiet and worked quickly, disrupting John as little as possible.

“I will let Mr. Holmes know once you are required for the fitting. It should not take too long on the day, we will just make sure that all measurements are correct and the uniform will be a comfortable fit for you. And congratulations, sir.”

“Thank you. It’s no trouble, I appreciate this,” John assured him, before the older man packed his case and left again.

While John had his measurements taken, Sherlock had ordered curry, which arrived just minutes after the tailor had left. John hadn’t even realized how hungry he was until he could smell the tikka masala and naan bread and his stomach protested loudly at still being empty.

As John sunk back into his armchair, happy with a fresh beer and full of Indian food, he was glad the day was almost over. He didn’t say a word, but Sherlock could tell at a glance just how much it had all taken out of him, being reminded time and time again about his time and imprisonment in Afghanistan.

So when Lestrade called two days and two nightmare nights later with a fresh case, both Sherlock and John were glad for the distraction and shift of focus.

Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade and Sergeant Sally Donovan were already at the crime scene in Hammersmith when John and Sherlock climbed out of their cab.

A man had been found bludgeoned to death with a very blunt object. He was the third person to be killed that way in the last three weeks and all victims had been found in dumpsters in seedy alleyways. Lestrade and his team were desperate to catch the person quickly turning out to be a serial killer.

John stood back behind the crime scene tape while Sherlock went off to look at the body from all angles and actually hissed at Anderson when the forensic specialist came too close.

Once the body had been lifted out of the dumpster, Sherlock jumped in, which surprised even Lestrade, who wrinkled his nose. While Sherlock was busy, examining the dumpster and deducing away, John took a closer look at the body.

The man’s face was completely smashed in with the remnants of a wide-framed pair of glasses visible in the wound and John wondered whether dental records could be used at all to identify this man. Whatever had been used to kill him, at had been crude but it had definitely done the job.

John crouched down next to the victim and took a pair of disposable gloves one of the crime scene technicians offered him. The man’s hair was brown and hair gel made it look like wet spikes, while his poorly trimmed stubble was caked in blood. The victim could not have been dead long, John realized, as rigor mortis had not yet started to set in.

The faint outline of a club stamp was still visible on the back of the victim’s hand and even though the alley reeked of rubbish, puke and urine, John could still detect the lingering scent of alcohol and body odor that surrounded the body.

“Male, Caucasian, mid to late 20’s, can’t be dead more than two to three hours. My estimate is that the blunt force trauma to the head killed him, but that will have to be confirmed by the coroner. I can smell alcohol on the victim and there’s the outline of a nightclub stamp visible on his hand,”

John spoke to nobody in particular, but he was sure that Sherlock had heard him and that Lestrade had also been paying attention.

“Hm, Lestrade, did the other victims have nightclub stamps too?”

Sherlock asked as he climbed out of the dumpster empty-handed.

The DI thumbed through his notepad.

“Er… yes. Not from the same club, though,” Lestrade confirmed once he’d found the right page of his notes.

“As I thought. I think you’ll find that all the victims knew each other,”

Sherlock said as he walked over to take a closer look at the body.

“They all had nightclub stamps, had their heads bashed in and they were found in dumpsters behind nightclubs they hadn’t been in. That’s not a coincidence. They must all have known each other and their killer.”

Lestrade just looked at him with equal amounts of confusion and awe.
Ok. But how?

“Come on, Detective Inspector. Think! Men murdered in nightclubs or rather dumped, literally dumped, just behind clubs. The most likely scenarios are prostitutes or drugs. Look at his clothes. Cheap suit, bad fit, it’s off the racks from Matalan. The shirt has stains on it and it’s not even ironed, the jacket is at least one size too small for him, as are the trousers. They are way too tight around his waist and groin to fit him properly and he has already fastened them underneath his protruding stomach. The tie doesn’t match anything he’s wearing and his shoes are at least two years old, there are holes in the soles and a wear pattern that suggests that he turned his feet inwards while walking, but he more than likely also had a noticeable bounce in his step. See how the heel is barely used? This is a pretty high-end club. Just like the one he visited, according to the stamp on his hand. If he’d had girls inside, they wouldn’t be taking an average Joe back to a room somewhere. No, this would be high-class clientele, or better off, at least. A pimp would look his part in there. Designer clothes, nothing too flashy, maybe even a bit understated but definitely expensive taste that would be obvious to anyone looking his way. Drug bosses would be the same. You’ll find that all the victims were small time drug dealers trying to get a cut. Maybe they stepped on somebody’s toes to get themselves noticed and killed…” Sherlock trailed off while looking at the body.

John stood back to give Sherlock some space.

“So, drugs. Are you sure?” he asked.

“It’s the logical conclusion. And the most likely reason to get killed in a nightclub. I doubt this victim was in a relationship, as the partner would probably have pointed out that none of his clothes fit or match and that he still had baked beans sauce around the edges of his mouth. He was clearly vain or he wouldn’t have put the product in his hair, but not vain enough to care about the rest of his appearance or the body odor he was emitting, even though he was probably meeting business contacts. Once you look into his background and relations, I’d be surprised to find a girlfriend somewhere. The lack of personal hygiene and the unkempt attempt of a beard, let alone his complete disregard for the state of his clothes would have probably driven her off. I’d put money on the fact that he was thought of as gay more often than straight.”

“Brilliant” John smiled.

Lestrade was busy taking down notes of Sherlock’s ramblings and reminded himself yet again to invest in a Dictaphone to record Sherlock instead. It would make his life that much easier.

Meanwhile, Sherlock had started to pace up and down the alley, murmuring deductions under his breath and running possibilities through his head.

At the far end of the alley, just where Sherlock was, a metal fire exit door suddenly opened and a young man stepped out carrying two black bin bags and whistling a random melody. He looked up when he noticed Sherlock, then looked down the alley towards Lestrade, the flashing blue lights on the police cars and the crime scene tape. For a second, he and Sherlock were frozen in place, looking at each other.

Then the young man bolted.

He took off with Sherlock immediately on his heels. A second later, John was also in motion, darting down the alley, leaving Lestrade and his team slightly dumbfounded and scrambling into action behind them. Moments later, the DI caught on and gave chase.

“Oi! Police! Freeze!” he shouted but the man, Sherlock and John had long since rounded the corner and were out of sight.

When the Detective Inspector finally caught up with them, the man had hurled the rubbish bags at Sherlock and John and the contents of said bags were scattered across the floor.

The guy was now brandishing a pen knife and kept stabbing the air in front of the consulting detective and the army doctor in an attempt to keep them away.

Sherlock heard Lestrade’s approaching footsteps and used the temporary distraction to try to disarm the man. He leapt forward but slightly miscalculated and the man lashed out, his pen knife slicing and stabbing at Sherlock.

Sherlock pulled away slightly, his shirt torn and an angry red gash visible on the pale skin underneath, quickly turning his crisp white shirt crimson red. Even though Sherlock kept fighting, he now shielded himself a bit more, not at all keen to let his attacker continue to slice and dice.

With years of training in various forms of martial arts and the odd Defence course he’s participated, Sherlock was able to put up a very good fight, keeping the man at bay and the knife away from him. Eventually, though, the man managed to push Sherlock roughly into the wall, which knocked the air out of the consulting detective’s lungs.

Just as Sherlock hit the wall and the young man got ready for another attack, John Watson surprised everyone by stepping in and pulling the man away from his friend. All the police officers kept to the sidelines, watching it all play out.

Much quicker than all of them thought possible, the doctor crouched down and ducked the blows and the knife as the man turned on John, face red with fury.

Within seconds, John managed to get a grip on the guy’s arm and twisted it back painfully, elbowing the man’s solar plexus until he relinquished his hold on the weapon. As soon as John
saw it fall and heard clatter on the asphalt floor, he kicked the weapon out of reach. With both of them unarmed, the fight had just got fairer.

The two of them engaged in a vicious fight, bare knuckles and no holds barred. Again, John proved light on his feet and quick as a fox as he ducked and dealt blow after blow. Both of them were grunting in pain, and John was sure his ribs would protest his involvement in this fight for a while.

Eventually, John managed to get a grip on his opponent’s jacket sleeve and front buttons. Lestrade and the others had their weapons raised but didn’t dare intervene because the two of them moved so quickly that especially the DI feared that he’d hit the wrong guy.

Once John had his hands on his opponent, the doctor hooked his right leg behind the other man’s and swept his foot across with speed and force, literally sweeping the other guy off his feet. Although John kept his grip on the man’s clothing, he did nothing to cushion the fall, instead letting his attacker drop down to the asphalt like a sack of potatoes.

As soon as the man hit the ground, flat on his back and all air knocked out of him, John sat down in one swift motion. Never letting go of the other man’s sleeve, John stretched his right leg out and tucked his left leg in, dropping to the floor and pinning the man in place. His right hand went behind the young man’s neck and John leaned across his chest with all his weight.

Leaning low to the other man’s ear, John growled “You picked the wrong people to mess with. I could snap your neck just like that and it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve done it.”

The man’s eyes opened wide in fear. He’d clearly underestimated this short man, because try as he might, he couldn’t get up.

John was completely calm again, if slightly annoyed, as he waited for Lestrade to come over and arrest the man.

“Any time that would suit you, Lestrade, would be good.”

As soon as the handcuffs clicked into place, John sprung up and raced over to where Sherlock was crouching and leaning against the alley wall. The Detective Inspector and Sergeant Donovan looked on as John seamlessly slipped from soldier mode to doctor mode, from fighter to healer, crouching down next to his best friend.

“Sherlock. Look at me. Where did he get you?”

John’s eyes were full of worry as he quickly scanned Sherlock for injuries.

“I’m fine, John, just a bit winded, he got me in the ribs,” Sherlock tried to wave John off, but the doctor was having none of it.

The initial cut across Sherlock’s chest was wide but luckily didn’t look too deep. There was another cut across his right shoulder and right arm that was deeper and clearly defensive wounds from when Sherlock had tried to shield himself from a blow.

“I’m fine, John. Nothing to worry about,” Sherlock tried to placate the doctor and tried to push him away.

“I’ll be the judge of that. Now stay still and stay down.”

The tone of voice made it clear that Captain Watson would not accept any arguments. So Sherlock made the executive decision to shut up and for once do as he was told.

John helped Sherlock out of his Belstaff coat to get a better look at the injuries. With practiced moves and gentle pressure, he checked Sherlock’s rib cage for broken bones. Sherlock winced slightly, but John couldn’t feel anything moving underneath his hands.

“It’s not broken but more than likely bruised. That’s going to turn purple pretty soon. I’m afraid that breathing will hurt for a while. Plus, you’ve got several cuts and abrasions. I can treat them, and that cut across your chest will need stitches, but I can do that, there’s no need to go to the hospital.”

“Seriously, John, I’ll be fine. It’s just a scratch.”

Sherlock tried to get up and experienced a certain bout of vertigo when he was finally upright. He looked down at himself and saw the blood spreading from his arm across his shoulder and then joining another blood stain further along his chest.

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh. Now let me treat them, or I swear I will call an ambulance and I will insist they keep you as long as possible at the hospital. I know how much you hate them and I am a doctor. Believe me when I say we can always find another test to run that will ensure you’ll have to stay another two hours.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

Sherlock tried to sound menacing, but it came out without much bite. John could tell. He gave the consulting detective a quick smile that basically said ‘Me? Never!’ before he said, equally sweet: “Try me.”
John led Sherlock over to one of the panda cars and sat him down on the backseat, with his feet still hanging out the door. He turned towards the assembled team.

“I need a first aid kit. Donovan? Anderson? First aid kit would be great, if you’re quite finished gawping at us, that is.”

Sally went to retrieve the well-stocked kit from another car, mumbling to Anderson to stop staring. She handed the kit over to John, who gladly took it.

He cleaned Sherlock’s wounds and bandaged them up. The cut across the detective’s chest needed eight stitches and Sherlock impatiently huffed to John to just get on with it, as the doctor waited patiently for the lidocaine cream to take effect.

John worked quickly but efficiently, never compromising the quality of his work. The stitches couldn’t have been better of he’d done them post-operation at a hospital somewhere rather than the back of a police car, in a damp and dirty alleyway.

“I’ve got painkillers at home should you need them, but we’ll see how you do first. This is just to keep your arm still so the wounds don’t open up on the way home,” John said as he was folding a make-shift sling for Sherlock’s arm and shoulder and tied it tightly.

“Right, all done mate.” John gave Sherlock a hand up.

“Let’s get you home” he chuckled.

“Once again, John, you neglect your own injuries. Are you alright?”

“Me? Yeah, fine. I’ll have a few bruises, but that’s about it. He didn’t get me with the knife, after all.”

As John handed the first aid kit back over to Sergeant Donovan, she said, “Army doctor. I see it now. Those were some pretty impressive moves, Doctor Watson.”

John just smiled at her. “Good night, Sally.”

“John, Sherlock, I’ll text you later, okay? We’ll need to get your statements, but I’ll let you take painkillers first, yeah?” Lestrade called after them.

“Don’t forget, Lestrade. All the murders are linked. The boy might have committed the crimes, but it’s highly unlikely that he is the one behind the idea. It’s his boss you want. And it’s more than likely drugs. Text me when you know more”, Sherlock said before John dragged him away and hailed a taxi back to Baker Street.

Chapter Summary

The smallest things can serve as a trigger.
John really needs a friend and Sherlock learns even more about his hero flatmate.

Trigger warning: Violence, torture

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your continued support!
I am so very glad you like this story, you wouldn't believe it!

I am really sorry about what I do to John in this chapter. It does get better though, I promise!

Once again, I have no ties to any armies anywhere in the world, so I am not sure whether what I describe herein is possible/plausible. But it's fiction and John is the hero of this story. Of course the hero falls on hard times sometimes but he'll make it through stronger than ever!

The judo moves in the previous chapter do exist, I used to hold the orange belt a long time ago.

Talk To Me

By the time they got home, it was late and both men were glad that they would not have to explain their injuries to a fussing Mrs. Hudson, as they sneaked past the downstairs flat and up the stairs.

Once inside their own apartment, John helped Sherlock out of his coat as the sling restricted movement.

“Right, let me have a look at those cuts in the light then. Bathroom. Now.” John ordered.

“I’m all right, John, really no need to fuss…” Sherlock started, but John gave a light push against Sherlock’s injured shoulder and the detective winced in pain. John looked smug while Sherlock scowled at him.

“As I thought. Well, Sherlock, you have two choices. Either, I’ll look at the wounds again and examine your ribs as well to make sure there’s no possibility of a fracture and internal bleeding in which case I’ll help you clean the wounds, bandage them and give you painkillers; or you can suffer in silence and risk infections. Your choice.”

John’s voice was matter-of-fact and no-nonsense as he walked towards the bathroom to turn on the hot water tap. After a minute, the lanky detective appeared in the doorway, leaning against the frame.

“Fine. Knock yourself out, John. I still think it’s not necessary but if you insist…”

“I do. I’m your doctor after all. And I seem to remember this guy, not sure whether you know him but I believe Sherlock Holmes was his name, brilliant man, a real genius, saying something along the lines of only fools arguing with their doctors. As I said, genius, that guy, couldn’t agree more!”

John grinned at Sherlock, who rolled his eyes but did concede that he had uttered words to that extent at some point when John had dragged him away from Lestrade on the basis of being exhausted.

John made Sherlock sit down on the closed toilet and helped him out of the sling and torn shirt. The cuts were already clean; he would just have to wash away the blood that had dried around them.

The doctor quickly found a wash cloth, dabbed it in the warm water he’d collected in a small bowl and went about cleaning the wounds methodically and applying antiseptic ointment on a few smaller scratches.

Sherlock’s chest wound would need to stay bandaged for a few days and would definitely hurt, but the shoulder and arm wounds had stopped bleeding and the detective would not need a sling after all.
All over Sherlock’s torso, purple bruises were blooming. The attacker had got closer and inflicted more damage than Sherlock cared to admit, but the evidence was there, on his skin.

Sherlock let John finish his job, then got up and went to his bedroom to get changed. Meanwhile, John returned to the kitchen, put the kettle on and rifled through the cabinets looking for painkillers. Ever since learning of Sherlock’s past addiction, he had made sure that he only kept medicine in the house that wouldn’t cause Sherlock any damage or cause a relapse.

A few minutes later, Sherlock entered the kitchen just as John was adding milk to their teas.

“Heart, these should help.”

He handed two aspirin and a glass of water to the sleuth, who had opted for his usual pyjama and blue dressing gown as his attire.

“Thanks,” he said as he grabbed the pills and water and wandered over to the sofa where he gulped everything down before stretching out on the couch. John carried the mugs over and sat down at Sherlock’s desk.

“The cuts aren’t too deep. Just keep the stitches clean and try not to pull them.”

“Yes, John. I’ve actually had stitches before.”

“I know, I’m just reminding you.”

He was rewarded with a dismissive hand gesture from Sherlock.

“Right. I’m starving. I’m ordering take away from Hakan’s, they’re open late. Joining me?”

Sherlock thought about it for a while. Technically, he was still on a case, but they had caught the culprit or so it seemed. Now it was up to Lestrade’s trained monkeys to get a confession out of the suspect. He usually ate after cases…

Before he could make up his mind, he could hear John placing his order for a shish kebab and chips, with a side order of cheesy garlic bread for Sherlock.

John knew the detective wasn’t likely to eat yet, but the offer was there, like always. They sat in silence for a while and sipped their teas. Both were startled out of their daydreams by the sound of the doorbell heralding the arrival of food. John dashed downstairs to get it.

When he came back upstairs and started unpacking the Styrofoam boxes, Sherlock looked at him.

“What?”

John could feel his friend’s gaze burning on his back.

“How long have you been practising judo?”

John had to chuckle and was glad that Sherlock couldn’t see his face as he transferred his dinner to a plate.

“I don’t.”

“You have to.”

John grinned as he took his dinner through to the living room and reclaimed his seat at the desk.

“I really don’t, Sherlock. Never fought judo in my life!”

Trust Sherlock to be able to tell the martial art discipline from a single throw.

“That sweep, how you unbalanced him. And the hold you used on the floor. They are definitely judo.” Sherlock started.

“They are. But that still doesn’t mean I’m practising it.”

“Then how do you know them? Granted, they were fairly basic, but they do require practice to get right, especially with the ease you demonstrated.”

John grinned.

“A friend of mine in the army showed me a few things. Hand to hand combat, anything goes. That particular maneuver saved my life a few times. I never took classes or anything.”

“You should, you know? You seem to have a talent. Martial arts are not for everyone. I myself am trained in barbaric, but I think judo would fit you as a martial art. It’s gentle, non-violent and still effective,” Sherlock explained.

“‘Well, I don’t know about talent, Sherlock. I think the few things I know are enough for me, if I didn’t learn it in combat training or from mates in the fifteen years I was on active duty, then I think I might be able to survive without it.”

John tucked into his dinner like he had been starving. He had to admit that having a case was not only good for Sherlock, but it also took his own mind off Afghanistan for a moment. Patching Sherlock up had become such a common occurrence that it no longer triggered gruesome flashbacks.
Today at the crime scene had been the first time that the Yarders had seen him fight properly. He had single-handedly disarmed his opponent, fought off an attack, subdued him and held him down until Lestrade was able to cuff him. He had no doubt confirmed all the suspicions and theories the officers of New Scotland Yard had about him since that article came out. However, the suspect was in custody and Sherlock still alive, so all was well.

Once John had finished his dinner, he waved the box with the garlic bread at Sherlock before placing it in the fridge.

“Well, I think I’ll try and catch up on some sleep. Night, Sherlock.”

The detective did not respond, but John didn’t really expect him to. Once Sherlock heard John’s bedroom door close and his flatmate rummage around upstairs to get changed, the detective got up from the sofa and strolled over to the window and the music stand to pick up his violin.

He played a few notes, ignoring the shooting pain in his shoulder that flared up every time he moved the bow across the strings. But playing his instruments pulled the bandages even tighter and Sherlock could feel the pain spread from his shoulder into his arm.

Halfway through his most recent composition, he reluctantly gave up and conceded that he should give it a rest for a night. After all, there were plenty of other things that could occupy his mind for a while. So he returned to the sofa, mindful of his bruises, and started sorting all the new information the last few days had revealed about John into the appropriate rooms of his Mind Palace.

Sherlock must have fallen asleep despite his best efforts, because he sat bolt upright and blinked awake when he heard John scream and thrash through another nightmare.

He still contemplated whether to put on the kettle or try to wake John up when another desperate and heart-wrenching scream from the bedroom upstairs made the decision for him.

Racing up the steps two at a time, Sherlock found himself spurred into motion and outside John’s room way before he had time to make the conscious decision to move from the couch.

As he pushed open the door, the sights and sounds that greeted him made Sherlock feel like he had been punched in the stomach.

John was tangled up in his sheets, covered in sweat. He was thrashing around like someone who was forcibly held in place and tried desperately to escape.

“No! No, no, no! Nooooo! God, no!” he screamed, eyes clenched shut, hands grabbing the sheets so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

John screamed again and then curled up until he was in foetal position, making himself as small as possible, lying on his side with his arms wrapped defensively around his head, whimpering and trying to present as small a target as possible.

The sight of the confident army doctor and soldier, who had just hours ago fought off and caught a murder suspect single-handedly, being reduced to a sobbing mess and begging for mercy was heartbreaking.

Sherlock deduced that John, while on one of his missions, had endured more than being held prisoner. This, the scene that was being played out in John’s subconscious, looked decidedly like torture.

And if it was, then it had been something John had deliberately chosen to keep secret. He had told Sherlock about everything else that was in his file, had bared his soul to his best friend. Sherlock suspected that John had tried to save face, to not come across as weak or anything less than confident by admitting that he at one point of his life had been reduced to beg for mercy.

Trapped in his nightmare, John kept up his mantra of “No, no, no, God, please, no!” crying out again and again, flinching away from invisible attacks. Sherlock knew he had to wake John up so his friend could escape his own subconscious.

“No!” he called out while sitting down on the edge of John’s mattress, carefully avoiding contact with his flatmate to stay safe.

Sherlock knew from experience that trying to shake John awake was not a good idea, as the good doctor had attacked his flatmate and landed an impressive left hook to Sherlock’s cheek before the cobwebs of sleep had cleared away and John had realized that he wasn’t actually under attack. Sherlock wasn’t taking his chances, but he knew he had to do something.

“John!” he called again, a bit louder this time.

“No, wake up!”

But John kept tossing and turning and pleading.

That’s when the detective decided to switch tactics. If he could not get John to wake up immediately, maybe he could at least try to change the dream.

“Watson!” he barked.

Then he realized he had no idea what year it was in John’s mind and what rank he held, so he
couldn’t call him Captain Watson.

“Soldier! Watson! Sitrep!”

Sherlock did his best to convey the same authority that his tutors at boarding school had used. John visibly tensed at the tone of voice, and Sherlock was secretly impressed that it seemed to have worked.

“A… Ambushed, sir. Sergeant Crawford is dead, sir. Please, look out, they can’t have gone far and they are armed,” John mumbled, still asleep but at least responding.

“What’s your name, soldier?”

“Second Lieutenant John Watson, sir.”

‘Second Lieutenant’ Sherlock thought. ‘So this must have happened a while back. This is most likely after he was commissioned as a soldier, rather than when he joined the RAMC, but I’d better confirm it.’

“Not John Watson of the RAMC, surely?”

“Formerly, yes, sir.”

“Ok, Watson, I need you to move. Can you move?”

Sherlock was glad he was getting through to John. John had stilled, but his breathing still came fast and hard.

“I… I can’t, sir. I’m bound, tied up, sir, and I can’t see. My leg and fingers are broken, sir.”

Sherlock swallowed hard. So John had indeed been held somewhere and tortured, possibly before the two instances Sherlock knew about.

“Watson, I’m untying you, okay? Keep still for a second; I’ll get you out of here. Look at me, Watson. Open your eyes!” and to Sherlock’s utter amazement, actually John did.

He looked at Sherlock but still seemed to be trapped in a place his mind did not want him to escape from.

“Sit up, soldier.”

John tried. He twitched his fingers and tried to lift himself up off the mattress but gave a cry of pain and collapsed again. Then he attempted to roll onto his side and brushed his feet against his shins, which caused him to scream in agony and inhale sharply.

“Sir, I can’t move. They burned the soles of my feet, sir, so I wouldn’t run, I fear my injuries might be worse than I first thought, sir, I’m a doctor, but I can’t see the extent of the wounds…”

Sherlock couldn’t believe his ears. It made him sick to think that John, his friend, his only friend, had been treated in such a way. But John was still asleep, Sherlock could worry about everything else later.

“Backup is on the way, we’ll have you out of here in no time. Let me see your injuries, Watson, I need to make sure that we can get you out of here in one piece.”

John gave the tiniest of nods and with that, Sherlock reached out a hand and touched John’s good shoulder. He pulled his friend up into a sitting position and put both hands onto his shoulders until he could see John focusing in on him. John blinked, slightly taken aback.

“Sh… Sh’r’ck? I was… I mean, I was, and you… you were….”

He looked at Sherlock, confusion written clearly all over his face as he chased the dream away.

“It’s alright, John. You had a nightmare and I felt it necessary to wake you, you sounded like you were in agony and you wouldn’t wake up when I tried to call you.”

John was still looking around his room, trying to blink the visions away. Sherlock, in a rare display of tact, decided not to probe for the time being, at least until John had calmed down and collected himself again.

“I’ll put the kettle on. Come downstairs when you’re ready,” Sherlock said and left the room.

When the detective reached the main floor of the apartment, he found a worried Mrs. Hudson standing in on the landing, wrapped up in a bathrobe and with curlers in her hair.

“What’s going on, Sherlock? Is he alright? I heard screams”, she was frantic but calmed down a bit when she realized that Sherlock looked more relieved than worried.

“Everything’s alright Mrs. Hudson. John had a nightmare, but he is awake now. Go back to sleep, it’s all under control, I promise.”

He hugged her and gave her a peck on the cheek before he kindly but decisively turned her around towards the stairs with a smile on his lips.

John meanwhile had dropped back down onto his sheets, still trying to collect his thoughts and
slow his breathing down again. He tried hard not to think about how much of the dream was his imagination and how much Sherlock might actually have heard.

Eventually, he rubbed his face, gathered his dressing gown and joined his friend in the living room for the promised cup of tea.

Entering the living room downstairs, John found two mugs of tea ready and waiting, sitting on the coffee table. He grabbed one before sitting down in his armchair.

“I suppose you want to know what that was all about,” John said after a few sips of his brew, feeling the warmth spread back through his whole body.

“It’s… it’s your wounds…. That’s what triggered me,” he confessed with a small voice and looking away from his friend.

Sherlock was a bit surprised by this. By John’s own admission, his wounds hadn’t been severe.

“But I’m all right, John. You stitched me up, remember? They look worse than they are.”

“Oh course I remember,” John sighed.

“It’s just… the position of the wounds… I’ve seen them before. Felt them myself, as well.”

Sherlock recalled a mental image of John’s scarred torso. Now that he thought about it, there had been a long scar across his chest, but it was a silvery line now. John had said most of his scars either came from his years in the army or sport injuries and he hadn’t given them much further thought than that.

Grabbing his own cup of tea and lowering himself into his leather chair, Sherlock looked at John for a moment, deductions flying left, right and centre through his head. He opted not to voice them for the time being.

“You spoke to me, you know? In your nightmare. You called yourself Second Lieutenant Watson and said you were formerly of the RAMC, so clearly this must have been around ten years ago, when you signed up for front line action. You’ve seen duty in Congo, Iraq and Afghanistan since then. You’ve been in Afghanistan on more tours than Iraq, so there’s a better chance for this to have taken place there. It was also your first tour there, given your rank. You’ve seen a lot of action in a lot of different hot spots and this clearly didn’t happen at a base somewhere. Given what I now know about your service records, this was a covert mission. Fairly early on. It wasn’t your first or you wouldn’t have gone back for more, but it was still early in your career. Am I right?”

Sherlock put his cup down and looked at his blogger, who swallowed hard once he had caught up with Sherlock’s deduction. The doctor looked defeated, the nights of interrupted sleep and too many nightmares taking their toll on him.

“Yes, you’re right. It happened in Afghanistan, towards the end of my first tour there.”

John sighed in defeat and Sherlock knew just by looking at him that John had made the decision to share this last secret with him as well, not banking on getting any more sleep that night.

“I was young. It was a pretty quiet day and Sergeant Crawford decided to give me a bit of training. I was the crow, the newest recruit to the team, had arrived at our base the night before and we were supposed to move out about a week later and try and reclaim a village that had reportedly been harbouring al-Qaeda operatives. We were busy collecting intel and I had only just got there, so the Sergeant took me out on exercise to see if I was any good. It’s common practice. We were only supposed to be out for about two hours give or take. Our vehicle broke down, it had been a sort of primitive stinger, but it did the trick. Slashed two tyres and we only carried one spare. While we were out examining the damage and jacking the car up, we were overpowered. They jumped us, at least ten men who had been well hidden until then. We were simply outnumbered, even though we did put up a fight. The next thing I know is that someone held a knife to my throat and ordered me to move. As I said… I was young and cocky. Stupid, you’d say. I just saw red. They had just killed my superior. My hands were tied and my leg broken, but I barely felt it at the time. I tried to fight. Avenge Crawford’s death…”

John looked up at Sherlock who still sat across from him, watching him intently while John fidgeted with his tea mug.

“Needless to say I could barely keep upright. Next thing I know, the knife cut into my chest. It… it sliced me half open. I panicked, lunged forward. One of the guys held me and turned me around, tied me to a bench, blindfolded me. He asked where they could get drugs from. I refused to answer. For every question I refused to answer, he bent one of my fingers so far back that it snapped and broke… I had lost a lot of blood, could still feel it running down my chest. When the finger breaking didn’t have the desired effect, one of them pulled off my boots and socks and held
a flame to my bare feet. Sensory deprivation can play so many tricks on your mind. I could only
hear and feel what they were doing. I held out as long as I could, but it hurt like hell. Then I felt
the tip of the knife again and they started to dig around the wound with it, making it wider, I
thought that was it.”

By now, John had abandoned his tea on the side table and rearranged himself in such a way that
he sat almost cross-legged. He started worrying the bottom of his pyjama trousers instead.
Sherlock got up slowly and wordlessly placed a hand on top of John’s to still them. John looked
up, a grateful expression on his face despite the worry and pain still visible there.

“I thought that was it for me. It was my first time anywhere near a front line and the first time I
thought I’d die… I held out for two days before I gave them an address, one I knew would be
highly guarded. And then they laughed and left me there. Bound, bleeding, with a broken leg and
broken fingers. Nobody knew where I was and Crawford was dead. I didn’t expect to be rescued.
A patrol came through the village two days later and found me by chance. I was half delirious by
then. I was taken back to base, eventually recovered. I was half delirious by then. I was taken back to base, eventually recovered. I know it’s illogical, but I was itching to get
out there after that. To show them they hadn’t broken me by a long shot. And I managed fine. But
maybe they did succeed after all.”

The tea had gone cold by now, but John still drank it all anyway. Then he rubbed his face, ran a
shaky hand through his blonde hair.

“God, I can’t believe it, Sherlock. I’m pathetic. I mean, look at me. One cut, not even on myself,
and one that doesn’t even need a lot of stitches and I’m losing it spectacularly…” John buried his
face in his hands.

“Don’t be ridiculous, John. You’re far from pathetic! You had a scare. It triggered a response.
We’ll deal with it. That’s all. A lot of people went through far less than you had to go through and
they are only coping half as well as you are, if they are coping at all. It’s okay, John. We all know
you, John. You’re strong, courageous, loyal. Selfless. You’re a protector and a healer. You’ve
lived through war zones and whatever London can throw at us on a regular basis. You’re allowed
to have nightmares. It doesn’t make you weak. It’s how our subconscious deals with traumatic
events, how our minds try to make sense of what we’ve experienced so that maybe we can
eventually start to heal. You’ve had an extremely stressful week, in which you’ve been forced to
relive the darkest days of your career. Had to relive and talk about the days you almost died. It’s
our body’s natural response.”

Sherlock deliberately held John’s gaze, trying to look reassuring as he crouched down before
John’s chair so he wouldn’t be looming over his friend.

“You know I’ve always held you in high esteem – you’re my only friend, John. But not just that. I
know your skills and talents, we all know how you’d do anything to help those in need, as a
doctor, and as a soldier, and you’ve proven this time and time again, often without concern for
your own well-being. Lestrade, Molly, Mrs. Hudson and I know you, John. We know who you
are and we all trust you. One nightmare more or less is not going to change that. Not now, not
ever. We’re not responsible for what our minds want to show us when we don’t have conscious
control over them. That does not make you pathetic. Understood?”

John gave the slightest of nods and cleared his throat.

“Yeah. Understood. I just… I should be over it. I hate not being in control and I’d love to have a
full night’s sleep for once.”

Sherlock got up and went to the bathroom, just to return moments later with a glass of water and a
dropper. He offered all of it to John who took it and inspected it closely, curious about the
contents but wary, knowing Sherlock’s tendency to experiment.

“Don’t worry, it’s safe. Completely organic. I find this sometimes helps more than any sleeping
pills. They’re not meant to knock you out, but they do calm you down. I actually wrote a blog
about all their properties, you should look it up sometime. Believe me, I know all about wanting to
make your mind shut up sometimes. You could try them, if you want to try to sleep again, that is.”

Sherlock gave John a genuine smile, and John could tell Sherlock meant it. He may not have had
the nightmares that plagued John, but he had wanted to escape his own mind before.

John glanced at the small bottle in his hand and pulled out the dropper.

“Oh, just a few drops in the water will do,” Sherlock supplied and John added five drops to the
glass.

“Thank you, Sherlock. I hate to dump all this on you. I know it makes you uncomfortable. It’s just
that stupid article… It’s like it dislodged an avalanche of suppressed memories I can’t get it to
stop. Rather it seems to just mow me down. I feel like my subconscious is trying to suffocate me
sometimes…”

He left a long pause while he got up and pulled the old throw with him to the couch, where he lay
down again while Sherlock returned to his armchair.

Once he had settled down properly, John turned towards his friend again.

“Um… would you… you know… would you mind playing for me again?”

John asked, barely audible.
Sherlock sighed.

“I wish I could, John, but I can’t tonight. I have tried before and with the cut on my arm and
shoulder... well... I can’t move the bow properly without the bandage chafing against the
wounds. I’m sorry.”

Sherlock was frustrated that his body could betray him like that. The stupid thing was only meant
to be transport.

It was especially frustrating because he knew that it would take no effort on his part to help John.
He liked playing the violin and he always played for John whether he’d been asked to or not.

“Oh. No, that’s fine, Sherlock. Don’t worry about it. It’s fine, honestly.”

John was quick to reassure him.

But Sherlock got up and put on a recording of his favourite compositions for the violin. Maybe it
would help John, and the music would definitely help him think.

“Compromise?” he asked.

“Definitely. Thank you.”

John smiled and pulled the blanket around himself.

Sherlock settled back down in his armchair to muse over the case again as he watched the former
soldier sleep.
Lennon And McCartney

Chapter Summary

The Baker Street Boys find new leads and discuss music.

Chapter Notes

A bit of domesticity, because John deserves a breather :)
Discussions of various types of music within....

As for John's instruments: One gets mentioned in The Blind Banker, one is taken from ACD canon and the other was my idea.

All songs mentioned in this chapter can be found on Youtube, if you're interested.

Lennon And McCartney

John woke up the next morning thinking that these late night heart-to-hearts with Sherlock had to stop. Sherlock Holmes didn’t care for sentiment or debilitating nightmares.

John’s army career had been long and half of it dangerous and he’d got injured way too many times to count them all.

But he was a soldier, injuries came with the territory. John just hoped that once he’d received the Victoria Cross and the media attention died down again, so would his nightmares. They had been few and far between since he moved to Baker Street all that time ago, and now they were back with a vengeance and John didn’t care for it one bit.

Mycroft really had done a good job of keeping the journalists at bay. Only a few had managed to get in contact with John directly, agents kept traffic moving smoothly along Baker Street and Sherlock had unplugged the landline just in case.

John didn’t particularly want to retell his story to strangers. Sherlock, he could deal with and Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson and Molly as well. But not the vultures lingering on the doorstep of 221b.

John watched from the window as another reporter was swiftly moved along down the street and told not to return by the men in graphite suits.

While John made breakfast, Sherlock researched online to find more clues for their latest case. Just as John had sat down at the desk with a plate of toast and omelette, Greg Lestrade walked through the door and into 221b Baker Street.

The agents must have recognised him and Mrs. Hudson must have let him in as neither of the two tenants had heard the door bell chime.

Both Sherlock and John looked up at the Detective Inspector expectantly. Taking in Sherlock’s still damp hair and John’s slightly dishevelled look and the freshly cooked breakfast, Greg Lestrade walked through the door and into 221b Baker Street.

The agents must have recognised him and Mrs. Hudson must have let him in as neither of the two tenants had heard the door bell chime.

Both Sherlock and John looked up at the Detective Inspector expectantly. Taking in Sherlock’s still damp hair and John’s slightly dishevelled look and the freshly cooked breakfast, Lestrade cleared his throat.

“Sorry, is this a bad time?”

With an exaggerated wave of his arm and a mouthful of omelette, John gestured for the DI to come in and make himself at home.

“Nah, it’s fine. Morning, Greg. Just let me finish this and get changed, yeah? It’s not often that madman over there lets me enjoy a full meal” John smirked.

Sherlock pretended not to hear John as he looked more closely at the Detective Inspector.

“There’s been another one. He’s escalating.”

“Yes, in another dumpster, behind another club and with another stamp. I need you to take a look.” Lestrade produced a cardboard tray holding three coffees that he’d kept hidden so far by placing it on the low shelf on the landing.

He grinned at John as he revealed it.

“Brought a peace offering, by the way… or bribe, if you prefer” and handed out steaming cups of Speedy’s strongest coffee.

“You’re a life saver, Greg. Ta!”
John happily accepted the cup Lestrade handed him.

“You must be desperate if you stop to get coffee for us just so we take a look at another crime scene. But then again, I still do not understand what merits some of your crime scene technicians to be titled as such. Did yesterday’s suspect not give you any clues or have you just not figured them out yet?” Sherlock said as he grabbed his coffee.

“He means thank you, Greg. Much appreciated.”

John chipped in and grinned at both detectives.

“Yes.”

“No worries. I know better than to take offense at that. Known him long enough after all.”

“I’m right here, you know?” Sherlock said as he took a sip.

“The guy we arrested last night was just a hired hand. Someone else seems to have taken over.”

“Oh, well, we’ll meet you there. Just leave the address, we’ll be right behind. As you can see, we’re both not quite ready yet.”

“Oh yes, right. Thanks, guys.”

Lestrade turned to leave but then remembered something else.

“Oh, how’s your chest, by the way, Sherlock?”

“It’s fine, a mere scratch.” Sherlock waved it off.

“Oh, okay. Good. I’m glad. Anyway, see you in a few. John, don’t let him rush you. The victim’s dead and my team’s at the scene, he can wait five more minutes for you to arrive.”

The DI turned on his heels and headed back down the stairs while Sherlock retreated to his own bedroom to get changed.

“I’ll just jump in the shower real quick, Sherlock. Put the kettle on, I’ll need another cuppa if you want me to come with,” the former soldier shouted down the hallway as he went into the bathroom for a quick rinse and shave.

Looking at himself in the mirror, he flinched. The bags under his eyes had become even more pronounced, the night terrors taking a visible toll on him. With a sigh, he stepped under the water, the initial cold shocking his body awake somewhat.

When John emerged from the bathroom fully dressed and feeling marginally more awake, Sherlock was already pacing through the living room. To his credit, he had put the kettle on again, he’d just forgotten to refill John’s mug with another tea bag. Once this was remedied, John downed the tea in big gulps so the two of them could get going to Lestrade’s new crime scene.

The body they found was just like the last one; young, male and dressed for a night of clubbing. He looked a bit more respectable, but not expensively so.

The only thing different about this victim was his skin colour. While the other three men had been fair or olive skinned, this latest body’s skin was the colour of rich coffee. Alive he must have been a good-looking, if not striking, young man.

The nightclub stamp on his hand was barely discernible due to the dark ink on dark skin, but a UV light eventually revealed it.

This time, Sherlock did not jump into the dumpster, dismissing it as unimportant. He left that job to Anderson.

Meanwhile, John crouched down next to the body to help examine the man. He too had been bludgeoned to death; the man’s face was bashed in, his eye sockets, nose and teeth broken with a blunt object. John thought that the murder weapon could very possibly be a pipe or a cricket bat.

“Lestrade, can you get me close ups of all the nightclub stamps? The connection has to be in the clubs. Check the clubs, see whether the regulars know about any recent drug deals gone wrong, or new management taking over,” Sherlock said while examining a speck of dirt on the floor.

“Sure, Sherlock. This guy doesn’t look like a drug dealer, though.”

“Maybe he doesn’t, but that doesn’t mean he can’t still be one.”

“True,” Lestrade agreed and scribbled into his notebook.

“He’s in his early 30s, well-dressed and with that level of personal grooming clearly trying to appear to be of higher social standing. Well-educated, even though he spent his childhood in poverty. A scholarship student from abroad, then. From what is left of his dental work, I’d say Ghanaian. Plus, you’ll probably find the tell-tale scar of the polio jab on his triceps when you do the autopsy. He lived alone but had a string of lovers. He dressed to impress and the packet of condoms in his breast pocket speaks for itself. He went to clubs regularly; he had an old promo leaflet for another club in his pocket. Lestrade, I suggest you start your search there.”
Sherlock handed over the crumpled piece of paper he’d found on the body.

“Text me if there’s anything else. Come along, John.”

John actually had to jog to catch up to his flatmate as he was leaving the crime scene.

“That’s it?” he asked once he’d reached Sherlock. The consulting detective just looked at him blankly.

“You’re still convinced he was either a dealer or a pimp, aren’t you?”

“Of course. They are the most likely choices. Moreover, I do have a certain amount of practice at spotting drug dealers, if you recall. Why do you ask?”

John winced a bit at the reminder. It had been years since Sherlock had spoken to him about recovering from his cocaine addiction. For all intents and purposes, he had always viewed Sherlock as clean and sober. So for Sherlock Holmes to intentionally remind John that he was once an addict and would probably have blended right in with the clientele at the clubs they were currently investigating, was unexpected.

“No, I know, Sherlock. It’s probably nothing anyway… just a hunch, really. He didn’t strike me as the type to deal or do drugs, and I can picture him as a player, definitely, but not as a pimp.”

Sherlock just gave a noncommittal hum.

“Well, I’m sure Lestrade will find out soon enough.”

They sat in comfortable silence on the taxi ride back to Baker Street. John lost in his thoughts and Sherlock wandering the expansive corridors of his Mind Palace.

Back at the flat, Sherlock grabbed his laptop for some more research, while John rummaged through the fridge for something to eat. Deciding that the easiest and quickest option for lunch would be grilled cheese, John quickly set about preparing the food.

When he sat down at the desk with a plate of food and his own laptop, Sherlock was already typing away furiously.

“Found something?” he enquired, regarding his flatmate with one raised eyebrow.

“Maybe. I’m indexing where the bodies were found and the nightclubs they’d been to. They are all over the place so far. There is no way a pimp could hold sway over such a large area. Drugs are looking more and more likely,” Sherlock explained without looking up.

John quickly finished his meal and grabbed a map of London. After all this time living together he knew Sherlock’s methods, so he spread the map out on the coffee table, grabbed a permanent marker and sat himself down on the couch.

“Right, then. Which clubs did Lestrade say they’d been to?”

He looked up at Sherlock expectantly, the marker at the ready.

When they’d marked all the clubs, John could see that they were indeed spread all over the city. However, it wasn’t until they started to also mark in the dumpsters in which the victims had been found that a pattern became evident.

Once Sherlock saw it, he was almost disappointed. Could it really be this straightforward?

The first victim had been found at the club the second victim had visited. He in turn had been found behind club number three. Sherlock groaned inwardly at his own stupidity. There was no need for John to see or hear it, as he was sure the soldier would never let him live it down.

Knowing the army doctor, he’d gloat about it for weeks if he wasn’t careful. John, however, did notice the slightly annoyed huff his friend let out and smirked to himself.

Finally, his life resembled some kind of normality again with them solving cases and sharing laughs; Sherlock being brilliance personified and John the stalwart and steadfast partner who could see right through Sherlock’s façade and call him out on it. It was what passed for normality at 221b Baker Street and John wouldn’t have it any other way.

The nightmares of the previous nights momentarily forgotten, John enjoyed the thrill of the chase. Sherlock watched John in his peripheral vision and smiled. Finally, John seemed focused on the task at hand and not reliving the war.

Absent-mindedly, Sherlock scratched the bandage currently covering the laceration across his chest. John noticed and went into doctor mode immediately.

“Is it itchy? Does it hurt?” he asked and pointed at Sherlock’s chest.

“No, it’s fine.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, Sherlock. I’ve got to change the bandages anyway. Stay here, I’ll just grab my med kit”, John said, already on his feet and halfway to the bathroom.

“It’s fine, John, really” Sherlock started, but his friend was having none of it.
John grabbed the bag and noted that he would have to re-stock yet again pretty soon. Apparently, one could never have too many bandages when living at Baker Street.

Before he returned to the living room, John grabbed a glass of water and retrieved the painkillers. As he put his kit and the water down on the desk, John stood back and fixed his gaze on the consulting detective.

Sherlock merely raised an eyebrow.

John assumed his army stance, feet shoulder-width apart and arms crossed in front of his chest. And waited. Sherlock didn’t move, he just looked around the room at the medical bag. John started tapping his foot after a while. Sherlock just leaned back and smiled.

“Shirt off, Holmes. Now.”

Sherlock knew that tone of voice. It was John’s take-no-prisoners command voice. A voice which made new recruits come to the ‘shun quicker than Sherlock could blink, he knew. Even Sherlock had learned to obey John’s command voice, although he thought to himself that he’d draw the line should John ever demand he ‘drop and give him twenty.’

The consulting detective knew that an argument with Captain Watson would be futile and the bandages did indeed need redressing. He glared at John for another minute for good measure; John just raised an eyebrow. Two could play that game.

Eventually, Sherlock relented and started to unbutton his shirt, uncovering the white bandages underneath.

John got a bowl of warm water and his antiseptic cream ready and then helped Sherlock remove the bandages. He sighed with relief when he saw no indications of infection. The fabric scratching along the sutures had probably just caused the itch.

He quickly cleaned and redressed the wounds and checked Sherlock’s shoulder movement. Satisfied that his friend’s wounds were already healing nicely, John got up and went to the kitchen to dispose of the used bandages and let Sherlock redress himself.

Chuckling about the fact that it was entirely normal for him now to have a medical waste bin in the kitchen, John went about fixing tea for the two of them.

“Thanks, John” he could hear Sherlock mumbling behind him.

“No worries, Sherlock. Here, I made you a cuppa as well.”

He passed a steaming mug over to the younger Holmes brother who had wandered into the kitchen and followed him back out into the living room.

Both men sat down in their armchairs, lost in thought as they sipped their teas.

“Sherlock?”

“Hm?”

“Sherlock, at the crime scene earlier. Didn’t you say that the victim had some sort of flyer on him?”

“Hm? Oh, that! Yes. It was some nightclub promotion or other. I glanced at the date, it was one and a half weeks ago, so it’s hardly relevant for this case,” Sherlock dismissed it.

“Hm. What was it? A new club opening? Happy Hour? Battle of the Bands? A concert of some sort?” John listed all the potential reasons for clubs handing out flyers to their patrons.

“I wouldn’t call the sort of musical gatherings taking place in nightclubs ‘concerts’, John. Remind me to get us tickets for the Proms this year.”

“I’m sure your idea of a concert is very different to mine. Even though I attended what was arguably the best live concert ever held,” John teased smugly, leaning back and grinning at Sherlock, who had looked up with interest.

“That’s preposterous, John!” Sherlock exclaimed and John really had to hold back the laughter. Sometimes it was just too easy to bait Sherlock. And boy, the man bit each and every time.

“Besides, I had no idea that you liked that rendition of Mozart’s Magic Flute. But I agree, it was the best I have ever witnessed.”

“I’m not talking about Mozart, Sherlock” John chuckled.


“That’s exactly my point, Sherlock. I’m not talking about classical music. I’m talking about rock music.”

“Dull,” Sherlock dismissed and sighed, that conversation could have been quite interesting.

“You wouldn’t say that if you had seen Queen perform live at Live Aid 1985…”

John took another sip and placed the mug on the side table.
“The Queen gave a concert? I was under the impression she only played privately!”

Sherlock looked at John, surprise written all over his face and John doubled over and absolutely lost it. It took him a good three minutes to stop laughing and he was glad he’d put the mug down because they’d both be covered in tea by now otherwise.

Once he’d got his breathing under control a bit, tears of laughter still in his eyes and his abused ribs complaining at having laughed so hard, John looked back up to Sherlock. His friend just sat there with a confused look on his face, trying hard to work out what it was that had John in hysterics like that.

“How’s Her Majesty, Sherlock?” John laughed and rolled his eyes.

“Queen the band! You know? Freddie Mercury, Brian May… Come on, you must know some of their songs! We will rock you? Bohemian Rhapsody? Queen live at Live Aid! Possibly the best concert in history. How can you not know?”

“No, I don’t think so. I mostly listened to British, German, Austrian and Italian composers, although I was also quite fond of Camille Saint-Saëns.”

Suddenly, John was quiet and Sherlock dared to look across at his friend. John just stared at him in utter disbelief.


“Lennon and McCartney! They were one of the best, most influential and successful songwriting duos of the twentieth century! You must have heard of The Beatles! How can you grow up in Britain and not know The Beatles?”

John was gobsmacked, still trying to work out whether Sherlock was having him on or not.

“I can assure you, I have not. Besides, contemporary music was frowned upon. Mummy didn’t approve. Both Mycroft and I received classical training. I play the violin, obviously, but I also learned to play the piano when I was three. Mycroft was much the same, except that he chose cello and piano. I opted for saxophone lessons at boarding school, I knew it would annoy Mycroft and Mummy, but it was taught at school and, therefore, deemed acceptable.”

“Hang on; you can play the piano and saxophone?”

John thought that the whole conversation was getting weirder and weirder.

“I believe I just said that, do pay attention, John!”

The doctor just looked at the detective and couldn’t find a hint of humour or sarcasm.

“I had no idea. I would like to hear you play some day. Piano and sax, that is. Didn’t pick you for playing a jazz instrument, but I guess it fits,” John stated, glad he was already sitting down.
“I prefer the violin, but I did solo jazz for a while. Besides, I don’t see you taking out your clarinet or dragging a piano in here.” Sherlock was watching his friend intently.

“I’m not even going to ask how you knew. I was never any good, though. Clarinet was a bit of a Watson tradition that my great-granddad started and piano was compulsory at my school. I learned to play the guitar, though, during my army days. A mate taught me.”

John laughed at how the conversation had gone from discussing a crime scene to discussing musical proficiency.

John chuckled and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Hang on! You did solo jazz?”

“Yes. Is that so hard to believe?”

Sherlock really didn’t see why John found that so bizarre.

“Sherlock, a minute ago you had never heard of Queen or The Beatles and now you’re telling me you’re a pretty accomplished jazz player. I mean the classical music I can see. I have known you long enough and I have heard you compose for the violin. I’m just having trouble picturing you with a saxophone, let alone playing jazz.”

“What?”

Sherlock was genuinely surprised. He’d always thought it was obvious.

“Jazz can be anything you like. You can even improvise. I have always found the music resembled the way my mind works. Granted, I could have played jazz on the piano, but the saxophone annoyed my parents and it was worth it just for that,” he grinned.

John thought about that for a while. Sherlock’s explanation made sense. He could be quiet or loud, fast or slow, change melodies halfway and still produce something beautiful while playing jazz.

“Fair enough. I guess that makes sense. I kind of figured that unlike my big sister, your brother did not grow up listening to The Clash and the Sex Pistols and passing on that musical taste.”

“Sex Pistols?”

“Yeah. 70s punk band. I bet Anarchy in the UK was not as popular in the Holmes household as it was in the Watson residence at the time.”

Sherlock drew back, slightly appalled.

“Yes, I can assure you that my mother would not have allowed anything with a title like that past the front door.”

John’s grin grew wider again.

“How about David Bowie, then? Fleetwood Mac? The Who?”

Sherlock shook his head at every band John listed.

“Right, remind me to get my vinyl records back from Harry. I’ll make a connoisseur of decent music out of you yet!”

John leaned back in his armchair, a self-satisfied smile on his face. Sherlock held his gaze, a smile also on his lips, raising his eyebrows as if to say ‘Is that so?’

Neither of them realized who started laughing first, but soon they were breaking out in uncontrollable laughter at the absolute absurdity of the conversation they had just had.

As Sherlock joined the laughter, he was glad to see John sufficiently distracted from his nightmares and knew that John cherished the few moments of idle chit-chat between them that had really been few and far between recently.

Sherlock conceded that maybe he should make more of an effort to talk to his friend more often about mundane things, for the sake of conversation more than to talk through information pertaining to a case.

John was, after all, his only friend and if talking about trivial things like music was enough to keep a war hero’s PTSD at bay for a while, then that was a small price to pay on the part of a certain consulting detective.

After a while, John gathered himself again and calmed down a bit.

“Right then, back to the case. There was some sort of concert promo flyer in the victim’s pocket. But you dismissed it.”

“Yes, obviously, John. It wasn’t even a current flyer, the event has already been.”

“Fair enough. Any other clues?”

“Not yet.”

John returned to his laptop to type up a blog post, but made up his mind halfway through. He took
another look at the London street map and the markers he had placed at all the crime scene locations. He typed the name of the first club into the search bar.

Sherlock watched as John frowned at the computer and returned to typing just to frown some more a minute later.

“Er… Sherlock?” I think I found something. Have a look.”

He turned his laptop around so Sherlock could see.

Sherlock’s eyes flickered across the web page that John had opened and then his eyes widened as understanding dawned on him.

“John, I’ve said it before, as a conductor of light you are unbeatable! Nevertheless, I think this time you have outdone yourself! This is brilliant!”
Hidden Talents

Chapter Summary

It turns out, John's a man of many talents. Surprisingly, so is Anderson, or so it seems.

Chapter Notes

This is it, my dear readers! With posting this chapter my word count is officially past 50,000 words, which means that I achieved my NaNoWriMo goal of 50k words within 30 days! *happydance*

This story is far from over though. It does get a bit quieter for a while now though, as John and Sherlock are on the case. But there's still loads more to come!

I thank you all for your continued support! Without your comments and kudos, I wouldn't have got this far!!

Hidden Talents

Thirty minutes later, the two men got out of a cab in front of New Scotland Yard. An idea had formed in Sherlock’s mind by the time they got there and John had an idea of his own, but they would need the help of Lestrade and his team to pull it off.

As usual, Sherlock dashed out of the cab and into the building without a backwards glance, and left John to pay their fare and hurry after the detective.

When John entered New Scotland Yard, Sherlock was nowhere in sight. ‘Just great’ John thought. ‘Bloody bastard couldn’t even hold the lift!’

He stabbed the Up button angrily and paced in front of the lift. John was positively fuming by the time he heard the ‘bing’ of the lift door.

When Sherlock got to Lestrade’s squad room, the first thing he noticed was the front page article about John that had been cut out and carefully attached to the squad notice board by the water cooler in pride of place. He smiled to himself. This was excellent news, the team was finally starting to see John for who he really is, instead of waving him off as Sherlock’s sidekick.

“Hey, Sherlock! What are you doing here? Where’s John?” Greg Lestrade called from the door of his office when he spotted the unruly mop of curls that no doubt belonged to the lanky consulting detective currently strolling through his squad room.

“He’s right behind. We have something to discuss with you!”

“Mr. Holmes? Sorry, sir. I was just wondering… That article about Dr Watson – is it true? Is he really being awarded the Victoria Cross?” one young female officer on the homicide team asked.

“Yes, as far as that is concerned, every word is true.”

Now every pair of eyes in the room was on Sherlock.

“He will not only be awarded the Victoria Cross, but also the Military Cross and Bar. He has done everything the articles say and more, and trust me when I say that the honours that will be bestowed on John Watson are the very least he deserves. I’ve seen Captain Watson in action, as I am sure all of you have seen Doctor Watson in action. I’m sure you all agree that he is a worthy recipient of our country’s highest honour.”

Every head in the room nodded, all the officers tried to reconcile the well-known image of the jeans and cardigan-clad doctor with the newspaper picture of the soldier with blood on his uniform, a medical kit over one shoulder and a rifle over the other.

Just as Sherlock was about to turn back around to Lestrade, the lift beeped and opened its doors to reveal one Doctor John Hamish Watson.

Clasping his hands behind his back, John stepped out of the lift into the squad room. He looked around and winced when he saw the front page story about himself pinned to the notice board. When he took another step forward towards DI Lestrade and Sherlock, a young man in the back of the room stood up and started a slow clap. The next to get up and join in was Sally Donovan, closely followed by Lestrade and the rest of the team.
The clapping increased in crescendo and even Sherlock joined in and smiled. John stood frozen to the spot, not knowing how best to react.

At some point, he started to make out music over the speakers of the announcement system in the room. It took John a while to recognise the tune, but he had to chuckle when he realized that someone was playing Chariots of Fire. John suspected the culprit to be Anderson.

He took another step forward and bowed theatrically, complete with a flourish, before he made his way over to the Detective Inspector.

The doctor had a precise and confident stride and half of Lestrade’s team either patted him on the shoulder or shook his hand when he made his way over.

There even was a wolf whistle or two from the back of the room.

Lestrade had just enough time to move his phone away from the microphone and hit pause before John joined them. He grinned sheepishly at John but the doctor just shook his head and laughed.

Lestrade handed a card over to John, who looked at the DI quizzically. Sherlock just stood back and watched.

Opening the card, John saw that every officer on the homicide squad had signed it. Across the top of the card, he could see Greg’s neat handwriting saying ‘Congratulations, John, on your Victoria Cross investiture. It’s an honour to work with you.’

A female script had added in brackets ‘And thank you for taming Sherlock Holmes. Much obliged!’ along with a smiley face. John grinned, knowing it was Sergeant Sally Donovan who had written it.

Lestrade cleared his throat.

“Erm.... I think you came in for a reason, guys?”

“Oh, yes. We no longer believe that the victims were drug dealers or pimps. We believe they worked for local record labels. Each victim attended karaoke and live music events at those nightclubs,” Sherlock explained quickly.

“There’s another event tomorrow night, calling musicians to come and play with a chance of getting signed by an independent label,” John cut in.

“Tomorrow’s event will be hosted by The Trainyard.”

“Trainyard? That’s where the last victim was found.” Lestrade frowned.

“Yes, it is. There is a pattern. And we had an idea for an undercover operation,” John chimed in.

“At the end of the operation you’ll most likely have a serial killer in custody. So what do you say, Lestrade? Are you in or out?” Sherlock smirked.

“I know I’ll probably regret this, but let’s hear your plan then,” the DI gave in.

Sherlock started pacing up and down in front of the officer’s desk while he explained the plan he and John had come up with.

“Tomorrow’s event requires musicians to play an instrument and be able to sing. We get someone to go on stage, get them to go through a whole performance and make it believable that they want that contract. I’ll pose as a new producer, out judging the talent and trying to spot the next big thing. If my suspicions are correct, the club owner and a loyal producer, offering a bribe so I keep my hands off ‘their’ talent, will soon approach me. Naturally, I’ll refuse. At which point, Lestrade, you and your officers should be able to catch the killer red-handed.”

Lestrade had paid attention to Sherlock’s plan and was actually impressed.

“OK, that’s actually not bad for an undercover suggestion coming from you. Let me ask around then. We need a musician.”

Lestrade assembled his team and asked who in the room could play an instrument and sing and to make themselves known by show of hand. Only a handful actually could, and of those, some played instruments you couldn’t simply carry around with you to a club.

It soon became apparent, that they would ideally need a guitar player. To Sherlock’s surprise that left only five people with their hands in the air. John was one of them. Anderson was another.

“How are you performing live in front of an audience? It has to be believable.”

Even though Sherlock felt like he was stating the obvious, it had to be said. The whole operation needed someone confident enough to pull it off. It had to look like they really wanted a chance to sing professionally.

John looked around. Most people had sat back down or dropped their hands, and Anderson didn’t look too thrilled at the prospect of playing in front of an audience.

“Oh for goodness’ sake. Just get me a guitar so I can practice. I’ll do it!” John said impatiently. All eyes turned on the army doctor.
“Are you sure, John?”

Lestrade’s eyes were wide in surprise; Sherlock just smirked smugly, having expected an outcome like this. John would owe him a fiver.

“Yes, I’m sure, Greg.”

“Have you done this before? The club is likely to be crowded.”

“Lestrade, there are only so many ways you can keep yourself occupied in the Afghan desert when gambling’s illegal and alcohol is banned. And there are only so many times you can polish your shoes and clean your gun and read the same books over and over. So on quiet nights, when you’re not on duty, you play, you sing. It’s either that, or Scrabble. Once a quarter we organised a sort of talent show to boost morale a bit. Bastion can accommodate around 28,000 personnel. I’ve literally played in front of hundreds at a time, probably thousands in total. I might not be very good and I’m self-taught, but I don’t suffer stage fright. Can anyone here beat that?”

He glanced around the room and saw a lot of surprised and intrigued faces, all shaking no.

“Right. That’s settled then. Where can I get an electric guitar and earplugs from, so I can practice quietly?”

Sherlock’s fingers were already flying over the keys on his phone.

“All sorted. It’ll all be dropped off at Baker Street in about an hour.”

John rolled his eyes. That meant Mycroft was involved.

“Right, the contest starts tomorrow night at 9pm. We’ll meet at 8pm a block away from The Trainyard for a briefing. John, people are likely to recognise you. You’ll have to disguise yourself.”

John looked from Greg to Sherlock, and Sherlock nodded, sending another text.

“Ok, back to work everyone. John, come with me. Sherlock, wait here,” Greg instructed and headed for the lift, John following closely on his heels. Lestrade led them down to the evidence locker.

“Greg? What are we doing here?”

“John, it’s not that I don’t trust you. But this whole undercover operation depends on your performance, depends on you being able to deliver. I need to hear you play before I can allow this to go ahead. There are acoustic guitars in there, and I’m fairly certain one of them is for left-handed players.”

John understood. He found the guitar and quickly tuned it. Lestrade then took him to a sound proof room.

“Ok, John, show us what you’ve got!” Greg grinned as he closed the door. John smiled back, took one deep breath and started to play.

Greg was impressed.

They returned to the squad room fifteen minutes and one rendition of Summer of ’69 later. It was the only song that John could play from the top of his head at short notice although he did assure the Detective Inspector that he had other songs in his repertoire as well.

When they got back to the squad room, they found Sherlock and Donovan shouting insults at each other. John quickly grabbed Sherlock by the elbow and guided him outside to hail a cab.

They barely made it back to Baker Street before one of Mycroft’s men showed up bearing gifts.

First, he brought an amp and some high-quality headphones up the stairs. This was followed by a small box of disguises. And lastly, a worn guitar case, covered with stickers.

John assumed the tattered case would make his bumbling musician act more believable. He half expected the guitar to be used as well. So when he opened the case and found himself face to face with a brand new, deep red Fender Stratocaster with white pickguard, his jaw dropped.

“Mr. Holmes sends his regards, Doctor Watson. He wants you to keep the instrument should you so desire.”

The agent’s words barely registered with John, who only nodded, entirely focused on the guitar, almost afraid to touch it.

Once Mycroft’s agent had left, John inspected the guitar more closely. He noted immediately that it was made for a left-handed player and strung accordingly. John was immensely grateful for that and the fact that Mycroft had paid attention. He had tried to play with his non-dominant hand when he first learned to play, but it had ended in disaster.

Wanting to practice in relative privacy first, John reverently lifted the Fender out of the case, plugged the headphones in and took a pick out of the case. He plugged each string and found the instrument newly strung and finely tuned. So he closed his eyes and began to play.
Sherlock watched in amazement. He had never seen John play before and he couldn’t hear the tune, but it intrigued him. Sherlock observed John’s facial expressions as he mouthed the words. He was obviously playing a rock number, judging by the chords John played and how he tapped along.

The detective was surprised how well John could play. John even demonstrated that he was able to finger-pick a particularly difficult intro that seemed vaguely familiar. John sang along quietly, but Sherlock could still make out the words here and there.

“Deep down in Louisiana, close to New Orleans...”

The longer John played, the more songs and chords he seemed to remember. The doctor played a few more songs in silence, fingers running confidently along the fingerboard without him even looking.

Sherlock knew from experience with the violin that this took practice, especially when you never had formal instructions, and he was impressed. When they’d spoken about playing instruments before and John had confessed he was a self-taught guitarist, Sherlock had never expected him to be this proficient.

Seemingly satisfied so far, John opened his eyes again. Sherlock had just enough time to pretend to look busy so it wouldn’t be obvious that he’d been staring.

“Sherlock? Could you get Mrs. Hudson? I need your input as to what song I should perform, as I can’t decide. I’ve got three really to choose from, and I’d like to know your opinion. The two of you will need to decide for me, I can’t make up my mind.”

John had barely finished speaking when Sherlock sprang up and bounded down the stairs like an excited five-year-old on Christmas morning.

John grinned to himself as he set up the amplifier and tested the volume. Only now did he realize that Mycroft had given him a small valve Marshall Amp. John let out an impressed whistle. Mates of his had dreamt about starting a band and had told him all about the gear they would get. A Marshall amp like this had always been pretty high on the list.

“Well, are you boys telling me what’s going on?”

“Mrs. Hudson, we are currently on a case, and as part of this, John will be going undercover tomorrow night as a musician; auditioning for a chance to record with an independent label.”

Sherlock’s grin got even wider, something John hadn’t thought possible.

“Yes. Thank you, Sherlock. Anyway, I will have to perform. However, it has been a while since I played and I can’t decide between three songs as I like them all. Therefore, I’ll need the two of you to help me make a decision. While Sherlock knows classical music, I’m not quite sure whether he’s ever heard anything from the last four decades. But I know you, Mrs. Hudson, listen to the radio all day, so you might know these songs.”

“Okay, if you say so, dear. It’s not going to be any of that screechy – screaming music, is it?”

John stared at her for a few seconds, before his brain caught up and he did a double take.

“I can assure you, it’s not going to be metal music, no. Right then, the songs to choose from are ‘I
want it all’ by Queen, ‘Summer of 69’ by Bryan Adams and ‘Layla’ by Eric Clapton. You’ll probably recognise them when you hear them.”

“They do sound familiar, yes.”

“Ok. Good.”

John took one last gulp of his tea and picked up the guitar.

“And Sherlock, no criticism from the cheap seats until I’m done,” he said and pointed at the consulting detective, who looked offended for a second before the smirk took over again.

“Here goes…” John said and started to play.

Sherlock was well and truly impressed and that was saying a lot. John had a pretty good technique despite being self-taught. Moreover, he knew how to carry a tune. Sherlock had heard John sing under the shower sometimes when the blogger had thought he was alone in 221b, but Sherlock had had no idea his friend was actually such a good singer.

Granted, the songs John had chosen were different from Sherlock’s usual taste, but John had packed as much passion into them as Sherlock did into his violin playing.

He watched fascinated how John closed his eyes every now and then while he was playing and how even Mrs. Hudson was tapping along in time. She even knew some of the lyrics!

At the end of the three songs, both Sherlock and their landlady gave standing ovations, while John blushed and bowed. He mumbled his thanks and put the guitar on the stand Mycroft had provided.

“Well, what did you think? Which one?”

John looked at Mrs. Hudson first, then Sherlock and adopted an at ease stance, patiently waiting for the verdict of his small audience.

“Oh sweetheart, they were all lovely. Why did you hide your talent?” she asked, still clapping.

“I didn’t really hide it, Mrs. Hudson; I just couldn’t afford an instrument. I haven’t played since I left the army,” John confessed.

“You should take it up again. You could do with a hobby, love.”

“I do have a hobby,” John laughed.

“It’s called ‘Sherlock’. I do work as a GP in case everyone’s forgotten. The cases are what I do in my free time, even though it doesn’t always look like it. But I might play more. It’d definitely be a less dangerous hobby than my current one.”

John smirked at the consulting detective, who scowled at him and pouted, but John knew it was a pretence.

“Well? I still don’t know which one I should play.”

“Go with the third one you played. You know that one best and seem most comfortable. It’s also in a vocal range you’re comfortable with. I agree, by the way. You should play more often.” Sherlock said.

“Oh, that’s one vote. Mrs. Hudson? Your opinion?”

“Either the second or the third song, I would say. The second one was lovely, but if it’s a competition, the third showed your guitar-playing skills more. Even though they were not exactly to my taste, mind you.”

“OK, the third one it is, then. I was leaning towards that one anyway. Thank you for your help.”

Clearly relieved, John ran his fingers through his hair.

“Oh John,” Mrs. Hudson laughed.

“How could I refuse a dashing young man like yourself willing to serenade an old girl like me?” She gave him a hug before she turned towards the stairs to make her way back down to her own flat.

Sherlock watched John as the doctor went towards the guitar again.

“Do you require more practice?”

“I wouldn’t mind playing it through once or twice, just to be on the safe side. But I should be good for now. Why?”

He was immediately slightly worried. Sherlock with a plan usually didn’t bode well for him.

“We need to sort out a disguise. You’d get recognised immediately due to your recent media attention if you showed up looking like you usually do. Nobody would believe the undercover bit.”

John winced. He hadn’t thought about getting recognised. Usually, it was Sherlock who got
recognised immediately with John standing on the sidelines and getting ignored.

“If they recognise you, they might realize we’re onto them. Mycroft sent some disguises over, plus we’ll have my own supplies to draw from. Why should start with your hair.”

Sherlock went on without realizing that John was slightly uncomfortable with the suggestion.

A look of horror flashed across John’s face when his hair was mentioned.

“What’s wrong with my hair?”

John ran his right hand through it as if to check it was still there.

“Nothing is wrong with it. But we should dye it.”

Sherlock dug around in the box Mycroft had provided and after examining the bottles closely held up several packs of hair dye to John.

“These will all wash out after a shower or two. Don’t worry, you’ll look yourself again at the palace. Besides, I’ll change my hair too.”

Sherlock did have a point. Between them, they had attracted enough reporters in all the time they’d known each other. John’s Afghanistan story had increased their news coverage drastically. So far, there had been at least one story per day about the incident or related issues since the first story broke on Saturday, and most papers were quoting John’s statement, immediately drawing attention to Sherlock as well.

John peered into the bag to check out the dye. There were all sorts of shades, ranging from dirty blonde to hazelnut and auburn. He swiftly grabbed the hazelnut-coloured one as he found it the least cringe-worthy.

“Will that be enough? Why not the auburn one? Go as far as possible from what you look like now.”

Sherlock questioned John’s choice.

“Brunette will do, thank you.”

Under his breath, John muttered “my gran would have had a field day if she lived to see me being a ginger. Probably would have disinherited me.”

Sherlock just laughed. John shot him a look.

“You didn’t know my Granma Watson. She’s been dead a long time but if you knew the woman, you’d try not to get on her bad side. Trust me, dyeing my hair ginger just for a day would have been enough. And I’d rather not risk her wrath, just in case.”

John had to concede it sounded silly, but his grandmother had harboured certain views towards people with certain hair colours and auburn was very high up on the list.

“I’m sure she was a lovely woman,” Sherlock conceded.

“I just didn’t peg you for being this superstitious.”

“I wasn’t. I just spent a long time believing that if anyone could come back from the dead, it would be Granma Watson just because someone peeved her off enough. But then…” he looked up to Sherlock, all serious now.

“Then you went and proved me wrong. You were dead, I kept asking you to come back, to be alive, and all of a sudden, there you were, breathing and kicking. I’m still not superstitious, but if you can come back, then my gran definitely could, too. You I can deal with. She’s another matter.”

Sherlock sobered immediately. He had been gone for two years dismantling Moriarty’s web and had returned to Baker Street more than three years ago. They both had spent a long time adjusting to each other again but had eventually been able to put it all behind them.

“I’m sorry, John. I didn’t mean to bring that up. I do see your point, though. I’d hate to come across my maternal grandmother again,” Sherlock apologized.

“It’s fine, Sherlock. I’m just going to go and dye my hair now.”

With that, John disappeared in the bathroom.

Sherlock felt like he could slap himself. Why did he have to bring that episode in their lives up again? It was true, he didn’t buy into superstition, but he’d heard what John had said, standing at his supposed grave and asking for a miracle. And here he was, that miracle personified and he had to go and ridicule John’s belief.

Sherlock kept standing outside the bathroom, talking to John.

“I didn’t mean to ridicule you, John. I know that thanks to your belief in the fact that I wasn’t dead I was able to come back at all.”

He was speaking to the door, but knew John had heard him as the water pipes were not yet
John just stood there, in the small bathroom, looking down at the bottle of hair dye. It’d been a while since they had talked about that particular incident. But he could also tell that Sherlock’s apology was sincere and not put on.

Eventually, he could hear Sherlock move away from the door, and John sat down on the toilet lid to study the dye instructions.

Sherlock made his way to his own room, to dig through his box of disguises and to sort a suitable outfit for both of them.

After a minute or two, John’s head appeared in the doorway.

“Erm… look. I didn’t mean to say anything. And I’m glad you’re back and all’s well. But… er… how exactly does this work?”

He waved the bottle of dye around.

Sherlock kept his head turned away for a second, relieved that they’d avoided an argument. Then he had to smirk.

“Considering that you managed to obtain a doctorate, in medicine no less, I assumed that you’d be able to read simple instructions, John…”

“I can read the bloody instructions, Sherlock, but I’ve never dyed my hair before, so a little help would be nice.”

“Fine,” Sherlock whined and followed John into the bathroom to apply the mixture.

Once that was done, Sherlock returned to the disguises while John was letting the formula work.

Forty minutes later, a freshly showered and dark-haired John Watson joined his flatmate in the living room.

“Right, hair’s done. What’s next?”

“A disguise, of course. I have put something upstairs that I think might work, especially given the song you have chosen to perform. It’s on your bed, have a look and tell me what you think. There’re plenty more disguises here that we could utilize should the one I picked not suit our needs.”

John retreated to his bedroom, afraid of what he might find. Having Sherlock Holmes pick out a disguise for going undercover as a rock musician could potentially go wrong. Did Sherlock even know what musicians wore to something other than concert halls? He half feared to find a tux and bow tie.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he opened the door and took in the ensemble Sherlock had laid out for him.

He let out a small appreciative whistle, thinking that this might actually just work. John picked up the clothes and got dressed.
A few minutes later, John called downstairs.

“Right, I’m coming down, you’d better not laugh!”

Sherlock looked up when John stepped into the lounge again. Clad in tight dark blue jeans held up with a brown leather belt, a tight, white t-shirt tucked into the jeans, a brown leather jacket and his brown leather shoes he looked more like Captain John Watson on leave than the jumper-wearing Doctor Watson from London.

Sherlock noticed the outline of John’s dog tags under the t-shirt. He had not put them out, but he appreciated John’s inventiveness. The outfit must have been close to what John used to wear when he was younger, so the dog tags were almost an unconscious addition.

“Excellent! That will do! The dog tags are a nice touch, by the way. Good thinking! That just leaves your hair style and contacts to sort out for tomorrow.”

“My contacts?” John asked slightly startled.

“Yes. What do you prefer? Green or hazel?”

“Green, but I fail to see what that has to do with anything.”

In answer, Sherlock just waved a pack of coloured contact lenses in front of him. John rolled his eyes.

“Ok, you’re sorted. Now I’m going to dye my hair. Probably get recognised if I leave it my natural colour.”

John looked at his flatmate and wondered what colour he had picked. What could you do with dark hair like that? At least John’s blonde hair with grey streaks had been relatively easy to dye.

“Sure, bathroom’s all yours, mate. Need any help?”

“I might… This is going to take a while. I’ll shout should I need assistance.”

As Sherlock disappeared in the bathroom, John went to get changed again so he wouldn’t ruin the new clothes prematurely. After all, he might still stain the white shirt with the hair colour. He remembered a time when a very drunk Harry had tried to convince their parents that her hair had always been pink and that her white shirt came with a pink collar.

Sherlock was really taking his time, and John would have been worried if he hadn’t been able to hear his friend clatter about in the small bathroom.

Deciding that all was well, John put the kettle on for a cuppa. He heard the water in the shower start and stop a few times and was still debating whether to make Sherlock a brew as well when he heard Sherlock behind him say “Me too, please, if you don’t mind.”

John turned around and nearly dropped the tea he had in his hand. He just stood there gaping at Sherlock, who all of a sudden didn’t look much like his flatmate at all.

Gone was the dark mop of curls. It had been replaced with ginger locks and styled in a slightly different way. John had to agree that it somehow suited him, though.

Clearing his throat, he asked “So, ginger? You deliberately went for the auburn one, didn’t you?”

“I might have. I want to test a theory I came up with.”

“And what theory would that be?” John asked as he handed Sherlock his cup.
“Whether sheer association with someone with ginger hair would be enough for your gran to come and haunt you,” Sherlock smirked.

John had to laugh at that and had to agree silently that it probably would be enough, in all honesty.

They passed the rest of the evening quietly. John practiced his songs some more, but with the headphones on, much to Sherlock’s dismay. Mrs. Hudson had made some Lancashire Hotpot, which she brought up for them, and then they sat in amicable silence watching TV.

Sherlock kept looking at John’s hair. It suited him and it would certainly suit the persona the blogger was about to portray. As for his own auburn curls, he suspected there could be worse.

Moreover, auburn was a traditional Holmes family hair colour after all; he was the odd one out, having inherited the dark curls from his mother’s side. He sometimes mused whether John and Lestrade had bothered to look at Mycroft’s hair more closely, as the shade of brunette of his hair sometimes changed.

For the first time since the Afghanistan story broke, John didn’t wake up during the night and Sherlock was more than relieved. If the doctor had a nightmare, it wasn’t bad enough for him to scream, but maybe exhaustion had something to do with it all as well.

John was glad that he didn’t have to be at the clinic the next day. He wanted to avoid being seen in public with his hair the way it was now.

So they both lounged around 221b, playing music and updating their respective websites, until it was time to get ready.

It took them longer than they’d care to admit to get the contact lenses in properly. There was some eye poking involved and several attempts of placing the lenses the right way up and not have them fold over.

There may even have been some crying, but the men made a pact never to divulge who of them had cried at the pain caused by yet another folded lens getting stuck under their eye-lid. They both seemed to have wet eyes, though.

Storming out of the bathroom, Sherlock threw a tin of hair-styling gel at John, before he locked himself in his room to get changed.

John took up his position in front of the mirror and thought he’d give that ‘straight out of bed and late for a lecture’ look another go, the one he’d cultivated a lot during his university days. After all, that had been his style before the crew cut took over.

For once, he was glad that he hadn’t made it to the barber shop yet. In his new, tight-fitting clothes and dark hair colour, he looked at least ten years younger.

While he waited for Sherlock to get dressed, John played his chosen song one more time before he placed his new Fender in the tattered case, grabbed his new jacket and ran his fingers over the cool leather.

He really hoped that he’d be allowed to keep it once the case was closed. It reminded him of a jacket he’d had a long time ago which Harry had taken and never returned to him. Years later he’d found out she’d exchanged his jacket for a bottle of cheap vodka from a homeless guy when she couldn’t afford the paint-thinner they sold as vodka at her local store.

When Sherlock reappeared in the living room, John was speechless. He’d spent the better part of an hour getting ready, making sure that everything was perfect for his stage persona, while Sherlock had only disappeared in his bedroom what seemed like five minutes ago and still he looked impeccable.

The consulting detective was wearing a grey suit and black shirt with the first two buttons undone. His ginger curls were in a slightly tamer mop, and there was what amounted to an actual fringe, with a few strands deliberately styled.

Although he’d had that hair colour for almost a day now, it still looked strange to John to see Sherlock that way. Gone was the tall and dark man of mystery.

In his place, there was a hazel-eyed man who looked strangely warm and approachable in comparison. A bit of stage make-up helped give him a healthy, slightly tanned complexion. John found it slightly unsettling because he knew the real Sherlock underneath the disguise, but he had to hand it to his friend. In terms of blending in with the hip crowd and playing a talent scout for an up and coming independent label, he definitely looked the part.

“Ready?” Sherlock asked and John grabbed his jacket and guitar case, making sure he had a pick in his jeans pocket.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” the soldier replied and followed his friend out onto the pavement.

Lestrade had sent a text with the location where the team would be briefed. They had chosen a busy pub, in which a group of revellers huddling together would not look out of place. It was literally just a stone throw away from The Trainyard and they could always pretend to get a few drinks in before their night out started properly. Getting there by taxi in London evening traffic took the sleuth and his blogger twenty minutes.

Entering the pub, John quickly found the Detective Inspector and casually walked over, giving
him a pat on the shoulder as he joined the small group.

“Evening, everyone. How’s it going?”

Sally Donovan did a double take, giving John an appreciative once over.

“Not bad, Doc!” she said, smiling.

“Whoa! Hi there, John. Nice effort, nearly didn’t recognise ya!” Lestrade grinned.

It was true, though. Here was the soldier, a confident man, looking at least 10 years younger than he actually was. He’d heard about John’s army nickname that alluded to him being somewhat of a Ladies’ Man a long time ago, but now, seeing him standing there and leaning on a tattered guitar case, he could actually believe that there was really some truth behind that particular urban legend.

“Where’s Sherlock?” Greg asked him after a while, looking around. The consulting detective had not joined them at the table yet.

“Right here, Greg!” came Sherlock’s voice from behind him, a second before he pushed his way into the group next to John and handed his friend a glass filled with a dark liquid.

The entire group gawped at the ginger-haired man that had joined their small circle. Lestrade, who had just taken a sip from his drink, nearly spat it back out when he saw the consulting detective.

Clumsily, he put his glass down on the table with a bit more force than absolutely necessary, while John looked at the glass in Sherlock’s hand and accepted it, but shot Sherlock a questioning glance.

“It’s coke. Relax, no alcohol in it, but I thought it’d be better to blend in here.”

“Ta!”

“Holmes?” Sally asked and gawped at him, jaw dropped and wide-eyed, clearly not believing her own eyes.

“Wow, you actually look human!”

“Well done, Sally, why not shout my name out, I think the bartender didn’t quite catch it.” Sherlock hissed and the Sergeant bit her lip.

“Sorry. But, I mean, have you seen yourself?”

Sherlock just rolled his eyes at her.

“She’s got a point there, Sherlock. I’ve known you for ages and you could have walked straight past me looking like that.” Lestrade came to her defence.

“Oh, Lestrade… And here I thought you were one of the competent ones.”

“Cheers,” Lestrade said, before adding “tosser” under his breath.

John had heard him and grinned.

They went through the plan again. John had been added to the list of performers earlier in the day under the name Myles Logans. He had chosen that name deliberately, as an homage to his fallen friend, the man who had taught him how to play the guitar out there in the desert sun.

Sherlock would introduce himself as Chris Hunt, should he get asked. John would go in first, then the Yarders in small groups and pairs, and last Sherlock. He would make it known at the entrance that he was there on behalf of a label. They would all pay particular attention to those checking out the musicians, but Lestrade, Donovan and Sherlock would also try to spot who would be keeping an eye on the talent scouts.

Lestrade’s team members would mingle for a bit but then situate themselves near the exits to block escape routes. Sherlock would approach a couple of performers, including John, and slip them his made-up business card and talk to them a bit, hoping for the suspect to take the bait.

If all went according to plan, Sherlock would play along so that Lestrade and the others could catch the suspect red-handed.

As far as undercover operations went, this one was pretty straightforward and everyone agreed to their assigned roles. During his performance, John would scan the crowd to see whether he could spot accomplices.

Slowly, the team finished their drinks and with one last nod towards them, John got up and turned to leave.

Sherlock grabbed his arm by the elbow to stop him. He fixed his friend with an intense stare and nodded, not saying a word. But John could tell what his friend was saying was “Good luck and be careful.” John grinned and nodded too.

“Good luck!” Sally Donovan called after him.

“I believe the term is ‘break a leg’” John joked, knowing full well that they were wishing him more luck for the mission than his performance, however, unfair that was.
He grabbed his guitar case and made his way through the crowd and out of the pub.

One after the other, Lestrade’s team members left too, always keeping an eye on John. The Detective Inspector and Sherlock were the last to leave, seemingly joking around as they made their way down the street to the club’s entrance.

When John got The Trainyard’s door, the bouncer held him back. He just held up his guitar case.

“Hi there. Myles Logans, I should be on the list.”

The bouncer took a while to check the guest list, reading apparently not one of the strong points he’d got this particular job on. John waited patiently, until the bulk of a man stepped aside and let him inside.

Once indoors, a young female club employee greeted him.

“Hey, hun. You’re one of the performers, right? Come with me, there’s a backstage area where you can all warm-up and so on. Oh, and here…” she handed him a red wristband.

“Wear this and you’ll get free drinks tonight.”

John gladly accepted the wristband and put it on, making sure the ends wouldn’t get in the way later. He followed her through the club that was slowly filling, past the stage and towards the back of the club where the toilets and fire exits were. The staff lounge had been converted into the backstage area for the night, and he wasn’t the first to arrive.

A young man who John estimated to be in his mid-twenties and from somewhere in the Mediterranean, sat on the leather sofa, plucking away at a golden guitar, mouthing the words to a song. Upon seeing the door open, the young man looked up and grinned at John. He stopped playing and got up, extending a hand.

“Hola, I’m Joey, how’s it going?” he greeted as John shook his hand.

“Hey, I’m Myles. Not bad, and yourself?”

John nodded his head towards the guitar.

“Man, that’s a beauty! What are ya gonna play tonight?”

“Cheers, mate. Couldn’t believe my luck when I saw this up for sale! Who in their right mind would want to part with a custom-built Gibson Les Paul, right? I thought I’d play ‘Nightrain’ by Guns ‘n Roses. And you?”

“Layla,” John replied while taking out his own guitar.

“Oh, Clapton. Good choice! And nice guitar to boot!”

“Cheers.”

They both sat there for a while, chatting and warming up, both practicing their chosen songs silently while the club and backstage area slowly filled up.

Joey, it turned out, was from Spain but had decided to work in the UK for a while. He’d always had music in his life and when he’d heard about this open mic night, he’d decided to go for it.

Meanwhile, the Yarders and Sherlock had made it into The Trainyard. Donovan and Anderson were at the bar, pretending to get drinks in while studying the employees of the club.

Sherlock had kept near the entrance, in earshot of the young female who had led John away, as well as the bouncer. He had his phone out and was shouting into it over the noise of the club.

“Mike, I told you, I’m at The Trainyard! You’re the one who sent me here remember? Fresh talent, you said…” he pretended to listen to a rant at the other end.

“Look, I don’t even know whether the acts here are any good. I’ll let you know if I like someone here. This might be a bust, you know open mic nights are hit and miss. You’re the one who took on that god-awful wanna-be pop princess. I suggest that you let me look for someone else and drop her, before the whole label goes under. You’re not the only one with stakes in it…”

He left another pause, fully aware that both the girl and the bouncer had heard him.

“I’ll get back to you later. Now, if you’re quite finished, I’m busy!”

Sherlock dropped his phone into the pocket of his suit jacket, scratched his neck and moseyed over to the far end of the bar, close to the stage.

From there, he had a full view of the stage and the hallway that led towards the fire exits. He leaned back against the bar, sipped on his tonic and scanned the crowd.

The club was an actual, old converted train shed. Most of the floor was now wooden, but they had left a few of the old tracks in for effect. The walls were high and made of dirty red brick, but most of them were now covered in various posters.

There were a couple of seats and low tables along the walls, three officers had grabbed the first few lounge chairs to simultaneously keep an eye on the main entrance and the stage.
Lestrade was standing at the other end of the bar from Sherlock, trying to blend in with the mostly twenty to thirty-something crowd.

The club was slowly filling while some of the in-house technicians were checking the stage set up. Next to a stool, amps and microphones, there was also a drum kit and keyboard. Apparently, a few bands had signed up for the gig as well.

Just past 9pm, the club’s owner, Steve Bartlew, came on stage to introduce the first act of the night, a young woman who had chosen to play the keyboard. As she climbed onto the stage to cheers from the crowd, Sherlock spotted the first talent scout.

The man had a notepad in his hand and was busy scribbling away. A woman, who had a reporter’s pad out, was quickly dismissed as an actual journalist.

Sherlock wandered over to Lestrade to warn him that there was a reporter present, which the Detective Inspector acknowledged with a sour look on his face.

The first few acts were alright, although not many of them showed real talent according to Sherlock. After the second performer, he made his way over to the hallway so he could intercept performers he pretended to be interested in.

He took out his moleskin notebook and took down a few notes, watching his surroundings in his peripheral vision. He’d definitely got attention, and other talent scouts were slowly closing in on him or trying to get to the “talent” before he did.

Steve Bartlew had kept close to the stage, and while the other talent scouts did their best to look as if they’d never been there before, they still glanced in his direction more often than strangers would.

This confirmed Sherlock’s theory that the whole competition was a setup. Lestrade, it seemed, had noticed too.

“CHECK CONNECTIONS OF STEVE BARTLEW TO MUSIC LABELS. –SH”

He’d have to get his brother involved even further, as he simply didn’t have the resources in the club to see whether Bartlew was connected to any label.

About an hour into the evening, it was Joey’s turn to perform. The crowd went wild when he finished. It was the most reaction any of the performers had got all night from the audience, so Sherlock was compelled to approach him too and offer him his business card.

He deduced right away that the young man had been playing since he was a small child and could more than likely play several instruments if his slightly calloused hands and fingertips were anything to go by.

If he was honest, Sherlock was surprised that none of the club employees had approached him yet. His text alert chimed and he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“WELTBAR RECORDS. VARIOUS SISTER COMPANIES HAVE TIES TO ALL CLUBS YOUR VICTIMS WERE FOUND AT. –MH.”

He smirked and leaned against the brick wall where the hallway joined the main room of the club at the stage left end. Another half an hour passed, before Myles Logans was announced as the next performers.

John really didn’t suffer stage fright. Not much, anyway. He’d led men into battle and made it out alive, after all. This should be easy. He took a deep breath to steady himself, as his fellow performers called “break a leg” after him.

He caught Sherlock’s eye for a second as he left the hallway and climbed on stage, Stratocaster in hand. Sherlock blinked once, almost imperceptibly, if you didn’t know the methods of the consulting detective.

As John took his place in the spotlight on stage, several of Scotland Yard’s officers wolf whistled for him and he grinned. The club held around three-hundred people and John had to bite back a laugh. This was child’s play.

He’d performed in front of twice as many soldiers, and that audience had been armed. This here was definitely a situation he could deal with.

He quickly connected his guitar to the amplifier, took another deep breath and began to perform.

And perform he did. Both Sherlock and Greg Lestrade had heard him before, but here, in a crowded club, solo on stage and with just a guitar and microphone for company, John showed his true talent.

Even Anderson had to confess that he was impressed, as John poured all the passion he possessed into the lyrics. He was going for it, as if an actual recording contract was on offer for him.

The female audience members seemed to think that his outfit screamed that there was a bad boy lurking just under the tame surface, and the lyrics to Eric Clapton’s ‘Layla’, especially the line “You got me on my knees, Layla, begging, darling please” helped in that regard as well.

All of a sudden, Greg Lestrade had no problem anymore believing John’s army nickname of
‘Three Continents Watson’ and found himself grinning.

Although the spotlight blinded him a bit, John could still make out most of the crowd, especially the first few rows. He noticed three men in expensive suits who kept looking in Sherlock’s direction and then back to Bartlew.

Unlike some of the other acts that evening, John had genuine talent, and the audience showed its appreciation as soon as John pocketed the pick again. There was applause and whistles and he could see Sally jump up and down excitedly as well. He raised the Fender in a salute and quickly made his way off the stage.

He was immediately intercepted by Sherlock and about ten women aged between twenty and fifty-five. Mumbling his apologies to the ladies, John let Sherlock drag him further into the corridor where they pretended to have an enthusiastic conversation about John joining Chris Hunt’s label.

Sherlock handed over his business card in plain sight of the other so called talents scouts and arranged for John to come down to his recording studio the next day for a demo.

“John, if I’m not back in five minutes, get Lestrade. This is linked to Weltbar Records, somehow. Mycroft hacked into the CCTV, so if he texts you, use any excuse you need to and get to Bartlew’s office.”

They shook hands and John turned towards the lounge, while Sherlock smirked and tried to leave the corridor, but the three heavies in Bartlew’s crew blocked the exit.

“Just what do you think you’re doing, aye?” one of them asked Sherlock.

“I could be wrong, but I don’t think that’s any of your business.” Sherlock replied as they pretty much frog marched him into Bartlew’s office at the end of the corridor.

“Oh, but it is. This is our club, our talent. Did you really think that this was a free-for-all?”

“Well, it is open mic night, so, yeah.”

“Oh, don’t get smart!”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. As if he needed to “get smart”.

“So what? You’re scaring off the competition? Afraid you can’t spot talent unless someone else is interested?”

At that moment, Bartlew joined them.

“You have been trying to lure away the performers all night. Did you really think we’d let you get away with that? Now Mister…”


“Well, Mr. Hunt. You’ve not been in the business long, have you?”

Bartlew took Sherlock’s silence as confirmation as he opened a drawer and got out a wad of cash that Sherlock could tell to be counterfeit at a glance.

“I’m only going to say this once Mr. Hunt. Take this money to compensate for your trouble tonight, leave my musicians alone and never set foot in one of my clubs again.”

“Oh! I get it! Weltbar Records! Clever, using an anagram of your own name, Mr. Bartlew. Making everyone believe Weltbar is an up and coming German label when it’s just a homegrown attempt at taking over London’s music scene.”

Bartlew did a slight double take, but recovered quickly.

“Very good, Mr. Hunt. Not a lot of people make that connection. But you see, nobody comes between me and a record deal.”

John had been waiting by the door of the lounge room, but so far, he hadn’t seen Sherlock. Checking his watch, he decided to text Lestrade to give him a head’s up and get the team in position.

He spotted the girl who had shown him to the backstage area walk down the corridor, carrying what looked like a bottle of champagne. It took him a moment, but then it dawned on him.

Just at that moment, he received a text from Mycroft.

“NOW. –MH” was all it said.

John sprung up and excused himself, mumbling something about needing to call his sister back from somewhere quieter than the lounge.

As soon as he popped his head out the door, Lestrade and Donovan were in motion and together, they made their way to the office at the very end of the corridor, while the other officers covered all exits.
The girl was just coming back out of the office, and John could hear Bartlew say “Thanks, babe. Be a good girl and close the door.”

At the door, they could hear Bartlew more clearly.

“Well, Mr. Hunt. We’ve tried asking you nicely. We even offered you compensation. But you refused. And we can’t risk you going out there, spreading the word about Weltbar and signing my performers to your little hobby label. You see, I have a reputation to maintain, for my business and myself. Then again, my nightclubs are obviously not all registered to Weltbar, now that’d be foolish.”

“Yes, but dropping murder victims in your own dumpsters is not exactly clever, now, is it? Sooner or later the Metropolitan Police would come to the conclusion that you’re involved.”

Bartlew stood back and nodded at his heavies. One grabbed the bottle and raised it, ready to swing it into Sherlock’s face while another grabbed Sherlock to pin him to his chair when the door burst open.

“Freeze! Police! You’re under arrest!” Lestrade shouted and raised his gun, as did Donovan.

The man holding the bottle let it drop, but surprisingly, it did not shatter. In fact, it did not behave like a glass bottle at all. It gave a metallic clang when it hit the ground and rolled under the desk.

Before the other guy had a chance to react, John had him pinned against the wall, waiting for Lestrade’s back up.

“You took your time,” was all Sherlock said.

“Yeah, well, you know how it is,” was Lestrade’s reply.

Bartlew was absolutely fuming once he realized that he’d been set up. Sergeant Donovan read him and his accomplices their rights as she led them away, under arrest for three murders and attempted murder. The other officers were quick to bag and tag the bottle after Sherlock pointed out that it was the murder weapon. A heavy, metal bat disguised as a champagne bottle. It wouldn’t have been out of place at any of the clubs or the office of a producer. Nobody would have questioned it.

On the way back down the corridor, John dashed into the lounge to get his guitar. He wished everyone luck despite the club’s owner just having been arrested. The contest continued, though, but he didn’t have the heart to tell them there wasn’t a recording contract up for grabs anymore. He’d heard most of them, though, and Sherlock had spoken to a few of them, so maybe the Holmes brothers could use their connections to get at least Joey noticed.

They had almost reached the end of the bar, just around the corner from the main entrance, when a band took the stage.

“Good evening, London! We are The Agreement, and this song is for my brother, Lieutenant Martin Fields”, the lead singer announced.

John stopped dead in his tracks mid-step and Sherlock nearly bumped into him as he spun around on his heels at the mention of the name.

[1] Inspired by The Brickyard, Carlisle  
[2] Montague Street was ACD Sherlock’s home before he moved to Baker Street  
Chapter Summary

Scrabble means that someone cares.

The song lyrics are NOT MINE, full copyright disclosure in the end notes!! No infringement intended. All lyrics marked in italics to note that this does not belong to me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scrabble in Afghanistan

John just stared at the band while Sherlock stared at John.

“You know that name.”

It wasn’t even a question, just the statement of a fact. John answered without ever taking his eyes off the stage.

“Yeah… In the video… Remember the face of the first guy who went down?”

Sherlock saw the scene play out again before his mind’s eye, saw the face of the soldier who dropped to the ground.

“Yes.”

“That… was Lieutenant Martin Fields.”

“Oh.”

Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade had made sure that the suspects had been taken into custody and left Sergeant Sally Donovan as the arresting officer to get them down to New Scotland Yard.

He turned back around to head back inside when he realized that Sherlock and John hadn’t followed them out. Greg found the two of them standing near the bar, both seemingly fascinated by the band that had taken the stage.

“Before we start, I’d just like to say a few words. You guys have probably read the stories about Afghanistan this week. The thing is, my brother Martin was one of those soldiers who had been held prisoner there. He got shot and he is home now and on Saturday, he will be awarded the Military Cross!”

There were cheers all around. Greg approached his two friends quietly, now that he knew why John stood there as if frozen in place. He joined them quietly, unconsciously placing himself so that John would be between him and Sherlock.

“I’ve never met the man, but my brother assures me that Captain Watson, who most of the articles this week have been about, saved his life, and I hope I’ll get the chance one day to thank him for it. While Martin was over there, we kept playing Scrabble together online, whenever we could. So when he’d been taken prisoner and we didn’t know what had happened to him, we worried. I hope this song gives you an idea of what it’s like to have a family member in our Armed Forces.”

John turned to look at Sherlock when his name was mentioned. He also acknowledged Greg, who had put a hand on John’s shoulder. John tried to look casual, to blend back in, burying his hands in his front pockets and hooking his thumbs through his belt loops.

On stage, The Agreement started to sing. It was quite a catchy number, to give them credit, and the lead singer, who also played lead guitar, clearly knew what he was doing.

“All day you cleared the mountain roads through towns where you were hated. Crouching at night in a laptop’s glow where our game of words awaited…”

John was listening intently to the lyrics, nodding slightly at the mention of online words games.

“…your war not like they’d told you. You whispered tales of sand and pain…”

Sherlock noticed that the look on John’s expressive face got sadder and sadder, but his friend kept looking straight ahead. Greg wasn’t even sure whether John still saw the Trainyard, or whether he saw tiny moments from Afghanistan as they were mentioned in the song.
“Eight thousand miles stretched between us, a space from peace to wretched war. I had something I wanted to do here you said. Do you remember what it was?”

John let out a shaky sigh. Since he got back home and had his purpose taken from him, he’d often wondered what he’d done out there in the first place.

“... With words like cameo and carry. But the words got short, like coin and sin, the more friends you had to bury. You asked if I could send you soap; No smell, you said, I might get lost out there. I used words like food and home and hope...” the singer continued before he started the refrain again.

John’s already shaky breath caught. It was barely audible over the song, but both Sherlock and Greg turned towards their friend, concerned for him.

John kept staring ahead, by now clearly not seeing a London nightclub anymore. His cheeks were damp, and both detectives saw the lights shimmering on them, but they weren’t sure whether John even noticed.

“Two weeks since you hit the mountain pass and I’ve had no letters, no words...” the singer continued.

“...dreamed you’re gone or lost or hurt...”

John’s shoulders were shaking now, the surrounding hustle and bustle of the nightclub drowning out his quiet sobs.

“It’s about us... it’s really about us... taken hostage...” he whispered as the lyrics registered with him.

Sherlock looked over at Lestrade and then copied the DI’s gesture, placing a hand on John’s other shoulder to ground his friend in London and the here and now and not the horrors he’d been through over there.

“So I’m left with just these useless words for Scrabble in Afghanistan...”

Despite the memories the song brought up again, John made sure he stayed and listened to the end. His mind supplied images of Lieutenant Martin Fields, one of his own Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers and what a good laugh he’d been around Camp Bastion.

John remembered how conscientious he’d been out in the field and then the video footage superimposed itself and showed John again how Fields had been the first one down at the compound.

When the song finished, everyone in the room was applauding, including Sherlock, John and Lestrade, although John kept his head bowed low, too many emotions fighting for dominance at the same time.

The soldier rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and then pinched the bridge of his nose, trying, and failing, to shake the sadness off and appear composed. He looked from Greg to Sherlock, clearly not feeling comfortable with yet another emotional display.

“Sorry. I’m good, I’m good. Um... Sherlock, I can’t make myself known here in front of them. What with this having been an undercover operation and all. Plus I know there’s at least one reporter out there because she tried to get backstage... I mean, there’s a good chance Martin’s brother will be at... what’s the place? Rickerby? Rickerby? Hall... on Saturday... Could you please make sure he’s coming? I’d really appreciate it.”

“Rickerby Hall,” Sherlock corrected automatically.

“Sure, I’ll go check.”

“Thanks.”

John rubbed the back of his neck. Greg grabbed the guitar case before it could fall to the ground when John suddenly let go of it, seemingly having forgotten he was still holding on to it.

“Here, I’ll get that. Let’s just wait here for Sherlock and then I’ll drop you two back at Baker Street, alright?”

“Yeah, cheers, mate.”

“No worries, John. That’s what friends are for, right?”

Greg tried to be jovial about it, but all it did was make John more depressed.

“Yeah, I guess so. I’m glad that Martin had someone at home who cared this much...” he trailed off.

Sherlock joined them again a minute later, confirming the singer would be attending the ceremony. He fixed his x-ray stare in John, but whatever he deduced, he kept his mouth shut for once.

“Let’s go home,” was all Sherlock said. John nodded in agreement and Greg shouldered the guitar case and followed them outside.
Not even Sherlock objected to being driven home in a panda car instead of a cab, and John looked like he couldn’t care less how he got home as long as he did make it back to 221b.

They rode in silence, neither detective sure of what to say to cheer John up and John too deep in thought to start the conversation.

Once they got back to Baker Street, John collapsed with an air of finality into his armchair, unwilling to move again.

Greg wasn’t sure whether Sherlock could be sensible enough to help John through whatever it was that bothered him, as he had never witnessed a nightmare night at Baker Street. Therefore, Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade of New Scotland Yard made an executive decision: he would order pizzas and keep John company.

Greg disappeared in the bathroom for a second and Sherlock, who had taken a seat in his own armchair opposite John, looked at his flatmate.

“Lestrade’s thinking about getting takeaway for us and staying here for a while. So if you want to be alone or rather, not want Lestrade here, now would be your chance to say so.”

John looked up startled.

“Greg’s still here?”

He looked around but couldn’t see him.

“Bathroom,” Sherlock supplied.

“He can stay… if you don’t mind, that is. Could do with some company,” John confessed.

A couple of minutes later, with their pizza order on the way, the three men settled down in the living room. Greg looked at John and then shot Sherlock a questioning glance, which the consulting detective returned with a shrug of his shoulders.

The silence stretched on, but in the end, it was Greg who broke it. He cleared his throat, which sounded way too loud in the confines of the quiet living room.

“Are you alright, John?”

Granted, the question was not very original and he could clearly see that the doctor was not alright, but he had to make a start somewhere, so he went with ‘awkward’.

John sighed.

“Yeah… No… I don’t know anymore. That song… there was so much truth in it, more than you probably realize. The guy it was about was on my team.”

“Okay. And I guess the bit about having gone incommunicado was about when you were taken and held prisoner,” Greg prodded.

“Yes.”

“Back at the club, you said you were glad that he had such a support system at home.” Sherlock joined in. “Which suggests that you didn’t.”

He looked at John, who had winced slightly.

“Oh, of course! Your last words! Well, what you thought were your last words! Lestrade, you’ve heard them before as well. ‘Please, God, let me live.’ You didn’t ask that someone should tell your girlfriend, parents or sister, how much they meant to you…..”

Sherlock fell silent when he realized that even when he had to fake his own death, he’d called John to say goodbye.

If even he had known immediately who to call, how alone must John have felt to have no names come to mind at all?

“Online Scrabble, or any online games, really, with family and friends back home are quite important pastimes, when you’re out there. It helps you to stay focused, to not lose touch with reality. Yeah, it makes you homesick, but it also gives you something to look forward to. Something you fight for, to get back home in one piece. More or less…”

John had his stare fixed on his feet and the carpet just around them, not daring to look up.

Sherlock’s expression immediately softened.

“You honestly believe that nobody would have cared, don’t you?” he asked his best friend, quietly.

Greg looked over to John, understanding finally dawning on him.

“Well, mum wrote every now and then. Just the most random things about her friend’s garden and the weather over here, never anything really interesting. Harry wrote every two months or so at first. But then mum died while I was still out there and by the time I got the message, it was too late to attend the funeral. That’s when Harry really let herself go. The only messages I’d get from
her were rants and accusations. Eventually, I stopped reading them and deleted them straight away. Clara, her ex-wife, tried to smooth things over for a while, but even she gave up eventually."

Before John could continue, the doorbell buzzed, and Greg ran downstairs to collect the pizzas. He was suddenly glad for the small distraction, thinking the food might actually help John.

Both Greg and John offered Sherlock a slice of their pizzas, which the sleuth declined. John made his way through a quarter of his meal before he continued.

“I mean, of course, I had friends from university and school, and some from the academy and the occasional girlfriend here and there. But they’d only write once in a blue moon. The girls especially. They’d write every day for about two weeks, until they realized that I was out there for the long haul and they simply forgot about me. My army mates were deployed themselves, stuck in a place just as bleak and dangerous and in a way, it’s the last thing you want to hear about. The occasional game of Scrabble, with someone who actually cared whether I made it back home alive or not, would have been nice. I guess it’s something every soldier wants. Knowing that you put your life on the line to protect something or someone; you are out there so that your loved ones are safe. It should matter.”

Sherlock got up to get a glass of water for John from the kitchen, quickly squeezing John’s shoulder in passing.

“Well, I can see how that song, beautiful as it was, can have that effect. I guess I never truly realized,” Greg said.

John let out a huff that nearly sounded like a laugh.

“They actually got it spot on, you know? There was a bit in it about soap. God, you miss scented soap out there. There’s just dust around you and then some more dust. After a while, it all kind of smells the same. It all becomes sort of bland… It’s… it sometimes feels like there are no beautiful things left, if you know what I mean.”

Greg couldn’t even imagine what it’d be like if everything smelled the same, day in and day out. He didn’t know what to say to John.

Sherlock returned with a glass of water for John and handed it to his friend.

“Your sister didn’t care, did she?” he asked softly.

John merely shook his head.

“No, not particularly. I had asked her to send a few tiny things, silly things, really, and my favourite books, but nothing ever arrived. And then I got shot and fell into a coma. I woke up on a Wednesday. Later I found out that Harry would have just pulled the plug on me if I hadn’t woken up by Friday night, even though they had explained my situation to her.”

Greg inhaled sharply.

“Man, that’s harsh. Your sister sounds like a right piece of work!”

John actually chuckled, albeit sadly.

“Yeah. She has her moments. Now that she’s off the booze she understands but back then… it was harsh. Why do you think I moved in with Sherlock instead of going to my sister for help? I trusted a complete stranger more than her. But the worst thing is, even after I got back home, nobody kept in contact. I only ran into my mate Mike by sheer coincidence and he introduced me to Sherlock. It’s just… it’s pretty sobering knowing that nobody is even going to miss you.”

John had discarded the pizza box on the small side table, staring at it and tracing its outline rather than look at his two friends currently in the room with him.

“John, I wish I could change the past, I really do, mate. But you should know that you now have a lot of people who care. Hell, you saw how many people care about Sherlock during… you know… that time… And he called himself a sociopath…”

“Still am one, Lestrade. And it’s high-functioning sociopath, if you please,” Sherlock interjected.

“Right, thanks, Holmes, moving on. What I’m trying to say is, you have so many people who would care about you, who would miss you, John. There’s Sherlock, Mrs. Hudson, me, Molly, most of my team, your colleagues at the clinic… the list goes on and on. And if you need further convincing, I’ll send you a Words with Friends invite as soon as I get home.”

He grinned sheepishly, but he meant it.

In all the time Greg had known John Watson, he’d never met a person who didn’t like the doctor. That he’d gone off to war and not even his family had cared whether he ever came home made him sick to his stomach.

“Tell you what. I’ll send invites to both of you. The three of us, and one endless game of Scrabble that I am sure to lose. I won’t even stand a chance against a doctor and a genius. But if that’s what it takes to convince you that you have friends and that you matter to us a great deal, then so be it!”

Greg got up and wandered over into the kitchen, where he picked up another two glasses of water. He kept one for himself, while he handed the other to Sherlock.
“To Scrabble and friends!” he exclaimed and raised his glass.

“Hear, hear,” John joined in.

Sherlock remained quiet but raised his glass all the same.

Eventually, the conversation turned to lighter topics and John seemed to relax more and more. He’d kicked off his shoes, and wiggled his toes and settled in properly, chatting about football scores and cold cases.

John caught himself rubbing his eyes and everything turned green. Only then did he realize that they were still wearing their coloured contact lenses, which both of them took longer to remove than they cared to admit, much to the amusement of Lestrade.

Sherlock had secretly given in and stolen the last few pieces of their pizzas, which Greg only noticed when he opened his box again to suddenly find it empty.

The DI had frowned, clearly confused and in the belief that he’d had two pieces left over. It was that, that finally brought the smile back to John Watson’s face.

It was early morning when Greg finally excused himself and left Baker Street. By then, he and John had agreed to try to meet up once a week for a pint somewhere. Because Sherlock had no interest in talking about such common things as films and rugby, he’d declined the invitation that had been extended to him, knowing it would do John some good to talk to other people every once in a while.

Sherlock closed the door and saw John sitting in his armchair half-asleep. He didn’t even try to wake him up again, just took the throw and covered John with it, before he flopped himself down on the sofa.

Sherlock was asleep within minutes.


© Jamie Freeman (melody) and Amy Tudor (lyrics). See appendix for full lyrics.

Chapter End Notes

The song is actually called “Scrabble in Afghanistan”. It’s by The Jamie Freeman Agreement, and yes, that’s Freeman as in Martin Freeman’s older brother. I therefore needed a soldier with the initials M.F. :)

The song was written by Jamie Freeman and Amy Tudor. It has not been released as a single (yet) but you can listen to it and download it on iTunes, it’s on the album “100 Miles From Town” by The Jamie Freeman Agreement.

https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/100-miles-from-town/id763511345

I came across it, and I love this song. It actually gave me goosebumps, because of this story.

For info on the lyrics and who it is actually about, see www.jamiefreeman.co.uk

All day you cleared the mountain roads,
through towns where you were hated.
Crouching at night in a laptop’s glow,
where our game of words awaited.
You said the screen time kept you sane,
your war not like they’d told you.
You whispered tales of sand and pain,
And all the time I had I gave you.

Eight thousand miles stretch between us,
a space from peace to wretched war.
“I had something I wanted to do here”, you say.
Do you remember what it was?

At first you played our game for points,
With words like “cameo” and “carry”.
But the words got short, like “coin” and “sin”,
the more friends you had to bury.
You asked if I could send you soap;
“No smell”, you said, “I might get lost out there”.
I used words like “food” and “home” and “hope,”
you put “welt” and “rust” and “wear”.

Eight thousand miles stretch between us,
a space from peace to wretched war.
“I had something I wanted to do here”, you say.
Do you remember what it was?

Two weeks since you hit the mountain pass,
and I’ve had no letters, no words.
I’ve walked in fear as thick as glass,
dreamed you’re gone or lost or hurt.
There in your stone, your endless night,
plodder through sand and searing light.
Dust off, return, unleash your pain!
Find your words and question me again!

Eight thousand miles stretch between us,
a space from peace to wretched war.
“I had something I wanted to do here”, you say.
Do you remember what it was?

There’s nothing I can say my friend,
to make this easier to stand.
So I’m left with just these useless words
for Scrabble in Afghanistan.

Eight thousand miles stretch between us,
a space from peace to wretched war.
“I had something I wanted to do here”, you say.
Do you remember?
Can you tell me what it was?

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Reflections

Chapter Summary

John thinks back about Afghanistan and why he had worded his will the way he had.

Chapter Notes

Real life got in the way a bit, but to say sorry, I've written the longest chapter yet.
In no way am I endorsing alcohol abuse, but I hope to explain Harry's decisions a bit
and explain the strained relationship between the Watson siblings.

Reflections

Sherlock woke to the soft noise of John whimpering in his sleep. It didn’t sound like one of his agonizing nightmares, but John was clearly distressed and Sherlock had a slight suspicion that the way his family and so-called friends had treated him while he had been deployed might be to blame for John’s current predicament.

He peeled himself off the leather couch and quietly walked over to the red armchair, in which a certain doctor and ex-soldier was currently sleeping.

John’s years in the military had made him a pretty light sleeper, and once asleep, he barely moved unless he was in the throes of another flashback.

Sherlock knew that John usually slept on his right side, stretched out rigid and ramrod straight, by the way John would move around stiffly first thing in the mornings. He never said so, but Sherlock could tell by John’s gait that his leg still bothered him from time to time and on cold nights and mornings, John’s injured shoulder would seize up.

During his sleep, John had somehow managed to kick the old blanket loose as it was only covering one of his legs now with both feet bare and exposed to the morning chill in 221b.

Careful as not to wake John from the first almost decent night of sleep he’s had in over a week, Sherlock rearranged the blanket, tugging it around John, covering his legs, arms and shoulders again so his limbs wouldn’t be stiff with cold on top of the crick he’d surely have in his neck once he woke up.

It was Sherlock’s way of making sure his friend was safe and looked after and now that he knew how those who should have been closest to him had treated John, he swore to himself to show John more often how much their friendship meant to him. It certainly explained why John always seemed so grateful for the smallest gestures, even when it just meant labelling the poisonous items in the fridge or leaving one mug clean for him to make tea.

While Sherlock rearranged the blanket, John didn’t even so much as stir. The sun was just rising, giving London that early morning golden glow that Sherlock sometimes stayed up for deliberately, just so he wouldn’t miss it.

He lifted his beautiful Stradivarius out of the case and wandered over to the tall window, looking out into London as the city was starting to wake up on a lazy Sunday morning.

Sherlock lifted his violin to his chin, the wounds on his shoulder no longer smarting. He was relieved that he could play again and lunged straight into one of his own compositions he’d come to think of as ‘Sunrise Symphony.’ Obviously, he would never call it that out loud, but that didn’t change the fact that he had written it while watching a similar sunrise years ago.

As soon as the soft music filled the air of their apartment on Baker Street, John’s quiet sobbing subsided. He slowly relaxed even deeper into his favourite armchair, sighing deeply as he started another dream cycle.

Sherlock could hear the slight change in John’s breathing pattern and smiled. Over the years he’d found out which melodies worked best at lulling John to sleep or making him relax after a nightmare and Sherlock, standing at the window and looking out at London basking in the early morning sun, had something that almost amounted to an epiphany. If his plan worked, he might help John with his sleepless nights in the long run.

John woke up two hours later, the most relaxed he’d felt in a week. He frowned when he found himself tangled up in a blanket, but then smiled contentedly when he realized Sherlock must have thrown it over him in his sleep.

The lanky detective was still at the window, eyes closed to the world, completely lost in his music,
swaying along with the soft melody. John loved quiet mornings like this. Now that he was a
civilian again and not on constant alert, he liked to indulge by staying wrapped up nice and warm
longer than absolutely necessary every once in a while.

He’d long since realized what a calming quality Sherlock’s violin play had on his frayed nerves.
Sunlight was filtering through the curtains, basking 221b in a column of warm light, the edge of
which was slowly warming up John’s toes.

Reluctantly, John got up to use the bathroom, leaving his tiny cocoon of warmth behind. Once in
the bathroom, he looked at himself in the mirror. He looked a mess. Dry streaks of tears ran all
across his face, his hair stood in all directions, held up by the gel he had put in it the previous
night. And it was still the wrong colour.

John soon found out that the hair dye manufacturers had lied. Instead of it taking only two
showers for the colour to wash out again, John needed to lather up eight times before his natural
blonde and grey was visible again.

Feeling refreshed and more like himself again, he quickly got dressed and vacated the bathroom,
as Sherlock would no doubt have to spend some time as well to get his own hair back to normal.

John went straight to the kettle, as was his morning ritual. On auto-pilot, he made a cup of tea for
Sherlock too, who was still playing his violin in the living room.

He placed the mug on the desk next to the consulting detective and then went back to the kitchen
to start on breakfast. He needn’t have bothered, though, as Mrs. Hudson soon appeared on their
doorstep.

“Good morning, boys,” she greeted them cheerfully.

Seeing John run around the kitchen in search of useable pots and pans, she stepped in.

“John, don’t you worry about breakfast, dear. I just wanted to check that you are up and decent
because I could hear you move about. I have made a Full English breakfast for you and some
scones for Sherlock. Be a dear and help me carry them upstairs?”

In moments like these John absolutely loved Mrs. Hudson, maybe even more than he’d ever loved
his own mother. And there was no question that even Sherlock absolutely adored her to bits.

“Mrs. Hudson, you’re a lifesaver, you know that?” John asked and gave her a hug.

“I may have been told that, once or twice,” she chuckled and led the way downstairs while John
fixed Sherlock with a quick stare, then pointed to the kitchen.

He held up three fingers, pointed at Sherlock and the kitchen again and then followed Mrs.
Hudson to her flat.

Minutes later, they were all seated around the desk in 221b, with John and their landlady tucking
into a full plate of breakfast, while Sherlock was munching a scone, sipping one of the
three teas he’d made. Mrs. Hudson had gone all out and made scrambled eggs, bacon rashers,
sausages, mushrooms, hash browns, baked beans and even grilled tomato, and served it all with
toast and fried egg. To John, this was utter bliss and she knew it was his favourite, just the way he
liked it.

“To what do we owe a feast like this, Mrs. Hudson?” John enquired between mouthfuls.

“Do I need a reason to want to have Sunday breakfast with my boys? Besides, I saw you running
yourself ragged all week. All that media attention on you and now that case, I figured you might
not have made it to the shops yet.”

John hummed in agreement around another bite. He looked at Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson and
remembered the conversation he had had with Sherlock and Greg the previous night.

He knew that those two would miss him, and it meant everything to him that they would both be
with him when he would receive his Victoria Cross.

John had invited his sister more of family obligation than an actual desire to have her there. No,
the people who counted the most were currently sitting around him in his living room. The three
of them formed their own little sort of Baker Street family and John would not have it any other
way.

Mrs. Hudson was the caring and loving mother neither of the two men had had when they were
growing up and Mrs. Hudson treated both of them like they were her own flesh and blood, dotting
on them whenever she could.

With the realization that friends are the family you chose for yourself, John grinned, which caused
Sherlock to look at him quizzically, with one imperious eyebrow raised high.

“Care to share, John?”

“Hmm? Oh, no, sorry, lost in thoughts, I’m afraid”, John chuckled as he realized how that must
have sounded to Sherlock.

He pulled Mrs. Hudson into a sideways hug, bumping their shoulders together.

“I’m just really happy, actually.”
He grinned, first at the landlady who insisted she wasn’t their housekeeper but looked after the flat after all, and then at Sherlock.

“Oh I’m glad, dear,” Mrs. Hudson said as she squeezed back.

They chatted about this and that, each ending up with one cup of tea and one cup of coffee. Mrs. Hudson told them all about how Mycroft’s lovely assistant had come over and taken her dress shopping.

“She’s such a lovely girl, that Anthea. Your brother should really get a move on, you know, she’s not going to wait for him forever!”

Sherlock's only reaction was a knowing smirk, while John nearly spat out his coffee at the mental image of Mycroft and Anthea in a relationship together.

“Oh, don’t be so surprised, John,” Sherlock chuckled.

“You didn’t believe all that ‘assistant’ nonsense, did you?”

John grumbled a reply that sounded suspiciously like ‘well, yeah.’

“Anthea took me to all sorts of shops, said I needed two dresses. I mean I know I needed one, but two seemed a bit much. Plus a fascinator for each dress! I told her I still had one from my niece’s wedding, but she wouldn’t have any of it, bless her,” Mrs. Hudson carried on.

The mention of the formal dress reminded John that he would have another appointment with the tailor for his own uniform soon. He wondered how Harriet had got on, knowing that Mycroft had promised to take care of her dress as well.

It was almost lunchtime when Mrs. Hudson went back downstairs and Sherlock disappeared into the bathroom to get his hair back to normal.

In the time Sherlock needed to turn his hair from ginger back to his natural dark brown, John just sat in the living room watching TV and enjoying the first peace and quiet in a long time.

When he checked his emails after a while, he saw that Lestrade had kept his word. There was one invitation for a game of Words with Friends waiting for him in his inbox.

John fixed himself another tea and mused about the song from the night before. It was true that he had been lonely. His army nickname had more been the result of John’s failed attempts at trying to find someone who cared about him rather than deliberate one night stands. A lot of those encounters ended up that way, and he really didn’t mind all that much, but every time, he hoped it would last a bit longer than the last one.

He told everyone it was because he could be cocky and stubborn that he volunteered and was chosen for dangerous operations. However, that wasn’t entirely true. When it became apparent to him that nobody at home really cared anymore, John deliberately signed up for dangerous missions. Even if nobody cared whether he died, he could at least make sure he died while doing something worthwhile, maybe even saving a life.

After he had been invalided and returned to London, he’d stayed with his sister for three days until he first found a cheap hotel and then the bedsit provided by the Ministry of Defence. Harry was still on the booze back then.

When he left, she gave him her phone to stay in touch and that was it. And he only got the phone because she wanted to be rid of it and he needed one.

They’d never really got along, not even as kids. Whatever he did, he could be sure that Harriet was tattling on him. She was the older sibling, and whenever something ended up broken in the Watson household, she was sure to blame John for it, whether he'd actually broken it or not. This had resulted in quite a few undeserved smacks off his father for John.

His father had died when John was twenty-nine, his mother had died when he was thirty-five. Harriet had always liked liquor, but she really started to drink once their dad had passed away. When John was unable to attend their mother’s funeral due to his deployment, Harry lost it completely, nearly drank herself into a coma.

In her drunken stupor, she’d blamed him for their mother’s death, because she’d died of cancer and when John had spotted the signs and urged her to see her doctor when he’d come home on leave, it was almost too late. The cancer had spread rapidly and there was nothing John could have done to help. Harry kept saying that if he hadn’t run off to play hero, their mum would still be alive.

She also resented him, because he’d had to leave her to deal with all the legal and financial troubles surrounding the funeral and subsequent adherence to Mrs. Watson’s last will and testament.

But Harry already had Clara back then, they were already in a civil partnership, and John had been sure that she had the support she needed.

He had made his own will shortly before he was deployed with the Royal Army Medical Corps, and then updated it once he passed out of Sandhurst as a combat soldier. As a doctor and a soldier, he knew what was at stake and that out there, every day could be his last.
He had decided long ago, that he wouldn’t want to waste away hooked up to machines somehow. That’s the one thing he was sure of: he didn’t want to live on in a permanent, vegetative state.

Therefore, he had specified certain numbers, levels and measurements, with the clear instruction to keep him alive until his condition had deteriorated and been below those specified levels for at least forty-eight hours. Then, and only then, could the machines be turned off, because he knew that his chances of survival and regaining his full mental capacities, let alone being able to lead an independent life, would be less than ten percent.

After he had been shot, John had fallen into a coma while his body battled the enteric fever and sepsis. It didn’t look good, but lucky for him he never got anywhere near the levels he had specified.

His doctors had tried to explain to Harriet that it’d be best for him to wake up on his own accord and they had explained his will to her.

She was barely in her right mind at the time. She’d got drunk before she spoke to the doctors, who told her about John’s condition and that he had this specific clause in his will.

They stressed that he was doing well, considering, and to give him time to wake up on his own.

What she had taken away from it was that her brother is in critical condition and that his will asks to end his life should he end up hooked up to machines.

She’d never been as relieved as when she got the call on a Wednesday night that John had woken up and was lucid for the time being.

His doctors told her that he would be flown home as soon as his condition allowed and that he would need to recuperate – they had actually used the word ‘convalesce’ but she hadn’t understood its meaning – in England.

Then John was back, and she’d visited him in hospital and had him staying with her for a few days. They talked, at length, and when Harry realized that she had very nearly killed her little brother by pulling the plug when she shouldn’t have, she threw up, disgusted by her own actions.

She promised John to stop drinking. To make a point, she never finished the bottle of beer that she’d been nursing that night. She just got up and poured it down the sink in front of him. John took his time, explaining his will in detail. Then he moved out of her house.

Since then, John has updated his will three more times; the only thing he changed was the name of the person he trusted with this decision and act as his medical proxy in case he couldn’t make a decision himself.

After moving to Baker Street, John had written down the name Sherlock Holmes. He trusted Sherlock and that he would understand the medical jargon and diagnosis, as well as the levels he’d specified to make an informed decision.

When Sherlock had faked his death and left John to mourn, the doctor had once again reverted to Harriet due to her being his only next of kin.

However, since Sherlock’s return, the consulting detective was the person named again. Sherlock was proud that John trusted him that much because nobody had ever trusted him, literally, with his or her life before. Therefore, Sherlock changed his own will, too, much to the annoyance of Mycroft.

Mycroft could still make decisions and get all the information, but John Watson should make any medical decision and John could veto any changes Mycroft wanted to make in treatment or location if they impeded on Sherlock’s recovery. All in all, Sherlock felt quite smug about the arrangement.

John was still lost in thought, just staring straight into the unlit fireplace, when Sherlock flopped down next to him and placed another two cups of tea, as well as his feet, on the coffee table. Clearly startled, John nearly jumped out of his skin, let alone his seat.

Sherlock was dressed in another suit, as usual, and his hair was still damp, but it was back to his dark hair colour. Only against the sunlight coming in through the tall windows could John still detect the faintest reddish glow on the mop of curls.

John enjoyed the peace and quiet, having recovered from his adrenaline crash the night before. The two of them were no strangers to adrenaline, danger and the resultant euphoria. They both prized it. However, they also knew that once that adrenaline induced high was wearing off, they’d crash and burn until they’d be ready to return to normal and face the next challenge.

John had experienced such a high the previous night. Nerves, which he adamantly denied having been stage fright, the thrill of the chase, the danger… all in all, he’d had a brilliant night. Until the song about Afghanistan brought him back to desert sands and desperation. His euphoria had come to a screeching halt in the blink of an eye and he’d felt like he’d hit a wall while moving at lightning speed.

Sleep and tea were his usual remedies, as well as Sherlock’s soothing violin music. Sherlock preferred to sulk on the couch and not move a muscle.

John was glad for the respite. It was Sunday, the case was closed and for a little while he had
nothing to worry about. He tried to keep his thoughts away from his past. He knew he could move on, would eventually be able to let it rest again, to let the past be in the past and move forward.

But he also knew that it would take a while. For the time being, he appreciated being home, being safe and having good company.

John knew that Lestrade had been right. There were people out there now who cared about him. He wasn’t alone anymore. He let out a sigh and got up to refill his tea.

They spent the day in amicable silence, John reading a book and Sherlock composing. It was the first breather for both of them, after all.

John went to bed early, citing lack of sleep and an early morning shift at the surgery as his reasons for the nine o’clock retreat.

Sherlock could see right through the rouse, though. He knew that John was trying to get at least a few hours of undisrupted sleep either side of the inevitable nightmare. They’d both been quiet the entire day, and Sherlock wondered whether he should have checked more often whether John was alright rather than sorting through his Mind Palace and the ever-expanding room in it that contained all the data surrounding a certain army doctor.

Just because he hadn’t woken up screaming the night before did not mean that John’s nightmares were retreating. In fact, Sherlock suspected emotional exhaustion behind John’s somewhat restful sleep the night before.

So Sherlock refilled the thermos, got the cups ready and continued to play his nightmare-soothing medley that had the most effect on John’s sleep and dreams.

A scream from the upstairs bedroom brought Sherlock’s mind back to the present. He checked his watch and was glad to see that it had gone one in the morning. John had had almost four consecutive hours of sleep, which was more than he’d had in more than a week. Soon enough, John’s slightly uneven footsteps could be heard on the wooden staircase.

“I’m okay… I’m fine…,” John mumbled as he entered the living room and dropped down onto the sofa.

He pulled the thermos and mugs towards himself, and filled them. Sherlock acknowledged his presence in the room with a quick turn towards him while he kept playing the violin.

When the song came to an end, he sat down next to John, who wordlessly handed over the tea.

“At least I got some sleep, I guess,” John sighed before he took a sip of his brew, the warmth spreading through him immediately as he pushed himself further into the cushions.

“Are they… you know… any less intense?” Sherlock asked without looking at John.

“Well… Kind of. It’s different things on different nights, sometimes a single event but at other times I feel my mind is trying to show me a ‘Best Of’ of all the moments I’d rather not remember. Like my mind is saying: ‘Oh you think that was bad? Here, you completely forgot about this, didn’t you?’ To be fair, this past week has been challenging to say the least, and I’m not sure whether the coming week will be much better…”

“I think you’re doing remarkably well, John. And you know I’m your friend… you know, in case you want to… emm… talk. At any time.”

Sherlock was still not used to this whole sentiment and caring business, but he conceded that he did care about John’s well-being despite pulling a face like he’d just bitten into a lemon. John had listened to him enough times, so he thought it only fair to return the favour.

“I appreciate it, Sherlock. I really do.”

John eventually tried to go to sleep again at half-past two in the morning. Sherlock stayed up the entire night, playing his violin and listening out for signs of distress from John’s room. He was relieved when he couldn’t hear any.

John got up early in the morning and ran through his usual routine. He had to be at the surgery by 8am for an early shift that would last until 1pm. Even though he sometimes complained about how boring his job as a locum GP was in comparison to all the crime-solving, he was looking forward to a day of mundane diagnoses.

It was only after John had left to go to work that Sherlock finally decided to get some shut-eye himself.

The clinic was already crowded when John got there. A look around the waiting room confirmed his suspicions. It was hay fever season. He actually smiled a bit to himself. This should be pretty much straight forward.

John came home just after 1.30pm to find Sherlock sitting at the kitchen table, studying something under the microscope. The doctor went to the kettle without even giving it conscious thought, and fetched two cups.

When they had finished their teas, both men received text messages from DI Greg Lestrade, asking them to come down to Scotland Yard. They would need to give their statements and there would be a press conference held later that afternoon concerning the ‘Dumpster Killings’ as the
press had dubbed the series of murders.

Within minutes, John had got changed into sensible clothes for a press conference, as it would certainly entail their pictures being taken.

Sherlock was already on the pavement outside, and a taxi was gliding to a stop just as John closed the black door behind him by pulling the knocker.

The taxi ride through London took longer than usual. It was warm, nearly summer and a sunny afternoon to boot, which meant that thousands of tourists had descended on the city and halted traffic.

Once at Scotland Yard, Sherlock and John lost no time to get to Lestrade’s squad room. A few of the officers who had been at the club on Saturday night congratulated John on his performance.

One of the newer team members wondered out loud whether he’d consider playing at the Yard’s Summer BBQ or their Christmas Do. John overheard her and walked over, suggesting with a smirk that he might be available, depending on their offer, before he joined Sherlock and Lestrade in the DI’s office.

Getting their statements was a quick affair, the two of them so used to the procedure by now that they needed no prompts at all. Within a few minutes, both Sherlock and John were signing their versions of events. Lestrade could trust them to stick to the facts and not make anything up.

While John was giving his statement, Greg was studying him. He was relieved to see that John was in a good mood, actually joked around and smiled. He had looked so depressed Saturday night.

John’s wartime experiences were harsher than he had ever imagined, and he still couldn’t get over the fact that John had been surrounded by so many people and yet so alone.

As soon as he’d got home at 2.30am, Lestrade had made sure to send out that invitation as promised. He had also sent another invitation and a very long email to his nephew currently serving out there. Greg had no intention to make him feel as unwanted as John had felt. He wanted to make sure that his nephew knew they all missed him and that he would always be welcomed home with open arms.

Once Sherlock and John were done with their statements, Lestrade called for a press conference, which would take place two hours later in the meeting room downstairs.

He went through all the details with the sleuth and the soldier and made sure they knew what information could be released to the press.

They would mention that the suspects had been apprehended thanks to the help of the two of them, but they wouldn’t go into too much detail regarding the undercover operation unless directly prompted. The police would then confirm the roles Sherlock and John had played the previous night.

Greg also stressed that because the show had been popular, some of the patrons last night might have recognised them regardless of their disguises. He warned Sherlock and John to expect even more questions than usual, given the media’s current interest in John’s affairs.

With two hours to kill before the press arrived, Sherlock sent Mycroft a quick text, stating that the two of them would be participating in a press conference. The reply didn’t come to Sherlock’s phone, but to John’s.

“THERE WILL BE AN OFFICIAL PRESS CONFERENCE REGARDING YOUR VC INVESTITURE TOMORROW AFTERNOON. PLEASE REFER TO THAT ON ALL QUESTIONS PERTAINING TO IT. – MH”

“Oh great!” John groaned.

“Another bloody press conference, and this time all about me. Just what I need!”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to imagine what it would be like being the sole focus of a room full of journalists.

Because he still had time until the Yard’s press conference started, John excused himself and tried to sneak away, but Sherlock noticed.

“Something wrong?” he enquired.

“No, nothing. But we have two hours to kill and I need a hair cut. There’s got to be a barber shop around here somewhere,” John replied as he pushed the door open and stepped out onto the pavement.

Apparently, that was explanation enough, as Sherlock turned around and disappeared inside Scotland Yard again.

John wandered around the block until he found this tiny old barber shop tucked away between a green grocer’s and a second-hand bookshop.

An old gentleman who greeted him warmly ran the shop. Once John explained that he’d like his hair trimmed back to military regulations, the man got right onto it, working silently and efficiently.
He actually still used proper scissors instead of the electric shears most modern shops employed and the barber clearly took pride in his tools, as they were all as impeccable as they would have been the very first time he’d used them.

John was glad that the old man didn’t insist on small talk. There was nothing John hated more, especially since it always meant the whole procedure would take twice as long as it should.

Once the man had finished and brushed all the small hairs away, John looked in the mirror. The reflection that greeted him was well known, but he hadn’t really seen it in a few years since he had been invalided. He’d still kept his hair sort of short, but not as short as it once had been.

The man in the mirror was definitely Captain Watson, and John raised his chin. He immediately felt like a soldier again, the haircut enough to get him fully back into that mindset.

He thanked the man and left, his stride on the way back down the street even prouder and more purposeful than it had been before. He held his head high and shoulders straight as he waited his turn at the little coffee place just outside the Yard, getting a brew for himself, Sherlock and Lestrade.

Bearing his gifts in the form of three travel mugs containing life-sustaining hot and black liquid, he walked back into the squad room. Even though the team had known him for years, his confident step still turned a few heads.

“Ah, John, there you are… Oh, I see where you’ve been,” the DI said as he took in John’s haircut.

Lestrade gestured towards the cups on the little cardboard tray.

“Please tell me that one of those is for me, by any chance?”

“Oh, yeah. Tall, black, one sugar, right?” John asked as he handed the Detective Inspector his drink.

“Cheers, mate.”

Greg grinned as he accepted his coffee.

One by one, journalists and photographers appeared at Scotland Yard, slowly filing into a room at the end of the corridor.

“Here come the vultures,” Lestrade said sourly, as he spotted the first few reporters making their way to the conference room.

As was Scotland Yard’s procedure, Sergeant Sally Donovan would lead the conference due to her position as press liaison on the homicide squad. DI Lestrade would answer any questions directed at him and help with those that Donovan’s position didn’t fully allow her to make definite comment on.

Sherlock and John would stand at the front of the room, between the door and the desk that had been set up for the police officers. Donovan would introduce them and explain their roles in the arrests, they would only answer direct questions, and those referred to them by Donovan and Lestrade.

As for the rest of the conference, Greg Lestrade had told them with a grin: “You know the drill, boys. Just stand there and look pretty.”

As soon as they followed Donovan and Lestrade into the room, all cameras turned on Sherlock and John.

Shouts of “Doctor Watson, is it true you’re working full time for Scotland Yard now?” and “Mr. Holmes, what’s it like working with a war hero?” filled the room and it took Lestrade a considerable amount of time to start the actual conference and get the reporters’ attention away from John Watson long enough to get a word in.

“Ladies and gentlemen, quiet, please. This press conference is about the recent string of murders at well-known London nightclubs. Doctor John Watson and Mr. Sherlock Holmes are here in their professional capacity as consultants for New Scotland Yard. Any questions regarding John Watson’s military service will be answered during another press conference tomorrow, so please refrain from asking them. As difficult as that concept might be for you.”

Lestrade started the conference, immediately putting John more at ease.

While Sherlock stood there, more or less relaxed and used to the conferences, looking more bored than anything else, John stood at attention with his hands clasped behind his back, knowing every pair of eyes in the room would look at him throughout the next thirty minutes.

“Saturday night we took four people into custody, who have confessed to ordering and carrying out the murders of record label scouts Patrick Cavanaugh, Anthony Ribbal, Steven Newton and Kofi Ayeda.” Sergeant Sally Donovan explained.

“They were caught conspiring to kill Sherlock Holmes, who had been working undercover as a talent scout at the time. There is a link between all these killings. All victims were employed by small, independent record labels and were found murdered after they attended open mic nights at
London nightclubs. During the course of our investigation, we found that all those clubs were recently bought up by Weltbar Record Company and its sister enterprises.

“How were these men killed?” one of the reporters called out.

“All victims suffered severe blunt force trauma to the head, to the point that their faces were not always recognisable and we had to rely on dental records and DNA to make a positive identification. They were also all found in dumpsters behind clubs owned by Weltbar Records,” Donovan explained.

“Why did Sherlock Holmes go undercover for Scotland Yard?” a young female reporter asked from the back of the room. Lestrade leaned forwards, closer to his microphone.

“Sherlock Holmes was not alone. Several members of the Scotland Yard’s homicide squad were undercover as well. It was thanks to Doctor Watson that we were able to work out the pattern and Sherlock Holmes’ extraordinary observational skills made him a vital asset in this case. We had worked out that the victims were all talent scouts for up and coming record labels. I don’t know about you, but I couldn’t tell that you are a reporter just by looking at you in the street. Mr. Holmes, however, can. That’s what made his skills so invaluable in this case.”

“Doctor Watson, in what role were you involved in this case?” a male voice asked. John looked at the DI and nodded.

“Doctor Watson joined us in this undercover operation. We needed someone to have backstage access as well as a vantage point on stage to spot suspicious behaviour by anyone else who introduced themselves as a talent scout. Fortunately for us, Doctor Watson does not suffer stage fright and a set up record deal between him and Mr. Holmes served as the incentive the perpetrators needed to make themselves known to Mr. Holmes and therefore to us.”

Several cameras were held up, clicking away with ever increasing shutter speed, their flashes nearly blinding John and Sherlock.

John had to blink several times and focus hard to keep images of explosions and muzzle flashes at bay.

“Alright?”

Sherlock whispered next to John without looking down at his friend so the reporters wouldn’t be drawn to John’s distress.

“Yeah…”

John’s reply was more a sigh than an actual word.

The press conference continued like that for much longer than planned. Sergeant Donovan and Detective Inspector Lestrade answered questions, and even Sherlock gave the occasional short reply. But John kept quiet, acutely aware that at the conference tomorrow, he would have to do all the talking.

He was relieved when Donovan finally brought the conference to an end. They posed for a few more pictures and turned to leave, when a young redheaded journalist approached Sherlock and John.

“Doctor Watson?” she asked tentatively.

“I’m sorry, but DI Lestrade answered all the questions, I have nothing to add,” John tried to shake her off.

“No, I know. Despite what you might think of the press in general, I am not here for an extra sound bite. I just wanted to say hello to you for my sister. You might remember her. RAMC Nurse Amber Fountain, she said she was on your staff in Sierra Leone. I just know she would kick me if I didn’t say hello. I’m Heather Fountain.”

She extended her hand with a smile.

At the mention of the familiar name, John relaxed slightly and gladly shook her hand.

“Thank you, Miss Fountain. I do remember Amber, how is she?”

“She’s doing pretty well for herself, currently stationed at Camp Bastion’s hospital.”

“I’m glad to hear she’s doing well. She’s an excellent nurse! Please give her my regards when you talk to her,” John said.

Sherlock stood there and watched the small exchange, deductions firing away in his brain as he looked at the journalist.

She was young, mid-twenties tops, and clearly on her first full-time journalistic position. Her questions throughout the conference had been well-informed and probing just enough without going for sensationalism, suggesting she’d studied journalism and spent her free time on work experience and freelance assignments, honing her skills.

From what Sherlock could see of her notepad, she didn’t use shorthand, which suggested she had studied her trade abroad, in a country in which shorthand was no longer needed. Because Britain was the only country in Europe still using the system, that didn’t narrow the field at all.
She clearly worked for one of the smaller publications rather than one of the big national dailies, her clothing leaning slightly more towards smart casual than proper business attire. Her conduct throughout the conference had been very respectful and she was the only one who had kept her questions strictly on the case.

Sherlock felt something like professional respect for her because she had respected John. The fact that her sister had actually served under John in Africa made his decision.

He pulled John away slightly to discuss his plan. Once it was explained to him, John looked at Heather again, the resemblance to Amber suddenly striking and he wondered how he had missed it before.

John turned towards her and cleared his throat, not really believing that he out of all people would willingly offer what he what he was about to. He knew he should have said something from the start and had hidden away, but he also knew he couldn’t avoid it any longer.

Before he could find his voice, though, Sherlock cut in.

“Miss Fountain, we have a proposition for you that should prove mutually beneficial.”
“Are you sure this is such a good idea?” John asked nervously as Sherlock pulled him aside and explained his plan.

“Think about it, John. There will be a press conference tomorrow, focusing solely on you. There will be dozens of reporters, asking uncomfortable questions, going for sensationalism. If any of them were given any hints about your military career, there’s no telling what they might have uncovered and what they might ask about. In military terms, think of this as a pre-emptive strike. Choose whom you tell your story to, on your own terms. Then the vultures can do what they like. They’re all fighting over getting exclusive sound bites from you and they will think that everything is fair game. Miss Fountain has proven herself today, she stuck to the assignment and her questions all related to the murders.”

Sherlock stole a quick glance towards the redhead journalist while John listened intently.

“She’s clearly trying to make it in journalism, but she’s no Kitty Riley. She wants to get an honest scoop, without causing too much damage in the process. You confirmed yourself that you served with her sister, so chances are she is on our side with her story. There won’t be any attempts to make you look, I don’t know, like a doctor turned killer just because you fought on the front lines. And believe me; some of the red top papers might try to go down that road. Nothing sells better than a bit of controversy, I know.”

John thought back to all the less than flattering articles about the two of them and about Sherlock during his time away. He wanted to avoid a further publicity fiasco like that.

“What I’m suggesting is that you offer her an exclusive interview before the press conference. Think ‘profile piece’. You keep saying that you did your duty and that’s all, so show and tell her that you mean it. Let her tell the world. You’d help her get the exclusive all of London has been trying to get from you for a week and she’ll help you tell your story and portray you just the way you want. It’s a win/win situation!”

Sherlock clapped his hands excitedly. John had to confess that it did make sense and he’d learned the hard way that it was best to have the press on your side. And if the press happened to have a sister who had actually worked with John, even better. He looked over to the reporter and smiled.

“Yes, this could work”, he thought.

He walked back over to where Heather Fountain was still waiting for them. She clearly had no idea what was going on and was worrying the cuff of her blouse a little. In that regard, she immediately reminded both Sherlock and John of Molly Hooper.

Sherlock got the first word in, but John thought it best if he explained the plan, knowing Sherlock’s tendency to drive people away.

“Yes, as my friend just said, we had an idea. People have been badgering me all week for an interview regarding my time in the military as well as the Victoria Cross. If you’re interested, I’d like to offer you that exclusive.”

He grinned at her while she tried to come to terms with what he’d just offered her. This was literally the story every journalist in London wanted.

“Of course I’m interested! Wow, I don’t know what to say. Thank you so much!”

Even though she knew it wasn’t really very professional, she still hugged him. When she realized what she’d done, she blushed and stepped away, clearing her throat.
“Sorry, sorry. I just can’t believe it! Right, then. Shall we do this here?” Heather glanced around the Yard’s meeting room.

“Ah, no. We thought we could do this tomorrow, say around 2pm? That will leave plenty of time for your interview and the press conference afterwards. The address is 221b Baker Street. And bring a photographer.”

Sherlock grinned and winked at her before he gave John a light shove out the door.

John put up the token amount of protest expected of him for being shoved around by Sherlock, but soon gave up, knowing that protest was futile.

Just as they were leaving the premises of New Scotland Yard, John’s text alert chimed. He retrieved his phone and stared at Mycroft’s text.

“Apparently, I’ll have to make a stop on Savile Row on the way home. My uniform is ready to be fitted,” he explained as Sherlock hailed a cab for them.

“Oh yes. I wondered how long it would take them.”

A short taxi ride later, they stood outside a suit shop, catering exclusively to bespoke clientele.

John let out an appreciative whistle when he gazed at all the suits in the shop’s window.

“Mycroft did say that he is footing the bill for this, right? Because I’m not sure I could afford anything in there, let alone a tailored uniform.”

John had blanched slightly when he saw the price tags, the money worries obviously displayed on his face.

“Mycroft is the one who ordered it, so I say let’s make him pay,” Sherlock grinned as he pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

John followed him and was soon greeted by a young and impeccably dressed man, speaking with a thick French accent. Sherlock returned the greeting in flawless French, gestured towards John and then went off, disappearing deeper into the shop in search of god-knows-what.

Their voices must have alerted the older gentleman who had taken John’s measurements the week before. A heavy velvet curtain parted to reveal the man’s head.

“Ah, Captain Watson. So good to see you again. I’m glad you received my message and were able to attend so promptly. If you’ll follow me…”

The tailor vanished behind the curtain again and John stood there, still looking a bit dumbstruck, before he willed his feet into motion and parted the curtain.

Behind it was a studio, complete with mannequins and raised platforms and several lengths of all sorts of different fabrics neatly folded on shelves that lined the walls. Sewing machines, some of them vintage, lined a long table at the far side, yet the space did not appear cluttered. It looked purposeful but still elegant. Two changing rooms were off to the side and two leather armchairs stood next to a floor-length mirror.

The young man who had greeted them by the door came through, carrying a tablet with whisky glasses. He placed them next to the most vintage sewing machine, clearly a display item rather than still functional, and a decanter filled with an amber liquid which John only noticed now. The man filled a double measure of the drink into two glasses and handed one to John.

“François is just getting your uniform for you now, sir. Please take a seat while you wait.”

But John barely had the chance to sit down when the old gentleman, François, reappeared, carrying a garment bag and hanging it up in one of the two dressing rooms.

“Here she is, Captain Watson. If you’d just like to get changed in your own time and then come and meet me out here so I can do the final adjustments, that would be marvellous.”

John drained his glass of cognac and pulled the changing room curtain closed behind him. For the purpose of this fitting, François had even provided him with a dress shirt and shoes.

He carefully put on the uniform, paying attention that every line was straight and there were no creases anywhere. It was already a superb fit. He fastened the white belt around his waist and pulled the curtain aside, fully dressed in his No. 1 parade uniform. The only things missing were his gloves and beret.

As soon as he’d stepped out of the changing room, François was at his side and joined him in front of the large mirror. John looked at his reflection and almost didn’t recognize himself, too used to wearing woolly jumpers and cardigans. It had been years since he had last worn his uniform, but the feeling and sight was instantly familiar. He watched himself in the mirror as he reverently brushed his fingers over the epaulettes and his rank insignia.

“Right, sir, if you’d like to step onto the platform, so I can adjust the length of your trouser legs,” the tailor started and led John over to one of the raised platforms.

John felt bad that the older man would have to crouch down, but the tailor didn’t seem to mind.

The uniform was already a nice fit, not too snug, which John was grateful for. The trousers
John kept completely still while the tailor was working. The sleeves also needed to be taken slightly further in, François decided, after he had John move his arms like he was shaking hands. He also adjusted the seam in the back, pulling the jacket a little tighter still. John did not complain, though. The older man clearly knew what he was doing. Soon enough, he beckoned John to get changed again.

When he came out of the changing room again, Sherlock was sitting in one of the armchairs, chatting away in fluent French. John only understood the occasional word.

He knew Sherlock had had a very privileged upbringing, including expensive schools and probably lessons in all sorts of languages, but the fluency still baffled John a bit.

“Ah John, there you are. I trust all is sorted?”

John shot the tailor a questioning glance.

“Oui, Monsieur Holmes. I will make the final alterations tomorrow and then we will deliver the uniform to Baker Street on Thursday, as agreed,” the older man explained.


“Are you coming, John?”

Sherlock was up and back out in the main shop within seconds, his Belstaff coat a swirl of fabric as the detective leapt up. John followed him at a more sedate pace, chuckling at Sherlock’s eagerness to get going. He was more than surprised when the young shop assistant handed Sherlock a garment bag, which the detective accepted with thanks.

As they stood on the pavement, trying to hail a cab, John couldn’t help but stare at the bag. Sherlock noticed.

“What? I do need to get my clothes from somewhere. Or did you think me incapable of shopping for clothes?”

“No, it’s not that. Bloody hell, Sherlock, I knew you had expensive tastes when it comes to your suits.”

John didn’t even want to think about the bill.

“Yeah well, we’ll just have to tell Mycroft that your uniform was more expensive than first estimated.”

Sherlock gave a mischievous grin and John laughed. Yes, that sounded more like it. Far be it for the detective to spend his own money if he could avoid it.

Once they arrived at Baker Street, Sherlock dashed inside to deposit his new clothes in his bedroom. John was just coming into the living room when Sherlock came dashing back down the hallway.

“Right, off we go!” he said and turned John around again towards the stairs.

“Oi! Where are we going now? And stop shoving me around!”

John was getting annoyed at being manhandled by Sherlock.

“Dinner. You usually complain about not enough sustenance intake so I will remedy that. Chop, chop, John, we haven’t got all day!”

John let out a sigh. A sit-down would have been nice, but dinner didn’t sound too bad either. Still, to make a point, he was deliberately slow descending the stairs again.

He was surprised that Sherlock just stood outside the door, not trying to hail yet another taxi. As soon as John closed the front door behind him, Sherlock set off at his usual fast pace.

After they had turned down the second street, John knew where they were headed. He smiled to himself, already working out his order in his head.

“Oh stop thinking that today’s the day you’ll finally try the four-cheese gnocchi. We both know that you’ll end up having the penne con pollo al forno as usual.”

Sherlock must have read his thoughts.

“You never know, I might be in the mood for gnocchi,” John countered, slightly petulant, although he knew deep down that he’d more than likely end up with the pasta dish.

Before long, they arrived at their favourite Italian restaurant. As soon as they walked through the door, Angelo was there next to them, giving both men a more than eager pat on the shoulder as he shook their hands.

“Sherlock! John! I was wondering when you’d come by! Haven’t seen you in a while. And John, congratulations, ny man!”
Angelo practically beamed.

“Your usual table is free, take a seat, I’ll get you something to drink.”

The men walked over to the table in the window. It had become their table because it was excellent for surveillance, overlooking the street and a mirror further inside the restaurant meant that both men could be watching the proceedings outside even though one of them had his back turned towards the window.

A minute later, Angelo returned with a bottle of red wine and three glasses. He put the bottle down on the table and then pulled an extra chair up, sitting himself down at the side of the table and filling three glasses.

“So, tell me, is it true then? Are they really giving you the Victoria Cross?” Angelo asked as he handed John his glass of wine.

“Yes, yes, that’s true. The ceremony is on Friday,” John confirmed.

Angelo’s eyes widened, then he got back up and raised his glass. John had just enough time to realize what was about to happen and tried to dissuade Angelo, but to no avail.

“Too late,” Sherlock chuckled, as John buried his face in his hands for a second.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, could I just have your attention for a moment, please? I’d like you to meet Captain John Watson, who will be awarded the Victoria Cross this Friday!”

Angelo excitedly gestured for John to stand up. The doctor got to his feet, slightly embarrassed that they still couldn’t have a meal in peace and quiet. So he stood, with his hands clasped in front of him, giving a brief nod in greeting to the room full of diners.

“Three cheers for the good doctor! Hip, hip, hooray!” Angelo started and the whole restaurant including the staff joined in.

“Thank you very much,” John mumbled as he took his seat again.

Angelo gave a hand sign to one of his waiters and sat back down as well, engaging both John and Sherlock in conversation.

Five minutes later, a waiter came over, carrying a piping hot dish of penne con pollo and a side order of cheesy garlic bread. John hadn’t even ordered, but suspected Angelo behind it.

He tucked in while Sherlock only nibbled on a piece of garlic bread. Angelo excused himself eventually, leaving the flatmates alone.

“So, fluent in French, huh?” John asked between mouthfuls.

“Don’t be so surprised. You know I speak many languages,” Sherlock replied.

“Yeah, I know, I just didn’t think you’d be fluent, somehow.”

“Grand-mère and grand-père detested it when we spoke English around their house…”

“Your grandparents were French?”

“Not just my grandparents, but yes. On my mother’s side.”

“Huh. Alright. Well, as far as I know the Watsons are mainly English and Scottish. Although, if I remember correctly, nobody was quite sure where my great-great-grandfather had come from.”

John shrugged his shoulders and took another forkful of his meal.

“I should think that your Scottish heritage is quite evident, you do own pyjamas and a bathrobe with the Watson Clan tartan after all, although I suspect they might have been a gift meant as a joke without the gift-giver understanding the familial connection. As for your great-great-grandfather… I’m assuming you mean an individual called Paul Loose. Honestly, John, a simple online search would have revealed that he was a German carpenter who came to England on his waltz looking for work and ended up staying.”

Sherlock dismissed the topic before John could utter “brilliant” or ask Sherlock to clarify what exactly a waltz was. He had the funny feeling the detective didn’t mean the dance.

“Besides, John, there are far less boring things to discuss than genealogy. We should put a strategy together on how to handle the media tomorrow.”

This was something John could agree with. He’d be the focus of attention tomorrow, whether he really wanted to be or not, and he’d better be prepared.

So they started making a list on several of Angelo’s napkins with things to say, leave out and stress as important. While they were working away, Angelo kept refilling their glasses and had various plates of desserts, ranging from tiramisu to gelato, appear on their table.

John polished off the lot, and Sherlock was glad to see John eat. He knew that one of the PTSD symptoms John had had when he first met Sherlock was that he didn’t eat.

As much as John harassed Sherlock about the detective’s eating habits, John hadn’t been much
better himself. He’d be hungry and grab an apple or a slice of toast, but he wouldn’t touch it all
day. But once John had found out that he could still be useful, could still help people and moved
into Baker Street, his appetite returned.

He’d polish off a plate and go for seconds as if he’d been starving. Denying himself food was not
even a conscious decision for John, he simply felt too depressed to eat.

So Sherlock made a point to stop for food for John, even mid-case. John never really realized this.
But to Sherlock seeing John eat a whole meal meant that John was happy enough to eat, and that
in turn made Sherlock happy.

He was especially happy to see John eating now, at Angelo’s, despite the week he’d had with his
nightmares and all the attention that had been drawn to him.

Sherlock stole one scoop of gelato, which he didn’t really count as food because it would melt.
They’d come up with a fairly comprehensive plan for the next day, to show John exactly the way
he is. Soldier and doctor at once.

Angelo refused to accept their money and even gave them a doggie bag with seconds to take
home. John, as usual, slipped a twenty-pound note into the tip jar.

Back at Baker Street, the two men continued to discuss their media strategy and at some point,
although John couldn’t remember when and how, Mycroft became involved in the planning as
well.

After all, the official press conference was organized by the Ministry of Defence, and they were
really adamant that everybody knew exactly what could go on record and what could not.

It had gone midnight by the time they had all agreed on what to do.

ACD canon Sherlock Holmes hinted that French painter Horace Emile Jean Vernet was his great-
uncle in The Greek Interpreter

Carpenters go on Waltz after their apprenticeships, before they become Masters of their craft.
They wear distinct uniforms and wander until they find a place without a Master, where they can
settle down.

Apparently common in PTSD sufferers. Hinted at during A Study in Pink, when John doesn’t eat
his apple, then has dinner at Angelo’s and remarks later that he is starving when asked whether
he’d like dim sum
In Profile

Chapter Summary

John gives his interview.

Chapter Notes

I know that John was reluctant to talk about his experiences with Sherlock. I like to think that he was coerced into giving these detailed answers thanks to the Holmes brothers...

I am a journalist, so these are questions I would ask. Also: Try taking notes at 120 words per minute in longhand without looking at the page. I can do it, but it's not easy, especially when you have to be able to read it all afterwards!

In Profile

John suffered another nightmare that night. He came downstairs; Sherlock woke up and vacated the couch, and they made tea and sat together for a while. It was a familiar thing to do, but John feared it was slowly becoming the norm.

He was angry with himself for being unable to keep his mind and emotions in check. Soldiers don’t cry, do they? He still couldn’t beat the feeling of being pathetic, yet he also knew that Sherlock was right when he said that he wasn’t really pathetic at all.

When he had first moved into Baker Street, the nightmares had plagued him almost every night, but they had gradually become less and less. For them to be back with such a vengeance was unsettling to John.

He blamed it all on the horribly detailed video of the siege. Even though he was sure he would have had a few sleepless nights with or without the video, having it all confirmed and seeing it all from a different perspective gave his nightmares a slight out-of-body experience feel to them.

All of a sudden, he could see himself, picture himself, as he lost consciousness. John knew that he had died that day for all of two minutes, which made the out-of-body experience more realistic.

Sherlock sat next to him and said nothing. The sleuth merely plucked the strings of his violin so the quiet of the flat wouldn’t be too overwhelming for either of them.

If he was honest, he was worried about John. The nightmares had been constant for a week, and they were taking a visible toll on his friend. John tried to brush them off, insisting he was fine, but Sherlock could see it clearly on John’s face whenever his thoughts returned to the desert sands of Afghanistan and Iraq, and all he had to endure while he’d been out there.

When John excused himself to go back upstairs and try to get more sleep, Sherlock was relieved. He was even more relieved when John didn’t stir again until his alarm went off.

John’s early shift at the surgery went well and he was secretly pleased to have a bit of a respite, being able to focus on something other than the images in his head. He knew that the press conference and interview today would be hard on him again, but he also knew that he had to do them. And the sooner he’d get them out of the way, the sooner he could concentrate on receiving his medals and move on with the decidedly civilian life he led these days. He was just glad that Sherlock would be by his side.

While normal on-lookers only saw the sociopath persona Sherlock Holmes was so careful to cultivate whenever in public, John knew he could trust his best friend to have his back. Just having him in the room would serve as the moral support he’d need to get through it all.

He bit back a laugh. He could invade countries without a problem, but he couldn’t face a room full of journalists by himself.

John prayed that Sherlock had at least tried to tidy up the flat a bit, but knew deep down that it was a fool’s hope at best. While he went to get himself a cup of tea, John called Mrs. Hudson.

“Mrs. Hudson? It’s John… No, nothing happened. I was wondering whether you could do me a quick favour. Could you go upstairs and make sure Sherlock actually tidies the living room? He invited reporters into the flat and the last thing I need is for them to see his experiments all over the place.”

The landlady chuckled and reassured him that she would do her best. Sometimes John wondered
what they’d do without her.

John rushed home as soon as his last patient for the day had put his shoes back on. He took a quick shower and got changed into a suit, relieved to see the flat tidy and sparkling. He knew this was all Mrs. Hudson’s work, so he would have to find a way to make it up to her.

Sherlock was still lounging around on the couch in his pyjamas and dressing gown, so John chased him up and pestered him to get changed before Heather would get to Baker Street.

While the detective was in the shower, John got the last few things ready. They had agreed to put some of John’s photos out that showed him in uniform. The different uniforms he was wearing in the photos ranging from his passing out ceremony at Sandhurst to combat dress and his official portrait could tell the story of his military career for him, if need be.

If he remembered correctly, nurse Amber Fountain had told him that she was an ‘army brat’, her words not his, which meant that her sister Heather should at least be able to recognize the uniforms and ranks.

He also dotted a few pictures that showed him and Sherlock at crime scenes and press conferences around the place. After all, this was his life now, and just as big a part of him as his army career had been.

The skull was allowed to stay on the mantelpiece after Sherlock had thrown a tantrum of epic proportions and claiming that the skull had as much right to be there as John had. After all, the skull had been there first. Reluctantly, John had given in.

In all honesty, he didn’t mind the skull, but it could be a bit off-putting for visitors. But he figured that if visitors to 221b survived Sherlock, they’d get over a human skull by the fireplace.

“Hello John, dear. I figured Sherlock wouldn’t go shopping and I didn’t have time to bake a fresh batch of scones, but I found some Bakewell tarts in the pantry. I thought you might like them for your visitor,” Mrs. Hudson said as she carried a tray into the kitchen.

“Mrs. Hudson, I don’t know how to thank you. For tidying up as well.”

“It’s quite alright, dear. I know you would have done it if you had been here. But just this once, I’m not your housekeeper!”

“I know. Thank you. I have one more favour to ask, though. I’m not sure what Sherlock has done with our tea set, but I bet it’s not safe to use anymore. Could I possibly borrow yours for the afternoon?”

John felt rotten having to ask more of their landlady, but Sherlock had left something growing in the cups and the once white porcelain of their good teapot was now fuzzy and purple.

“Oh sure, John, that’s not a problem. Help me get it?”

He followed her downstairs to retrieve the whole set and the tea had just finished steeping when the doorbell rang.

Sherlock, dressed in one of his suits, emerged from his bedroom and picked up his violin as John returned downstairs to open the door. He was mildly surprised to find that Heather had come alone when they had specified that she’d bring a photographer as well.

“Good afternoon, Doctor Watson. How are you?” she asked as she stepped into the downstairs hallway.

“Well, Heather, not too bad, and yourself? And please, call me John,” he replied as he closed the door and mentioned for her to take the stairs.

“Oh, err, Heather,” she said and shook his hand.

Sherlock, pretending that he had played his Stradivarius for a while before the journalist showed up, put the instrument down.

“Miss Fountain. I’m glad you could make it. Please, do come in.”

He gestured for her to take a seat on the sofa. That way, she would have the full view of the flat, and all the carefully arranged items and photos.

“The kettle’s just boiled. Would you like some tea?” John asked their guest.

“Yes, please, if it’s no trouble,” she replied as she removed her jacket and folded it over the armrest next to her.

She glanced around, interest peaked when she noticed the army photos. She bristled a bit in surprise at the skull but quickly got over the shock.

“How do you take your tea, Heather?” John called into the lounge. The journalist looked up.

“Milk, two sugars, please, if you don’t mind.”

A minute later, John reappeared, carrying the tray with three cups of tea, the pot, extra sugar and creamer as well as the Bakewells. He put it all down on the coffee table and took a seat at the other end of the sofa, while Sherlock settled in his own armchair, intent on watching.
Heather got her notepad out and placed it on the table, then pulled her cup of tea towards her.

“The photographer will be here shortly, in case you are wondering. They are on different schedules to us reporters, so they drop by when they can and don’t stay long. I thought I’d get most of the questions out of the way first so my colleague won’t interrupt us too much once he gets here.”

“No problem. That’s fine.”

John took a sip of his tea, leaned back into the sofa cushions, crossed his legs and tried for nonchalance.

Heather quickly tested her pen on the margin of her notepad to make sure it was working.

“Ready?” She asked and grinned at him.

“Always,” He replied with a smile.

“Okay. Well, for the past week, the press has used the titles Doctor and Captain for you interchangeably. But what came first – a desire for medicine or the army?”

“Not beating around the bush, are you?”

John grinned.

“I guess medicine came first, but not by much. I’ve always taken care of friends and I was good at biology and chemistry, so I thought a career in medicine would make sense. But I didn’t come from money and I couldn’t have afforded to go to university on the little bit we had, so I looked at scholarship and bursary options and the army’s medical cadetship programme caught my eye. It’s highly competitive, but I gained a place. The more I thought about it, the better it seemed to fit. The army enabled me to study medicine and become a doctor and in return I had to serve seven years with the RAMC after graduation. I was helping people and served my country at the same time. It was a fair deal,” John explained.

Heather surprised John a bit by looking at him throughout his explanation while scribbling down her notes. Sherlock was intrigued as well. He knew she wrote everything down in a mix of her own quick longhand and made-up abbreviations, but taking down notes without looking at the page took some skill.

“Now, I know from my sister that you wouldn’t have left the field hospital as a Medical Officer. Yet, the story about Afghanistan has you on the frontline. What made you change careers?”

“I liked being in the army, liked the structure, the hierarchy. Everyone knows what to do and when. And I loved being in the RAMC. But my contract was up and I had to decide how I wanted to continue. Become a civilian GP? Stay in the RAMC? My goal had been to be a doctor, and I specialized as a GP, but I couldn’t quite see myself out of uniform just yet. But I kept thinking back to my officer training course at Sandhurst from way back when and that I had actually enjoyed it and had passed with flying colours. That was in 2002, so operations in Afghanistan and Iraq had only just started. I decided to apply to Sandhurst, to become a career soldier instead. If anything, my medical experience later proved useful, as I was able to administer first aid to my teams when needed.”

John took another sip of his tea. Heather also grabbed the tea cup, using her left hand to bring it to her mouth while her right hand continued to scribble away furiously.

“I’m not speaking too fast, am I?” John inquired.

“Oh no, not to worry,” Heather replied with a smile just as she finished the last sentence.

“So, if I understand this correctly, you took a voluntary demotion?”

“Yes, I did. I was a Major while I was in the RAMC. But that had more to do with being a qualified doctor. Ranks in the RAMC are administrative only, which means we are addressed with respect, but we don’t give commands unless it’s to do with the running of the hospital. I could order nurses to check on patients and ask enlisted men to help in triage if needed, but that’s as far as it went. Once out of Sandhurst I was commissioned, this time with men under my command. I was promoted to Captain before I left.”

“Speaking of leaving the army… Can you describe in your own words what happened during the firefight we’ve all read about last week?”

John looked at her and then at Sherlock and steeled himself. This was the nitty-gritty bit he knew he had to get through and deliver well. Heather saw his hesitation and smiled at him.

“Take your time. I’d just like to confirm that what has been reported was true and what it was like to actually be there. I realize that might be difficult to talk about.”

Sherlock nodded almost imperceptibly at John. The soldier was glad to have Sherlock in the room, after all the detective could read people like no other. Heather’s concern was genuine. With that knowledge, John cleared his throat.

“Yes, it is. Hard to talk about, that is. I was a Captain in the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers at the time. My unit was sent to retrieve a unit from 4th Battalion The Rifles, which had been taken prisoner. This all happened in an area that hadn’t been mapped thoroughly yet, so we were
unfamiliar with the terrain. We were taken by surprise and captured as well. All in all, we were there for two weeks. The Rifles were there for three. My unit had been put together to make the most of our skills. There were bomb disposal experts and snipers. I was there for my medical knowledge. The brief had been to rescue the other unit by any means necessary. But the next hospital was miles away. In case anyone needed medical attention, I was to provide it. As such, even though I was one of two Captains on the team, I was not in charge, defaulting back to Medical Officer status for the time being.”

John took a deep breath, knowing he’d have to relive his actions again, at least in his memories, and he would have to do so again later that afternoon as well.

Heather looked up at him and nodded as she took down her notes, asking him to continue. John thought back to Mycroft’s warning. Under no circumstances was he to reveal that there had been ransom demands.

“Our captors killed the Captain in charge of The Rifles, as well as our unit leader, as an apparent show of their strength. I believe they thought that we would comply more easily if we were leaderless. Everybody kept calling me ‘Doc’ and not Captain, and I gained a little bit of our captors’ trust when I helped treat one of them. We had managed to smuggle an SOS message out, but we couldn’t be sure whether help was on the way. So we decided to bide our time, seemingly become complacent. I was the highest-ranking officer there, so I took charge just like I was expected to do. We were still guarded, but they allowed us into the yard of the complex we were held at every day, for about two hours, much like an exercise session in a prison. One by one, we managed to get hold of weapons. We were outnumbered and our captors weren’t the brightest bunch, but intelligence is not necessary in order to do some serious damage with a gun. And they had lots of those. Eventually, a rescue team came for us. We had been ready to strike for two days by then, just waiting for an opportunity. After all, every soldier taken prisoner has a duty to attempt an escape. We don’t just roll over and give up.”

He grimaced a bit. Sherlock was paying attention to John as his friend revealed even more information that Sherlock had not known before.

“The actual firefight is a bit of a blur, I’m afraid” John lied so he wouldn’t have to go into graphic detail. “I remember attacking and that we shot our way out of there. I was the one with the med kit, so I kept running out and dragging my men to safety as I’d done hundreds of times before. I know now that most of us were injured that day. We’d been told that there was a chopper on the way for us, and the yard had gone quiet. We’d been declared all clear. But we must have missed one of the insurgents, because I got shot. Later I was told that I was the last one who went down. Unfortunately, that meant that by that time, I had used up all the bandages we had.”

“Yes that mean that you did not get any treatment?”

“Well, we all had to make do with what was available. My wounds were wrapped with rags to stop the blood flow. I had broken my arm by diving for cover and I had bits of metal stuck in my leg from grenade blasts. But crucially, I was shot in the shoulder.”

John pointed at his chest and traced the ridge lines of the scar through his shirt.

“As you can see, the wound was close to my heart. I wasn’t expected to make it. Actually…”

John had fought an internal war with himself whether to mention this next bit or not, but Sherlock had convinced him to divulge that bit, in the end. Sherlock’s argument had been, that it clearly demonstrates the sacrifice the armed forces are prepared to make for their country.

Heather looked at him expectantly.

“I went into cardiac arrest. I lost consciousness before we reached the helicopter and was resuscitated back at base, just in time. Then I was in a coma for more than a week. The makeshift bandages my team had used to stem the blood flow caused me to not only contract enteric fever but also blood poisoning.”

Heather inhaled sharply.

“Wow. I’m so sorry. That’s a harsh combination. My sister has told me about some of the injuries she’s treated and the survival rates associated with them. You don’t do things by halves, do you?”

John chuckled a bit. That last bit sounded a lot like Amber Fountain.

“Apparently not. But it signalled the end of my career on the front line and I couldn’t just default back to the RAMC, too much time had passed. So I was sent home, which brought me here.”

“It sounds like you definitely deserve the Victoria Cross!”

“That’s the thing, though.” John answered.

“I did my duty, as did everybody else who was there. My rank put me in charge but that we all made it out of there alive was very much a team effort. I trust all those men with my life. Have trusted them with my life before and even though they could have left me or given up on me, they didn’t. They ensured I made it home as well. We may have been from different units, but I do consider them my brothers. All of them.”

When Heather asked for their names and ranks, John happily provided the list, including their regiments as well.
“How did you find out you’d be awarded the Victoria Cross? What was your reaction?”

“Last Saturday night, after that original story in The Guardian, I received my invitation. I had previously been told that I would receive the Military Cross along with everyone else. Well, Military Cross and Bar, actually. I thought that the envelope I held in my hands contained my invitation for that. So when I opened it and read that it was actually for the Victoria Cross Investiture, I think I just stood there and couldn’t believe it.”

“He actually asked me to pinch him in the arm, to make sure he didn’t just imagine it,” Sherlock chimed in, grinning at both of them.

Heather looked up startled but then smiled.

“Yes. It’s still a bit surreal, I guess. I definitely didn’t join up for fame. I wanted to help and that’s what I did. We were in an extreme situation that could have ended any number of ways. Had I been in charge from the start, I would be dead by now. I knew that staying calm was key, panic could have put the whole team at risk. Lieutenant Martin Fields actually noticed the first weapon we could get hold of without being noticed. The plan to attack was a team effort. I just coordinated. Really, the only thing I did was apply bandages; that’s my job as a doctor. I would never leave anyone behind if there is a chance they survive. We were being shot at, those who went down were easy targets. I just made sure they had cover, and that they wouldn’t bleed out.”

John continued to stress that the whole team deserved to be recognized and that he only did what was asked of him as a medical professional, stating that any medic would have done the same.

“From having two careers in the army, you seem to have gone to having two careers as a civilian as well, John.”

John laughed.

“Yes, I guess that’s true.”

“You and Sherlock have made headlines before. How did you get involved in all this detective work?”

“By moving into this flat, I guess. We met through a mutual friend when I had just returned from Afghanistan. I was still getting used to civilian life again and could not afford a place in London by myself. Sherlock had told my friend that he was looking for a flatmate and so we met. The first time I came to this flat, Sherlock was called out on a case and I went along. I was curious and it definitely beat sitting around my small flat.”

“He assisted me in solving that particular case, as I needed a doctor’s opinion. By the end of the case, we had agreed to share the flat,” Sherlock cut in, got up from his armchair and walked over to the sofa to refill his tea cup.

“John’s proven invaluable as a partner, as a lot of the cases we take require medical knowledge or retrieval skills John has learned in basic training. We’re both accredited consultants for Scotland Yard and it does come in handy sometimes that John knows first aid and hand-to-hand combat. Unfortunately, a lot of criminals still insist on a bit of a brawl before an arrest.”

Only Sherlock could manage to sound bored while stating that they often ended up fighting for their lives.

“Isn’t this detective work constricting your hours as a GP?” the reporter asked.

“No, not really. I work as a locum GP, so I only get called when I’m needed by whatever surgery is in need of a doctor. I keep my scheduled hours, but if we’re already on a case, I’ll decline to take the shifts. It’s like freelance work for you, I would imagine.”

“I have to ask this, John, but what was it like for you to adjust back to civilian life after spending fifteen years in the army?”

John had known that the questions would become more and more uncomfortable and this was one that he had secretly dreaded. But they had agreed to give her a realistic account and he also knew that thanks to her connection to Amber, she would have a fair idea of what it’s like.

Together with Sherlock and Mycroft, John had decided last night to be brutally honest in this regard, to show her readers that being in the army doesn’t just mean war and heroics.

He adjusted his sitting position before he replied.

“Honestly, it was hard. Very hard. It wasn’t like when I left the RAMC. That had been a conscious decision. I was shot and so severely injured that I received an honourable medical discharge. I was invalided home as soon as I regained consciousness and had fought off an infection. Imagine having two distinct careers, which you both love, and then from one moment to the next, both are ripped away from you with no way of getting them back. Adjusting back to civilian life was probably one of the hardest things I ever had to do. From one day to the next I had no purpose anymore. I was used to adrenaline and danger, being on patrol and sometimes even helping to run the base clinic on quiet days. You’re never alone when you’re out there. You have your unit and that unit becomes your family. Back here, I was all of a sudden alone, for the first time since I joined the RAMC. That was one of the reasons I wanted a flatshare. And I had nothing to do, at least not anything that gave me that sense of having done something worthwhile.

Until I started helping out on Sherlock’s cases and then eventually I found work as a GP. Since I’ve been back, I’ve become aware of just how hard it is to adjust to civilian life again. There are
many veterans who suffer from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, some simply cannot deal with it and, unfortunately, commit suicide. As a veteran myself, I have learned that a support network at home is invaluable.”

Heather kept writing and nodded. John refilled their teas and took a bite out of one of the Bakewell tarts.

“Sorry, had an early shift and no lunch,” he smirked as she grabbed for one of the small tarts as well.

Just as John had finished his Bakewell, the doorbell rang.

“Oh, that’ll be the photographer. About time,” Heather commented with a quick glance towards her watch.

They could hear Mrs. Hudson downstairs, greeting the photographer.

“Afternoon. Captain Watson? Hello, I’m Noel Liss”, the man greeted him as he entered the flat.

“Hi, Heather!”

The reporter waved at him as she had just taken another bite.

“Uhm, right. I was thinking maybe a few shots of him sitting on the sofa. Plus some standing by the window and by the fireplace. To have a bit of variety,” Heather suggested.

Noel looked around the room and nodded at the suggestions.

“Yes, that should work.”

The photographer did not waste any time instructing John just how he should sit and tilt his head. Then he beckoned Sherlock over as well.

“Seeing as both of you solve crimes together, we should probably have a picture of both of you together as well.”

Sherlock reluctantly agreed but had to force a smile in the photos.

Noel asked to see John’s decorations as well, to take a picture of them. When John returned to the living room with his shoe box, the reporter and photographer were just discussing the best angle of the piece and how to underline this visually.

They asked John to pin the medals on his suit jacket when he told them that his uniform was still with a tailor. John put the box down and carefully attached his service medals to his graphite coloured suit. In a way, it saved him from having to do it later, as he had been asked to wear his medals for the press conference that afternoon. Once the photos were taken, John went into the kitchen, getting another teacup out to offer the photographer a brew.

Then he went over towards where Sherlock was standing.

“Do you think that went alright?” John whispered.

“Yes, I think that was marvellous. She seems sincere and you gave all your answers like we’d agreed yesterday. She’ll probably have a few more standard questions for you, though, once the photographer leaves, but I doubt it’ll be more than “how old are you” and “where did you serve.” I told you she would not try to get graphic details or try to twist your words.”

Sherlock had absentmindedly picked up his violin again and started plucking at the strings.

“I’m surprised you remembered much of the plan, though. Considering you and Angelo drank nearly two bottles of his house red last night,” he smirked and looked up at his best friend.

“Oh, don’t remind me,” John groaned.

“Early clinic with the remnants of a hangover isn’t fun,” he said but had to laugh too.

Neither man noticed that the photographer had secretly lifted his camera and snapped a few pictures at Heather’s instruction. She wanted to get a few candid shots as well, some that were clearly not posed, and showed what the two men were really like in their own home.

“Right, I think I’ve got pretty much everything. I’ve noticed there is a picture of you in desert combat uniform. Would you mind if I took a picture of it, too?” the photographer asked.

“Oh, no. Go ahead,” John said and provided him with the information when and where the picture had been taken.

Noel packed his camera away quickly.

“Sorry, got to dash. Got to get to a bazaar on the other side of London like five minutes ago,” he said as he shook John’s hand and disappeared downstairs.

“I’m almost done as well. Just a few more general questions, if you don’t mind, John.”

Heather took only another five minutes to wrap up. John had to agree that she’d asked decent questions and hadn’t pushed any issues. Her plan was to now write the profile and publish it that
afternoon online and then in print the next day, while a colleague of hers would attend the Ministry of Defence press conference for any additional information that might be released.

John walked her downstairs.

“Thank you, Heather. Just don’t make me look bad, okay?” he joked.

“Not to worry, John. Despite what Sherlock might think, some of us journalists actually do have tact. I think my sister might actually kill me if I even tried to make this tacky. And I would never dare, anyway. I do have respect for everyone who serves, no matter in what capacity. And thank you, for giving me this opportunity. You have no idea how much you’ve just helped a trainee reporter!”

“I’ll hold you to it then. Give my regards to Amber and tell her to get in touch, okay? Haven’t heard from her in ages. It’d be nice to catch up sometime.”

John closed the door and let out a sigh. ‘One down, one to go’, he thought.

The interview had brought his memories back again. But he had the funny feeling that this was nothing compared to what was still to come. He made his way back upstairs and dropped into his armchair, mentally exhausted.

Sherlock studied him for a minute before the brought his instrument to his chin and started playing an upbeat melody.

“That went remarkably well,” the detective said and John found himself agreeing. He checked his watch. One and a half hours to go until the MoD conference.

John pulled Angelo’s doggie bag out of the fridge and heated the meals up for a quick lunch, which he devoured in record time to calm his nerves. Meanwhile, Sherlock kept playing his violin, trying to soothe John’s nerves before it all got too much for the army doctor.
Mycroft had informed Sherlock and John that they would be taken to Whitehall in one of his cars.

After lunch, Sherlock played his violin while John went through the motions of washing up and getting ready but it was clear to the sleuth that John’s mind was elsewhere.

John settled down in his armchair and Sherlock noticed the blank look on his usually expressive face.

“Don’t dwell on it, John. You know it’s in the past and you can’t change anything, even if you wanted to,” he said as he put the Stradivarius down.

John sighed.

“Yeah, I know. I know. It’s just hard to focus on anything else at the moment. I liked it better when I was still under orders to keep all of this secret. At least then I didn’t have to relive everything every day and was able to push it to the back of my mind and get on with my life.”

Sherlock went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. He also retrieved his small bottle of rescue drops from his bedroom and offered both to his friend.

The soldier looked up startled when Sherlock waved a hand in front of his eyes to snap him out of whatever zone he had retreated to.

“I know you don’t particularly like anxiety medication, but I thought given the circumstances you might like to try these again,” Sherlock said and pointed to the vial.

“Just a few drops in the water. It won’t knock you out or anything, it’s not even medication. It’s an herbal soother and it should help calm you down a bit and keep full-on anxiety at bay. We both know that today has the potential for you to be heading that way. Best case scenario, they’ll help you relax a little so you won’t stress as much. Worst case scenario is you don’t feel any change at all. They’re legal and everything, you can get them at any health store. They’ve helped me in the past. You know how my mind works and what drastic measures I used to take to calm it down. Given that you’re already stressed and sleep-deprived and you’ll have to recount your story for a second time today, I think it’s worth a try.”

“I guess you are right. They did help calm me down the other day,” John agreed and added five drops to his glass of water.

“Thank you, Sherlock. I mean it.”

“Don’t mention it,” Sherlock said and smiled.

John downed the water like he had spent weeks in the desert without a drop to quench his thirst, and the thought struck Sherlock that John, in all likelihood, had spent weeks in the desert severely dehydrated, especially while he had been in captivity.

Before long, the doorbell rang.

“That’ll be one of Mycroft’s minions. Are you ready, John?” Sherlock asked as he put his coat on.

“Well, I’d rather stay here to be honest. Let’s just get this over with, okay?” his friend replied and got up to follow suit.

A car out of Mycroft’s fleet of sleek, black sedans took them to Whitehall and stopped in front of the Ministry of Defence building. Sherlock got out and waited for John to exit the car before he strode off, clearly knowing his way around.

John had been to Mycroft’s office before, but he was still surprised that this was where they were being briefed.
As soon as they had taken their seats, Anthea appeared with a tray of tea, which she poured for
the three men.

“The Colonel is on his way and should be arriving in five minutes. His driver has just called with
an update. Our own spokeswoman is currently checking the set-up in the board room and will join
you as soon as she can, sir.”

John studied Anthea and Mycroft quietly, still not believing that these two people, who acted so
distant in their business relationship, could be in a romantic relationship as Mrs. Hudson had
hinted.

“Thank you, Anthea. Please bring them here as soon as they arrive. Time is of the essence, I
imagine that the press will be here shortly.”

“Yes, sir,” she said and closed the door behind her.

Mycroft took in John’s appearance at a quick glance and was pleased to note that John had
followed the instructions to wear his medals. The ribbons were neatly pinned to the front of his
suit and it struck Mycroft again just how many medals there were.

But Mycroft also noted the slight hints of exhaustion John displayed. The bags under his eyes
were more pronounced than usual; his skin looked a bit paler. He was definitely sleep-deprived
and he knew from his surveillance teams and Anthea’s chat with Mrs. Hudson that John had
suffered nightmares almost every night of the past week. John’s hands were steady as a rock,
indicating he was under stress even now.

Still, the soldier sat ramrod straight, eyes fully alert, but with his trademark easy smile on his face.
Both Holmes brothers knew that the army doctor was putting up a valiant fight to seem confident
and not let his distress become apparent.

“John, the majority of the press conference this afternoon will involve our spokeswoman and your
CO, Colonel Carlyle giving statements. However, you will be asked to contribute every now and
again, and you will be asked questions. Some of them may be personal. I want you to know that
you are free to refuse to comment,” Mycroft said and watched the soldier.

John looked up to him and gave the tiniest of movements with his head to indicate that he had
understood.

“Now, I don’t need to remind you, but any of the special operations you were part of are strictly
classified.”

“I know that, Mycroft.”

“Good. I trust your earlier interview went well?”

“Yes, it did. At least I think so,” John replied.

“Excellent. There’s another order of business I’d like to discuss with you.”

Mycroft settled in his chair, looking at both Sherlock and John.

“Of course there is,” John muttered under his breath but he was sure that Sherlock had heard him.

“Now John, as you are aware, you will receive the Victoria Cross on Friday. To do so, you will
be required to wear your full military honours.”

Mycroft explained and looked at John.

“I know that Mycroft….“ John said before he took a double-take.

“Oh. So that’s why you requested I wear my medals today.”

“Indeed, John. You will receive the Bar for your Military Cross today. The ceremony won’t be as
big as it should be under normal circumstances, but that will be remedied at Rickerby Hall on
Saturday should you wish so. I did not want to tell you this beforehand, as I feared that this would
cause you undue stress. My apologies, should that assessment have been wrong.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes at his brother’s faked concern. Mycroft shot him a glance.

Before either man could say anything more on that matter, Anthea knocked on the door and
ushered the Colonel and the spokeswoman into Mycroft’s office.

John immediately sprang up and saluted Colonel Carlyle, who returned the salute. Even Sherlock
got up and extended his hand. He usually wasn’t one for social niceties, but John had served
under the Colonel and respected him, so the last thing Sherlock wanted to do was to aggravate
John further by being rude to his superior. He knew better than anyone else that John was trying
to look collected but actually, he seemed close to another nightmare or anxiety attack.

Sherlock had no doubt Mycroft had noticed the signs, but only Sherlock had spent the last few
days observing John and calming him down after devastating nightmares.

He knew the mind is a very fragile thing, and John’s had been repeatedly tested and dragged to its
limits since the original story broke. ‘Was that only a week ago?’ Sherlock thought.

He greeted the Colonel with what amounted to professional respect, but gave the spokeswoman,
twenty-nine, single mother, child is a toddler, has a cat, studied marketing but switched to PR, with the Ministry of Defence for three years’ the cold shoulder.

Together, they discussed their strategy some more, before Anthea knocked on the door again.

“They are ready for you now. If you’d like to follow me?” she said and held the door open. The spokeswoman leapt up and took the lead out the door, followed by the two military men who kept muttering in hushed voices neither Sherlock nor Mycroft could quite catch.

The Holmes brothers were the last to leave. They had agreed that they would slip in the back of the board room and observe.

Mycroft, so he could intervene in proceedings if necessary, as this whole debacle had been made his responsibility when the story first broke and answers were demanded. Sherlock, so he could intervene if John got into trouble, but more so to give John someone to focus on among the crowd of strangers.

The board room was surprisingly large and bright, the far wall was covered in – no doubt bullet-proof – glass from floor to ceiling, letting the London sunshine in. It was bathed in the afternoon light, which warmed the room up as the sun had moved just so that it was illuminating the entire room.

At least two dozen journalists and photographers were gathered, which made the room seem even warmer.

The spokeswoman introduced herself and Colonel Carlyle. John had been asked to wait just outside the door. He knew what was coming and steeled himself for it.

‘Get a grip, Watson! Just like always, military routine. You know the drill!’ John thought to himself while Sherlock and Mycroft took their seats at the back of the room, disappearing through the back door.

“Ladies and gentlemen, before we begin this press conference, there is something I need to make you aware of. Captain Watson will receive the Victoria Cross on Friday, as I am sure you all know. This news has overshadowed other achievements of Captain Watson. In fact, he will also be awarded the Military Cross and Bar. Today. I would, therefore, like you to welcome Colonel Carlyle, Captain Watson’s commanding officer. Colonel Carlyle, if you please…” she said and stepped aside, giving the podium to the Colonel.

The journalists in the room were furiously taking notes, leaning forward in their seats. All photographers had their cameras poised and ready as Colonel Carlyle stepped forward.

“Good afternoon. On the front lines, bravery comes in many shapes and sizes. It’s not always single-handed attacks on insurgents or daring rescue missions that are the bravest acts our soldiers can perform. Sometimes, bravery and gallantry lies in the details. The small things that are often overlooked. Carrying your injured comrade home through enemy terrain or leading your unit back to base, when communications have broken down and your GPS is unreliable, requires courage. This is something to which every soldier can attest.”

The room was filled with the click, click, click from the cameras. Carlyle looked out over the room and then towards the open door where John was standing at attention. The Colonel gave the slightest nod towards John before he continued.

“I have known Captain John Watson for years. We served together. And he really is a remarkable man. Army doctor and career soldier. That’s a very rare combination. I know from experience that it helps to have a medically trained soldier on your team. I also know that the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers have never gone through as many bandages since Captain Watson returned to London.”

A few of the journalists chuckled at that.

“As I am sure you know through reports and the Ministry of Defence’s statement last week, Captain Watson and his unit, plus an additional unit from 4th Battalion have been held prisoner for more than two weeks while they served in Afghanistan in 2009. Their escape was a front page story. However, their time in captivity was never brought up. We have now verified with all those who were present, that it was thanks to Captain Watson that they kept calm, despite their two unit leaders having been killed.”

The Colonel pulled a small box from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of him.

“It might not seem much to civilians, but the ability to keep calm under extreme stress is a crucial trait among soldiers that not everyone possesses. This is where Captain Watson’s seven years’ experience as an army doctor was invaluable. He was trained to stay calm, to not let a situation overwhelm him or distract him from what’s important. And those qualities also make a good leader. When his team was captured and his Captain in charge was killed, Captain Watson took command. For two weeks, he managed to keep his soldiers alive and sane before they were rescued. He knew there was no point fighting their captors in a blind rage as it would have likely resulted in more casualties. But he didn’t just sit back either. For two weeks, he and his men quietly planned their escape and they were ready to implement that plan as soon as the rescue team made contact with them.”

Carlyle glanced up again, camera flashes going off.

“Let me tell you, keeping fourteen adrenaline-fuelled but imprisoned soldiers calm is not easy.
With his actions during their captivity, Captain Watson ensured that all soldiers made it out alive. It takes courage to be imprisoned and not lash out. It takes even more courage to organize two units as one, getting hold of weapons and planning an escape while under constant threat from their captors. It takes courage to maintain morale when it looks like there is no way out. I am therefore greatly honoured to award Captain John Watson of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers the Military Cross and Bar for his actions during those two weeks in 2009 that ensured the survival of his unit.”

At that, John stepped forward towards the podium while the journalists in the room clapped and cheered. He walked with confidence and precise stride until he was facing Colonel Carlyle.

They shook hands and Colonel Carlyle handed John the small box, which he had opened in the meantime. The small black box contained the clasp that would later be attached to the ribbon of John’s previous Military Cross.

John accepted the box with a smile and switched it to his other hand, before snapping his heels together and saluting his commanding officer, who returned the salute.

Once dismissed, John performed a quick turn and walked over to his seat on the podium to start the actual press conference. He breathed in relief when he could sit down and automatically scanned the room to spot Sherlock at the back of the crowd.

The Holmes brothers were among the many people giving him a standing ovation while the photographers were busy snapping away.

Sherlock grinned at John from across the room, visibly pleased with his friend’s achievement. The soldier sat upright and proud, his easy smile on his face hiding the nervousness he was feeling underneath.

The spokeswoman, who introduced herself as Jodi Hall, started the actual press conference with a thorough statement outlining the Ministry of Defence’s view on the Afghanistan situation from 2009 and reiterated that they had been prisoners of war and not hostages. She also explained why John would receive the Victoria Cross.

“How come it took this long for these honours to be awarded? All this happened in 2009 after all,” one of the journalists asked.

“Sometimes it takes a while until recommendations are made. And all those recommendations will then need to be reviewed and verified. This process can take a while. This is what caused the delay in this case,” Ms Hall explained.

John had to try his best not to grimace, and he had a fair idea that Colonel Carlyle had to fight the same urge.

Both men knew that the mission had been secret, and that the Ministry of Defence had just fed the nation’s press a massive lie. It should never have come to light in the first place, and now they had to save face and explain the discrepancies away.

After Jodi Hall had given her statement and answered most of the questions regarding the MoD, she started to moderate the questions directed at Colonel Carlyle and John.

Carlyle was asked to describe what John had been like serving under him and how well he could attest to John’s character. There were questions digging to reveal whether either man had been part of special operations, which both men naturally denied.

There were questions like “Captain Watson, is it true that you went into cardiac arrest when you were shot?” and “What did it feel like to kill your captors?” as the media professionals worked themselves into a frenzy.

Ms Hall had to step in when no one could make out individual questions anymore, it all seemed to blend into one noise.

Shouts of “Captain Watson, how many people have you killed in your career?” and “How did you know how to keep your men calm? Where you working off personal experience?” and “Have you been held prisoner before?” filled the room.

The entire time, camera flashes continued to be aimed at John, who did his best to school his face into a blank expression.

From his seat in the back of the room, Sherlock noticed how John got more and more agitated the more personal the questions became. The tells were minute, but Sherlock knew what to look for and could see that John was doing his best, but he was clearly getting more anxious.

John looked out over the room and tried to catch Sherlock’s eye. He needed someone to focus on, as the questions brought back painful memories. He wondered whether some of the journalists present actually got off on making people this uncomfortable.

After all, there he was, a freshly decorated war hero, even though he hated the term, and all they could think of asking was whether he liked taking some bloke’s life.

The camera flashes were really starting to bother him now, and the sun was warm and unrelenting on his face. The final straw was the gust of wind that came from the corner window, which had been opened, the warm air hitting him square in the face.
Sherlock saw the tiny change in John and knew he had to get his friend out of there. He typed out a quick text.

“GO. I’VE GOT YOUR BACK. –SH”

John felt his mobile buzzing in his pocket, and pulled it out, keeping it in his lap and out of sight. He looked up and immediately found Sherlock’s gaze, who nodded at him.

With that, John Watson leapt up, nearly knocking his chair over. He mumbled “Excuse me” as he quickly strode towards the door and out of the board room.

As soon as the door closed behind him, he doubled over, hands on his knees and trying hard to steady his breathing. He kept his eyes shut tightly, but it didn’t work. So he righted himself and ran down the corridor, diving into the first empty office he came across.

In the board room, the journalists were frantically trying to get information regarding where John had disappeared to and why. While some muttered that it was stress related and wondered out loud whether “a person like that, who seemingly can’t deal with stressful situations” was actually capable of the acts of heroism that had just been attributed to him, Sherlock got up.

Colonel Carlyle and Jodi Hall were equally stunned and wondered why John had left proceedings so suddenly.

“Ladies and gentlemen, could I have your attention, please?” Sherlock asked, raising his voice to drown out the nattering of the journalists.

Once it had quieted down a bit, he continued.

“My name is Sherlock Holmes, and as you may know, I work with Captain Watson. I’d like to remind you that Captain Watson is also a doctor and as such, he is on call today. He has a very strong sense of duty and he would never neglect a patient in favour of a press conference.... Carry on.”

As soon as Sherlock was done, he ducked out the back door and into the corridor, leaving his brother to do what he did best – damage control.

Sherlock looked around but couldn’t see John, but he knew his friend still had to be close.

He tried several doors until he came across one behind which he could hear John’s distinctive voice barking orders which were muffled by the heavy door.

All John could feel was the relentless desert sun beating down on his face and neck. The reflection of the sand was almost blindingly bright and to make matters worse, he could see muzzle flashes all around.

“Shit, we’re under attack! Hit the deck!” he shouted, retreating towards a mahogany desk.

But to him, this wasn’t a desk in a plush office in Whitehall. This was a rocky outcrop somewhere in the middle of No Man’s Land.

He grabbed an umbrella from a stand in the corner and briefly wondered why his rifle had been stored in such a way, but he figured it didn’t matter as long as he was able to defend his position and his men.

“Down you idiots! Do you want to get shot?” he shouted at the empty room, eyes darting around to see where the next attack would come from.

Sherlock only hesitated a second at the door. From what he could hear, John was hallucinating and back in Afghanistan. His heart sunk a bit at that and he could have kicked himself for not intervening earlier. He had seen John’s distress but had not judged the situation to be as severe as it proved to be.

He carefully pressed the door handle down and pushed the door open, steeling himself for whatever situation was currently playing out in John’s mind.

The situation that greeted him behind the door could have been quite comical, if it hadn’t been so serious.

John lay on the plush carpet, keeping low and hiding behind a row of files, the end of an umbrella much like Mycroft’s resting on the folders and pointed straight at him. His friend was squinting, no doubt trying to locate his target through the scope.

Then John ducked even deeper, pressing himself flat to the ground while he lobbed a staple at Sherlock, clearly thinking he’d just thrown a grenade.

The detective was able to move out of the office item’s path just in time as it sailed past him and crashed into the wall behind him. Sherlock was amazed by the strength of John’s throw, but he was also sure that John didn’t know who he was or where exactly they were at the moment.

“Hold your fire, Captain! It’s me! Don’t shoot!”

Sherlock yelled and held up his hands to show they were empty. Then he held them protectively over the back of his head as he crouched down and hastily made his way to John’s side.

“John?” he asked hesitantly as he lowered himself to the floor next to his friend.
“Keep your head down! No idea where the bastards came from, most of their fire seems to come from north-northwest,” John said.

“Jack, can you see them? I’ve got three in my sights from here, but there are more than just three. Have you got the others?” John called over his shoulder.

Although there couldn’t have been a reply, John seemed to be satisfied with the response he got as he nodded and carefully aligned his umbrella-turned-rifle.

Sherlock knew that this hallucination was serious, but he also wished that the people in that room across the hall, the ones who had wondered whether John was a capable soldier and Captain, could see him now.

This was Captain Watson in action, taking charge, keeping calm even while he was under attack. He may bark out orders, but his hands are sure and steady on his weapon, and his breathing is slow as he takes perfect aim.

Sherlock shifted position, deliberately bumping into John in an attempt to shake him out of this hallucination, but it didn’t have the desired effect.

“Keep still, Lieutenant!” John hissed.

That’s when Sherlock decided to switch tactics. John was clearly too deeply immersed that touch and voice alone could not get him to snap out of it. He, therefore, tried to play into John’s protective instincts.

“Sorry, sir. It’s just… my leg, sir,” Sherlock said and pointed down at his thigh.

John glanced down at him and then immediately blanched.

“Shit! Why didn’t you say you’ve been shot?”

He rolled over to get to his non-existent kit and then glanced around, deeming the space under the mahogany desk was a serviceable cave to take shelter in for now.

He bodily dragged Sherlock across and made sure that the detective was under cover, before John started to press his hands to Sherlock’s knee.

“Damn it! That looks like it might have nicked the artery. Why didn’t you say anything?”

John muttered as his hands grabbed for bandages that weren’t there and started applying them to Sherlock’s non-existent wound. Sherlock admired again how John’s hands were steady as a rock while he worked.

Once John deemed the wound suitably wrapped, Sherlock sat up next to John, who was still crouching by his side. He carefully took off his scarf.

“Captain! You’re bleeding!” he exclaimed and pointed at John’s shoulder, where he knew the actual scar was.

“What?”

John looked down at himself.

“Oh, that’s not good,” he remarked dryly before he started shaking.

Sherlock bunched up his scarf in one hand and put the other on John’s shoulder, pretending to stem the blood flow.

“Can you smell that, Captain?” Sherlock asked and moved the scarf closer to John’s face.

“Smell what, Lieutenant? All I can smell is dust and sweat and diesel.”

“Ok, what else?” Sherlock prompted and moved the scarf even closer.

“I don’t know,” John said and frowned, wondering why he was shaking until he remembered that he had apparently been shot, again.

“Here, Captain, maybe this’ll help. At the very least it’ll keep the dust out of your airways,” Sherlock explained as he lightly tied the scarf around John’s mouth and nose like a bandana.

“Deep breaths, Captain. Talk to me. What can you smell?” Sherlock prompted again, while pretending to see to John’s wound.

John frowned. He drew in a breath through his nose. The sensation hit him entirely unexpected. He could smell an expensive aftershave, ‘Sherlock’s Armani stuff’ his mind supplied, and traces of the detective’s imported cedar wood and orange body wash.

He inhaled again and his nostrils filled with the lingering scents of rosin and cigarettes and Mrs. Hudson’s laundry detergent, tea, coffee and hints of sulphur that had been part of Sherlock’s last experiment.

John blinked and Sherlock noticed that his friend was slowly coming out of the hallucination.

“What can you smell, John?” he asked again, more softly this time.
“Home,” John blurted out without thinking about it.

“Good. And where is home, John?”

John hesitated for a moment and blinked again.

“London,” he said.

“Baker Street. 221b.”

“Good, John. And where are you now?” Sherlock asked as John looked around the room and groaned.

The sand underneath him turned back into the thick carpet it actually was and the rifle became an umbrella again.

“Oh God! Please don’t tell me…”

John closed his eyes in horror, thinking about the press conference.

“Good, you’re back. Don’t worry, as far as the press is concerned you were called to a medical emergency. Nobody knows you’re still in the building.”

John looked at Sherlock.

“God, I’m messed up, aren’t I?” John asked as he rubbed his face.

Sherlock noticed that his friend was not crying for once.

“Well, I have to say, at least my attacks seem to get more and more extravagant,” John chuckled, still not quite believing he had thought that Whitehall had transformed into Afghanistan.

“Normal is dull,” Sherlock said and looked at his friend, grinning. John couldn’t help but grin as well, the situation was just too ridiculous for anything else.

Sherlock pulled out his phone and texted his brother.

“FOUND JOHN. HE’S OK. NOT RETURNING TO CONFERENCE. NEED CAR.– SH”

The reply came an instant later.

“CONFERENCE ABOUT TO END. SECURITY ALERTED. USE EXIT 4. – MH.”

Sherlock looked at John who was still catching his breath after giggling for a while.

“The conference is about to draw to a close. I guess Ms Hall and the Colonel have kept everyone busy. Shall we?” he asked as he got back on his feet.

John nodded and got up, taking in the room. The décor was about as you’d expect for the office of a British diplomat. John picked up the umbrella and returned it to its stand before he noticed the shattered plastic stapler and matching dent in the white wall.

“Ah, yes. It seems that the Ministry of Defence can’t be defended with its own office supplies. Now, the letter opener could have done some damage, but the stapler proved utterly useless,” Sherlock deadpanned and John laughed out loud.

“Why did I throw a stapler at you?” he wondered.

“I think at the time you thought I was the enemy and the stapler was a grenade. Impressive throw, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

“Maybe we should stop by MI6 on the way home. I’m sure Q-Branch could come up with a stapler that could actually turn into a grenade,” Sherlock said.

John gaped at him.

“Did you just…? Did you just make a James Bond pop culture reference?”

John sounded incredulous and Sherlock didn’t understand why.

“James who? No, I mean it. This could actually be a decent suggestion for Q-Branch,” Sherlock answered, completely serious and completely oblivious to one of Britain’s most famous fictional spies.

John just shook his head, an exasperated half-chuckle, half-sigh escaping him.

Sherlock reached the door, pulled it open and glanced up and down the corridor. He spotted the security detail by the far stairwell, who spoke into a walkie talkie and then gestured for Sherlock and John to follow him.

“Ready to go?” Sherlock asked.

“God, yes! Lead the way!”
Sherlock and John were ushered down stairwells and corridors until they ended up in an underground garage with one of Mycroft’s fleet cars waiting for them.

John climbed in first and Sherlock followed close behind, telling the driver to drop them at Regent’s Park instead of Baker Street.

“Are you alright, John?” Sherlock asked as he grabbed a bottle of water that he knew his brother kept in his cars and handed it to his friend.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good, Sherlock. Thanks. It’s just… those bloody camera flashes and the sun and it got warmer and warmer and Carlyle was there so I was back in the military mindset….”, he trailed off and unscrewed the cap on the bottle.

“I’m alright now, though.”

John took a sip of the water and relished it.

“You know, I do believe those drops you gave me actually helped. I’m much calmer now than usual and I know I was hallucinating and by God it wasn’t the first time, but it wasn’t bad as such. We were under attack and then I thought I had to treat a gunshot wound. That was actually pretty routine for me, so maybe that’s why I’m so calm now.”

He took another sip of the water before closing the bottle again.

“It was a flashback to the war, yes, but that’s all it was, I think. No torture, no pain for me. No nothing, really, except the typical adrenaline rush. But thank you, for getting me out of my own head.”

“Yeah. That was clever. You knew I’d associate that particular smell with 221b. It actually smells like you and the flat,” John said as he looked over at Sherlock, mulling his words over.

“You didn’t put it close to any unsanitary experiments lately, did you? I didn’t just inhale a home-made version of Y. Pestis that you’ve been cooking up or anything like that, right?”

Sherlock looked offended.

“Do you really think I’d put my scarf around my own neck if I had exposed it to bubonic plague?”

John looked caught.

“Well… not on purpose, probably. Unless you wanted to study it first-hand…” he said but grinned.

It took Sherlock a second to realize that it was a joke, but then he grinned as well.

The driver dropped them off on the far side of Regent’s Park. Sherlock decided that the fresh air would do John good and the doctor had to agree.

Out in the park, the sun was still warm on his face, but he had a constant cool breeze around him.
and the sounds of London traffic and the occasional burglar alarm to ground him.

The two friends took their time, taking the long way round the boating lake back to Baker Street. The entire way, Sherlock kept watching John and John was aware he was being studied again. But he was grateful that Sherlock had provided him with an opportunity that he could leave the press conference with his reputation still intact.

John felt himself relax more and more the longer they walked, light-hearted banter and bickering being thrown back and forth between them.

After several pensioners had stopped and stared at John’s suit jacket, the doctor decided to take it off and fold it over his arm so his medals were hidden. The last thing he needed right now was to be approached by former servicemen.

Sherlock had to admit that John didn’t look as shaken as he had done in the past. The hallucination seemed to really have been a flashback to a pretty routine occurrence for John, rather than one that caused his usual responses.

John was calm, collected and confident, apart from his aversion to talk about his military service, which Sherlock could understand.

The two men got themselves coffees from one of the stalls near the Baker Street end of the boating lake and sat on the grass for a while, neither having anything else on at the moment.

While John enjoyed the coffee and the London sunshine and the feel of fresh grass underneath him, Sherlock sat with his back leaning against a willow tree, letting his fingers fly over the keyboard of his phone as he texted.

When they got back to Baker Street, a black car was parked out front. They both knew what it meant, and as soon as they entered they could hear Mrs. Hudson fussing over making tea.

“It’s no trouble, Mrs. Hudson, my brother should be back shortly,” they heard Mycroft say as they ascended the stairs.

“Please, do make yourself at home, brother,” Sherlock said derisively as he strode into the living room.

“Mycroft,” John greeted and nodded, acutely aware that he’d basically fled a press conference that had been about him.

“John, I trust you are feeling better? I was not aware that your episodes could be triggered like this, nor did I think that they would take that particular form,” Mycroft said and looked John over.

“Well, it wasn’t fun. And it’s been a while since I had a response like that. To be fair, even I didn’t think that the London sunshine could trigger anything at all, but there you go,” John replied as he took a seat in his armchair.

Mrs. Hudson busied herself in the kitchen making tea and shooing Sherlock out of her way. The detective joined his brother and John in the living room, knowing better than to get in Mrs. Hudson’s way in the kitchen.

“Congratulations again, John. Well deserved,” Mycroft said.

“Thanks, Mycroft.”

“I’m sure you’re aware that your sudden departure earlier caused quite a stir. However, we have explained the situation thusly: you attended the press conference even though the surgery had you on call for today. The text Sherlock sent you was in fact from the clinic asking you for immediate backup. We reiterated that you are a working GP and that your duty comes first, which is why you left so abruptly. I know for a fact that there weren’t any reporters or photographers in the corridor and the doors were closed the entire time, so believe me when I say your exit was secret.”

“Good… that’s… good. Ta,” John replied.

That scenario actually made sense, so he was happy to go with it.

The three men shared their tea in silence, before Mycroft rose to his feet and buttoned up his suit jacket again.

He left the flat on Baker Street with another twirl of his umbrella and only then did John finally relax.

Sherlock noticed with a frown that John had not yet voiced any desires to have dinner, which was something that concerned him. John always wanted to eat, but he had made no attempts of getting up and cooking something.

The detective let John watch television for three hours, knowing that John just needed something else to concentrate on for a while. Sherlock had recorded a few episodes of Time Team throughout the month and they now sat in their respective armchairs, studying the archaeology and geography of various places throughout Britain.

Sherlock would never admit it out loud, but the historical facts that the show uncovered sometimes proved useful to him and a few of his experiments on clay had stemmed from the programme.

It had gone 9pm when Sherlock couldn’t stand it any longer. He threw his phone at John.
“Dinner. Call somewhere.”

John was startled when the phone landed in his lap and looked up at his friend.

“Uhm... right. Any preferences?”

“Not for me. Dinner for you. Your borborygmus is interfering with my thought process,” Sherlock said, as if that statement was enough of an explanation.

“I’m sorry? My what?”

Sherlock let out a theatrical sigh.

“Honestly John. Your stomach is rumbling so loudly I can’t hear my own thoughts. Order something or make something, I don’t care which, but do eat and be quiet.”

John blushed slightly. He could feel his stomach rumbling now that Sherlock had drawn attention to it but had honestly not felt hungry before.

He picked up the phone and ordered his favourite chicken tikka masala and naan bread. To celebrate his Military Cross, he decided to get seconds, so he could have some for lunch the next day as well. Sherlock rolled his eyes at the thought that ordering seconds of a takeaway meal was what John considered a celebratory splurge.

The food arrived half an hour later, and Sherlock was glad to see that John actually was hungry, judging by how fast he devoured his meal.

They sat together for another hour talking about this and that and Sherlock correcting every answer on QI before John called it a night.

Sherlock got changed and settled in on the couch. Despite the day John had had, the soldier did not suffer from another nightmare or anxiety attack.

Sherlock made a mental note to refill the rescue drops soon and retreated into his Mind Palace in the knowledge that John was slowly but surely coming to terms with everything that had happened to him.

On Wednesday morning, John got an early call from a clinic he was as of yet unfamiliar with. But the small family surgery needed a doctor and it was relatively close by, so he agreed to take the shift.

If he was honest with himself, he just wanted to feel useful in London, put his medical skills to good use and not think about war and gunfire for a while.

The staff at the surgery greeted him eagerly when he arrived. Their whole waiting room was full of people by 8am and they were not only one but two doctors down. One had taken a pre-approved holiday, the other had caught a stomach bug off one of his patients.

The hectic clinic actually helped John, who was used to work on tight schedules. This suited him just fine and he got right into it. A sprained ankle, a slipped disc and a few hay fever patients later, he grabbed a quick coffee from the reception area.

“Need a breather? I can hold the next one off five more minutes,” the petite, blonde receptionist smiled at him warmly.

“If you could, just long enough for me to finish my first cuppa, that’d be great,” he smirked back.

They chatted for a minute and he was instantly smitten with her infectious, easy laugh. She was bubbly and had a warm personality and they instantly seemed to get on.

Throughout the day, he met the other staff at the surgery and helped with a consultation when a second opinion was needed.

When he came home, he found a copy of Heather’s paper on the coffee table, opened by Mrs. Hudson no doubt, to the exclusive article about him.

The main picture immediately caught his eye. It wasn’t the one of him posing by the window as he had expected. In fact, he didn’t remember this picture being taken at all.

It was a picture of him and Sherlock, standing by the fireplace surrounded by the skull and insect specimen boxes. Sherlock was holding his violin and smirking at John, while John stood there, one hand on his hip pushing his suit jacket open while the other hand was on Sherlock’s arm. John was laughing whole-heartedly and unabashedly in the picture and he remembered actually having to grab hold of Sherlock’s arm to keep his balance. Somehow, the photographer had managed to capture that unguarded moment between two best friends, sharing a laugh in their home.

There were other pictures, of John sitting on the couch looking serious, another one with Sherlock and one of John in combat uniform, as expected.

John put the paper away with the intention of cutting out the picture of him and Sherlock laughing together, getting it framed and giving it to long-suffering Mrs. Hudson.

On Thursday, the surgery called John to fill in again, much to Sherlock’s delight. That meant that
John could think about something else and he had free reign of the kitchen table. It also meant he
could get on with a few things he had planned for a while now.

Only twenty minutes after John had left for his shift, Sherlock exited Baker Street with his violin
case in hand and hailed a cab.

As it was, both Sherlock and John returned to the flat at roughly the same time. John had just put
the kettle on when Sherlock strode into the kitchen.

“What did you do to upset him this time?” he asked, slightly exasperated.

“He’s the one who should apologise! His trained monkeys completely destroyed my perfectly safe
samples!”

John decided to stop arguing. They’d been in this situation too many times for him to hope for a
different outcome.

Thirty minutes later the door bell rang and Sherlock groaned as he heard the footsteps ascending
their stairs.

“Mycroft, what do you want now?” he asked without turning towards the door through which his
brother had just entered.

“I swear he’s like a cat sometimes. Always dragging in dead things and leaving them on the
kitchen table or under the couch for me to find. And then he expects someone to praise him for
having been so clever that he got the dead parts in the first place,” John chuckled.

“Yes, indeed”, Mycroft agreed.

“His nannies despaired. I think he went through five different nannies when he was nine years
old, he’d just leave more and more disgusting things lying around his room to see how far he
could push them before they’d have a fit.”

“I am sitting right here and I can, in fact, hear you, you know?” Sherlock commented from his
place at the kitchen table.

He had to smirk, though. John wasn’t the first to comment he acted like a feline and he did enjoy
praise. Not for finding body parts, any idiot could do that and get some from the morgue at Bart’s,
but for his successful experiments he conducted with them.

John rolled his eyes at his flatmate.

“Anyway, Mycroft, I gather you came over for a reason?” he prompted as both men sat down in
the armchairs in the lounge.

“Ah, yes. There are certain protocols in place at Buckingham Palace that you will need to be
aware of for your Victoria Cross Investiture. I trust my brother has not informed you yet.”
“Sherlock knows the Palace protocol? How?”

“As I thought. How he knows it does not matter at this point, all that matters is that he does, in fact, know it.”

Mycroft emphasized the last part of that sentence and glared at Sherlock, the look saying ‘behave yourself at the Palace or else.’

“Well, John, as you will be meeting Her Majesty the Queen, you need to know how to address her correctly. In her presence, you should call her Your Majesty or Ma’am. Should you use the latter, please be aware that it is pronounced ‘maun’ and not ‘mam.’”

John nodded to show he understood. He was actually aware of this due to his time in the army, but he let Mycroft explain it anyway.

Mycroft told him how he should conduct himself, what the correct address was for the main people involved in the investiture and even included table manners. John gave a short snort, insisting that he was not the one who needed a lesson in table manners, but Mycroft looked at him and he quieted down.

“While at the table, don’t bend forward towards your food. Keep your back straight and bring the food to your mouth, preferably without looking down,” the older Holmes brother explained.

“Don’t worry about that, though. It took Mycroft years to get it right,” Sherlock chimed in.

“Anyway,” Mycroft quickly tried to change the subject.

“During your actual investiture, the way you approach Her Majesty is just like you did on Tuesday. The Lord Chamberlain will give a short introduction and explain which medal you are being awarded and why. The Queen will then call you forward and you will approach slowly. She will congratulate you and shake your hand, then she will present you with the Victoria Cross. You will accept it with a smile, snap your heels and salute.”

“Coming to the ‘shun…” John muttered under his breath.

“Beg your pardon?” Mycroft asked.

“That last movement. When we snap our heels together and then move into the salute. It’s called ‘coming to the ‘shun’ in the army, or rather coming to attention,” John clarified.

“Yes. Thank you. The Queen may or may not talk to you during the Investiture. If she does, always be courteous in your replies. Once you have received your award, you will leave with a quick turn…”

“… about face,” John supplied, and he took delight in the fact that it annoyed Mycroft.

“The quick turn on your heels when you leave the presence of higher ranking officers. It’s called ‘about face’. Mycroft, I was in the army for nearly fifteen years. I know how to conduct myself in the presence of higher ranking officers. I received my Distinguished Service Order from Prince Charles, as I’m sure it states somewhere in my records. I know this drill.”

“Very well,” Mycroft conceded and started explaining some of the minor rules and regulations at Buckingham Palace.

He left thirty minutes later, after stating that a car from the Palace would pick John, his sister, Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson up at 2pm.

Mrs. Hudson came upstairs about an hour later.

“Oh hello, my dears. John, there was a delivery for you earlier. I hope you don’t mind, but I put it in your room,” she said and rested her hand on the back of his shoulder.

“No, not at all. Thank you, Mrs. Hudson.”

John slowly walked up the stairs to his bedroom. He opened the door and saw… nothing. No box, no parcel, nothing out of the ordinary.

Frowning, he stepped over the threshold and checked his room with a three-hundred and sixty-degree turn. At the back of his door, he found a garment bag hanging from the small hook.

He opened the bag and took in his uniform. It was immaculate. He pulled the bag down but left the actual garment on the coat hanger. Then he took his suit jacket down and carefully attached the medals in their right place on his uniform jacket, taking special care as he fastened the clasp to his Military Cross.

John was lost in thought as he stroked his hand across his medals. He nearly jumped when his mobile rang.

“Watson!”

“Hey, John.”

“Oh, hey Greg. What’s up?”

“Not much. I take it His Highness has told you about the lab incident?”
“He mentioned bits of it.”

“Right. Anyway, I was wondering whether you’d fancy a pint. I was thinking of asking a few people out, the more, the merrier,” Lestrade said and John found himself agreeing.

“Uhm, about 45 minutes, the usual?”

“Sounds good, John! See you later! Oh, and tell that insufferable flatmate of yours he’s welcome to come as long as he apologises to Susan.”

“You and I both know that’s not going to happen. The apology, that is,” John sighed.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Anyway, see you in a few.”

John returned downstairs to find that Sherlock hadn’t really moved except to set up another two beakers on the kitchen table for one of his experiments.

“I’m sure Lestrade invited me along as well, but I won’t apologise. He should apologise to me. Until then, I will conduct my experiments and apply my deduction skills elsewhere,” Sherlock said before John could explain that Lestrade had just called.

“Well, suit yourself, Sherlock. I need a pint and I want to drink that pint with my friends. That includes you. When you decide that this childishness is beneath you, come find us at The Gunmaker. If not, I’ll be back around ten.”

John knew that this sort of blackmail didn’t usually work on Sherlock, but that didn’t stop him from trying. He knew that Sherlock wasn’t a people person, but the offer was there and genuine, and he’d hate to see Sherlock distance himself more than he should. Especially after how much the detective had helped him these past two weeks.

“Give my regards to Mike and Molly,” Sherlock called after John as the soldier left the flat.

As soon as the front door snapped shut, Sherlock grinned. His plan was working well. John knew that he barely ever went to a pub, unless it was required for a case like that night at the Trainyard. So him declining the offer to join them would not raise suspicions.

He had actually arranged this pub outing himself. That is to say, he had spoken to Molly at Bart’s when he picked his spleens up and suggested she could meet up with John as he seemed to need company, and maybe she could ask around whether anyone else fancied coming with them.

However, she was under strict instruction to treat John just like she had before the story about his unit broke, and to not mention his military service at all, if avoidable.

So Molly had asked Lestrade when he came by for the latest autopsy report and then she had asked Mike to come along for good measure.

The three of them were already at the pub when John walked in. He spotted Molly and Mike sitting at a table in the corner, and Lestrade standing at the bar ordering a round of lager.

Lestrade carried the three pint glasses over to the table, trying not to spill too much, and deposited them on the table with a clunk.

“Sorry, Molls, getting your red wine now, didn’t have enough hands,” Greg smirked.

“Give you a hand?” John asked and went back to the bar with Lestrade who ordered the wine and a few packets of crisps for the table.

Together, they made their way back over.

“Here you are, Molly. One glass of house red,” Lestrade said as he put the glass down in front of her.

“Thanks, Greg.”

“John, hope the usual is alright?”

“Yeah, cheers. I got crisps in if anyone wants any.”

John waved the crisps bags around and put them in the middle of the table, opening them so that everyone could reach.

“How are you, John? Haven’t seen you around for a while,” Molly enquired while she grabbed a crisp.

“I’m alright. Not too bad, all things considered. And you? I hear Sherlock managed to talk you into giving him samples again?” he grinned around his pint glass.

Molly blushed a bit.

“Well, you know…He was being nice and it’s not like we were storing them for anything, they would have gone into the waste bin…”

John put his hand on hers and looked at her.

“Molly it’s alright. He’s a manipulative bastard at the best of times,” he grinned.
“Hear, hear,” Lestrade chimed in.

“So John, Greg here tells me you played the guitar the other day in public? How did that go?” Mike asked after he took a sip of his beer.

John shot Greg a glance.

“Pretty well, actually, if I say so myself. That was fun, haven’t performed in ages!”

“Oh, what did you play?” Molly asked.

“Layla, by Eric Clapton. It was a toss-up really, between three songs, so I got Mrs. Hudson and Sherlock to decide because I just couldn’t choose.”

“He was really good. Wouldn’t have believed it was him if I hadn’t told him to demonstrate before we went in,” Lestrade chimed in.

“John Watson! Have you been holding out on us?” Molly said with mock shock.

John just grinned.

“I’m sure that can be remedied, Molly. Mycroft actually let me keep the guitar, so who knows?” he said.

But then John remembered something.

“Sherlock can play jazz on the saxophone!” he blurted out, and Lestrade nearly spat out his drink.


“Yeah, shocker, right? I couldn’t believe it when he told me! Apparently he plays the piano, too. I swear, is there anything he’s not good at?” John took another sip of his beer.

For the next two hours, the four of them talked about various musical tastes and topics of mutual interests. John didn’t even notice that his upcoming ceremony or the army weren’t mentioned by any of his friends at all.

He just enjoyed spending the time with his friends and in good company.

[1] Yersinia pestis, the bacteria that causes the plague

[2] This is something Diana, Princess of Wales once commented on

[3] High military honours are always presented by the Queen or other senior members of the Royal Family
When John returned to Baker Street around 10pm that night, Sherlock was still up and waiting for him in the living room, sprawled across the couch in his usual way.

As soon as John entered the living room, Sherlock sat up straight and looked at him. John immediately went on full alert.

“Sherlock?”

“John, you’re back.”

John looked around the flat as if anyone else could have come in behind him.

“No shit, Sherlock,” he exclaimed and studied his flatmate for a second before he deemed it safe to turn his back.

“I’m making tea. Want one?” he called over his shoulder as he retreated to the kitchen.

“Yes.”

John pulled down two mugs and filled the kettle. He automatically added the correct amount of sugar and milk to each cup and then returned to the living room, sitting down on the couch and forcing Sherlock to relinquish part of his sofa cushion.

He handed the consulting detective his mug and then took a sip of his own tea.

“You should have come out tonight. It was good. Oh, and Molly and Mike say hi,” John said.

“Well, it’s obvious you had a good night. You had two… no three pints of lager and some Worcester Sauce crisps, that much is evident. Molly sat to your right, judging by the concentration of her perfume on your right sleeve and shoulder. Mike sat to your left and he had more than two pints as well, as he gets tipsy after two, he spilled his beer on your left hand…”

Sherlock shot off his deductions at incredible speed.

“Sherlock, calm down. What’s got into you? You’re right about Molly, but Mike didn’t spill the beer, the guy next to me at the bar bumped into my side and sloshed his drink around. Look, I had a good time, it was nice and relaxing after the last two weeks we’ve had,” John explained.

Sherlock got up and retrieved a small CD case from his desk. He held it out to John.

“I know I probably didn’t show enough appreciation for your military actions and surviving those actions. But I know that tomorrow is a big day for you. And, as your friend, I wanted to give you this, before it all gets lost in a crowd of well-wishers.”

Sherlock kept holding the CD case and looked at John before he quickly turned his head to study the flock pattern of the wallpaper.

“What’s this?” John asked and took the CD.

“It would appear to be a CD case, John. Even your powers of observation should go that far!” Sherlock exclaimed before he could stop himself.

“Shush, you! Don’t spoil it, you were being really nice there.”

John opened the case and found a CD inside. Even though it looked professionally made, the CD case it came in meant that it had clearly not been purchased in a shop. Behind the cover, John found a track list. Some of the compositions he recognized, there were some of his favourites, like Gideon Klein’s Lullaby, for example. Some of the composition titles did not ring a bell, though.

He read through the list, murmuring under his breath as he read.

“The Lark Ascending, composed by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Nocturnal, composed by Sherlock Holmes…”

John did a double take.
“Composed by… Sherlock, you composed these songs?” his disbelief was clearly written all over his face as he looked up at his friend.

“Not all. Just some,” Sherlock clarified.

John kept reading the list until the very end.

“All renditions performed by Sherlock Holmes, on the Provigny Stradivarius… You… you recorded this entire CD? For me?”

John couldn’t really believe it. In his hand he held the best present – bar the 221b Medal of Bravery – Sherlock had ever given him.

“I’m speechless! Thank you, Sherlock, thank you so much.”

“It only seemed appropriate. These are all the songs I usually play during the nights when you can’t sleep. It just struck me the other day when we were injured that I can’t always play or I might not be here. I know that logically, these nightmares should become less and less as time progresses but until then, you can listen to this recording should I not be available straight away. You see, it’s purely a practical gift…”

“Thank you, Sherlock. This is… yes… very practical of you. And very nice. Sentimental even,” John said. Sherlock grimaced at the word.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell. The secret, that you’re really a sentimental person who cares about others, is safe with me. But I really do appreciate this!” John said and read through the list of compositions again.

“Would you play some of your compositions for me? I’m sure I’ve heard them before, but I never knew they were composed by you,” John requested and Sherlock exhaled, relieved that this particular gift seemed to be well received compared to a few he’d given John before. He’d never repeat the “Traits you share with Serial Killers” essay fiasco and John hadn’t really enjoyed a bound copy of his Tobacco Ash and Perfume Scents studies either.

Sherlock retrieved his violin from its case and moved towards the window, playing his compositions in the order he’d recorded them earlier that day.

He had used the time that John had been at a clinic to call in a favour from the manager at Abbey Road Studios, who he’d solved a case for years ago. Sherlock had actually had the idea to record his compositions for a while, but this had been the first available timeslot and he didn’t even need to make up a cover story so John wouldn’t be suspicious.

John brought out the bottle of Balvenie again and filled two glasses with the whisky. He sipped at it while he listened to Sherlock play.

All in all, this was as relaxing an evening as 221b was likely to see and he was glad for this sense of normalcy. Sherlock’s songs were as relaxing as he knew they would be, and more beautiful than he had realized.

Now that he knew which pieces had been composed by Sherlock, no doubt standing where he was right now, compared to those of the big name composers of old, John was even more in awe of Sherlock’s skill. He wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference. And it moved John immeasurably, that Sherlock had composed some of those pieces for him, just to help him recover and relax.

John knew that Sherlock was a good man, underneath his bespoke suit and sociopath armour; a man who had a heart, but was careful of whom he showed it to. John had known this for years, but it had been clear to see ever since Sherlock had apparently committed suicide to save his friends. No heartless man would have made so self-less a sacrifice.

Despite Sherlock’s music, John had trouble sleeping that night. But it wasn’t nightmares that kept him awake for once. It was nerves.

He usually prided himself on staying calm as far as nerves were concerned, no matter what situation he was in, but getting the Victoria Cross and meeting the Queen, plus all the rules he’d have to remember at Buckingham Palace, meant that his mind kept running through scenarios of how he could possibly screw this up.

At some point, Sherlock stopped playing his instrument, and put the CD on instead, before he retreated to his own bedroom. He knew John would be fine that night.

The next morning, John got up early and went downstairs for a cup of coffee. He wasn’t surprised to find Sherlock already sitting at the kitchen table.

“Morning.” John mumbled.

“Morning, John,” Sherlock replied, much too chipper for John’s liking at that time of the morning.

“God, I need a coffee…” John said, more to himself than Sherlock, as he made his way across to the kettle.

He shuffled around a bit, glanced over at Sherlock who already had a mug in front of him, shrugged, gave a non-committal “huh” sound and planted himself on one of the kitchen chairs as soon as the coffee was ready.
It took John the entire cup of coffee to wake up properly.

He made himself some sausage sandwiches for breakfast once he trusted himself around oil and a gas stove. Sherlock had declined the offer of breakfast, reminding John that there would be a banquet at the Palace which he would have to attend and he would be forced to eat something then.

After breakfast, John watched TV for a bit, but gave up when the news turned to his impending Investiture.

Once he figured he couldn’t delay any longer and he would have to get ready in time before his sister got to Baker Street, John went into the bathroom.

His shower was long, twice as long as usual, but he wanted to look his best. He shaved, with foam and his father’s old razors rather than the electric one he normally used, and made sure his hair was styled just right. John also got out his Diesel aftershave and applied it liberally.

After all, it was a gift and he only got to use it instead of his normal cheap stuff on special occasions. And if meeting the Queen and receiving the Victoria Cross wasn’t a special occasion, then he didn’t know what was.

As a doctor, he always kept his nails trimmed, but he clipped them anyway to make sure they were clean. Then he nearly doused himself in deodorant thanks to a stubborn nozzle, before he deemed himself ready to face the day.

He vacated the bathroom and retreated upstairs, leaving Sherlock to grab a quick shower himself.

Once in his bedroom, John closed the door and carefully laid out his uniform. He lifted his dog tags out of their box and carefully placed them over his head. He started to relax as soon as the familiar weight settled around his neck.

As he put on his uniform, he took special care not to crease anything. After underwear and black socks, he put on a crisp white dress shirt and then his new navy-coloured trousers with a single, wide red stripe down the side of the leg. Then he lifted his dress shoes out of their box and put them on, careful not to smudge or scoff them as he bent down to tie them. He once again made sure the dog tags were in place by feeling for them through the fabric, before he went over to the coat hanger by the door to get his jacket.

John buttoned it up carefully; making sure his fingers would not leave any marks on the buttons. The jacket fit him like a second skin, it was snug but did not restrict his movements at all. He fastened the white belt around his waist over the jacket before he put on his gloves.

He retrieved his red and white plumed beret from its resting place in the box and only then did he take a look in the floor-length mirror.

The sight that greeted him was a sight that John had thought he’d never see again. Staring back at him was a confident and proud soldier, a leader, who had seen battle and survived.

Here was the man those stories had been about. A man his team had trusted with their lives and a man who had put his own life on the line for his unit.

Even though he was still the same kind and compassionate John Watson, the man in the mirror looked nothing like the jumper-clad doctor most of London knew. It felt like a throwback to a different lifetime for John, to see himself in his regiment’s uniform.

He traced his rank insignia on the epaulettes and double-checked that he had attached his RAMC badge to his uniform as well.

John made sure that all lines on his uniform were exact, his trouser legs straight and the belt buckle resting in between the buttons of his jacket, high on his waist. Then John tucked his beret under his arm and slowly made his way back downstairs.

It appeared that while he had been upstairs getting ready, Harry had arrived. At least he could hear his sister chatting with Mrs. Hudson before he entered the living room.

Neither women had seen him in his full dress uniform before, and he took a moment outside the door to just breathe.

He stepped over the threshold and cleared his throat.

“Good afternoon, ladies.”

Both Harry and Mrs. Hudson stopped and turned to stare at him.

“Johnny!”

Harriet shouted and ran over to give her brother a hug. Then she held him at arm’s length.

“Look at you! Looking sharp, mister!”

“Thank you, Harry. You don’t scrub up too bad yourself.”

Mrs. Hudson’s reaction was more subtle than Harry’s. As soon as she saw John, one hand went up to cover her mouth, and John could have sworn there were tears in her eyes.
“Oh, my!” was all she said.

“Is Sherlock not out yet?” John asked as he couldn’t see his flatmate anywhere.

As if to answer the question, a frustrated huff could be heard from the direction of Sherlock’s room.

“Oh dear. I bet it’s that bow tie, he never really got the hang of those things,” Mrs. Hudson said as she started to walk down the hall.

She softly knocked on the door.

“Sherlock, dear, do you need any help?”

A muffled sound that could have been either yes or no came from behind the door, but Mrs. Hudson was already moving again, pushing the door open, slipping inside and closing it again behind her.

John looked at his sister. It had been a while since she’d seen her wear a long dress and a fascinator. He chuckled.

“Oi! What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Nothing. Just the last time you wore a fascinator, at least that I remember, was at Chrissie’s wedding and the thing was about the size of your head,” John laughed.

Harry good-naturedly punched him in the arm for that but quietly admitted that the thing had been a monstrosity forced upon her by their mother. The complete opposite of the small, elegant Bordeaux-coloured one she was wearing now.

John took a second to take in the rest of her outfit. Her blonde curls had been tamed somewhat and partially done up. John suspected Anthea behind that. The dress Harry wore was floor-length and the same dark red as her headwear.

He had to admit that when his sister decided to dress properly, she did look stunning. She knew she could turn the heads of many men if she dressed the part, and she had really enjoyed flirting with them, only to then introduce her wife.

They both looked up as they heard Mrs. Hudson admonish Sherlock with a firm “now sit still, young man, and let me do that!”

A minute later, Mrs. Hudson came back from Sherlock’s room, with the consulting detective in tow.

As soon as they stepped out, Mrs. Hudson was all smiles again and Sherlock smirked.

They joined the Watson siblings in the living room. Sherlock nearly did a double take. He’d never seen John in full uniform before, and it was amazing to see how much the simple act of putting it on had calmed John’s nerves.

Sherlock was wearing a black morning suit, as Mycroft had requested, with a white shirt, dark grey trousers and simple black bow tie. Once again, he looked effortlessly elegant while John had taken ages to make sure everything sat right.

Mrs. Hudson, in her green, knee-length vintage-style dress, bustled about and got a camera ready, which Harry took as a signal to move between John and Sherlock and hook her own arms under Sherlock and John’s. They posed for a few photos, including some of only John and Sherlock and some with Mrs. Hudson and a few of all of them together once they’d worked out the self-timer function.

Mrs. Hudson was like a proud mother around “her boys.” What struck her, now that she saw both of them in formal dress next to each other, was how thin John actually was.

Everybody always thought of Sherlock as the tall and thin one, but now that she saw John without one of his baggy jumpers, in a form-fitting uniform with a belt that accentuated his waistline, she had to admit that John couldn’t even have a pound on Sherlock.

She’d always loved her two tenants dearly, but today she felt like they were the sons she never had and she was moved that John had invited her as one of the three people he wanted there at the Investiture.

Mrs. Hudson took a moment to just look at the boys. They were joking around like always, the playful bickering and snark such an integral part of this particular house on Baker Street that she couldn’t even remember what it had been like before they had moved in.

There was Sherlock, who she knew had a very privileged upbringing, pretending to be uncomfortable in a morning suit but wearing it with a natural grace that belied his words.

And then there was John, standing there, tall and proud in his uniform, always taking care of Sherlock and protecting him from the genius’ own stupidity like an older brother would.

And she had to agree that Sherlock’s ability to find trouble and cause mischief definitely warranted him not only having one brother look out for him due to familial obligation but also John, who saw the chaos and stayed regardless and somehow managed to socialise and tame the whirlwind that was Sherlock Holmes in a way that nobody ever had before.
At precisely 2pm, the doorbell rang and a quick glance out the window confirmed that a black limousine was parked just outside their front door.

“Ready?” John asked and glanced around.

“Really, John, we should be asking you that!” Harry said and gathered her purse.

John went down the stairs first, followed by Harry, Mrs. Hudson and Sherlock. John, ever the gentleman, held the door open for all of them before he carefully put his beret on and locked the front door.

The driver was waiting for him at the kerb, holding the door open. As soon as John stepped out of the doorway, some of the female customers sitting outside Speedy’s started whispering and stealing glances in his direction.

John grinned at them.

“Ladies”, he said with a smile and a nod, before he turned towards the car.

Even a random passer-by greeted John with a brief “sir” and a nod as he went past.

“Good afternoon, sir. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” the driver said as John climbed into the car to join the others.

The ride through London was relatively quick, given that it was still early in the afternoon. The closer they came to Buckingham Palace, the more John’s nerves showed again. His gloved hands were resting on his knees and he kept clenching and unclenching them unconsciously as he watched London glide past the window. Sherlock noticed and gave Mrs. Hudson a look.

She reached over and patted John on the thigh before grabbing his hand and stilling it. John looked at her startled.

“I am so proud of you, my lovely. You’ll be fine, you’ll see. Just try and relax and enjoy it, this is your big day, dear. And we’re all here for you,” she said and John relaxed a bit again.

It was true. The people he wanted to be there most were currently sitting next to him in the confines of one of the Palace’s cars. Whether they were all blood-related or not, this was his little family.

Before long, the car turned onto The Mall and made its way towards the gates of Buckingham Palace.

“You know, I know we’re going to the Palace but I don’t think it’s sunk in yet,” Harry commented.

Flocks of tourists, curious Londoners and journalists had gathered by the main gate, and they were being kept at bay by guards to allow the cars access to the Palace. As soon as their vehicle was through the gate, it closed again behind them, waiting for the next honouree to arrive.

The driver took them through to the inner courtyard and brought the car to a stop in front of an elegant, sheltered entryway. A red carpet led right from the door of the car up some three small steps and into the Palace.

The driver got out and held the door open for John, who mumbled “showtime,” before he flashed one of his charming smiles at everyone and climbed out, straightened his uniform and then bent back down to offer Harry his arm as she got out of the car. She took his offered arm and stepped onto the red carpet, immensely proud of her little brother.

Next, Sherlock got out and also offered his arm to Mrs. Hudson. For show, he kissed her hand before letting her take his arm and joining John and Harriet.

The two pairs then slowly made their way inside, as Palace staff held doors open for them and pointed them up the main staircase and towards the Picture Gallery.

As they approached the Picture Gallery, Mycroft joined them. The new arrivals were introduced to the room at large by an usher.

“Captain Doctor John Hamish Watson, holder of the Military Cross, accompanied by his sister Miss Harriet Eleanor Watson,” the usher announced as John and Harry made their way into the room.

“The Honourable William Sherlock Scott Holmes, accompanied by Mrs. Martha Louise Hudson.”

John’s head spun around so fast he nearly feared it would snap as he gaped at Sherlock. Why had he been introduced in a way that assumed a title?

He had lived with the man for years, even attended his supposed funeral, and there had never been any mention or any correspondence bearing a title, or indeed, his full name.

Sherlock grimaced a bit and gave his best attempt at an apologetic smile as Mycroft stepped into the room.

“The Right Honourable Lord Arthur Mycroft Timothy Holmes.”
Sherlock closed his eyes for a second.

“Lord?” John mouthed at Sherlock and glanced from one brother to the other, not really believing what he’d just heard.

“I assure you, John, the title is quite recent and I do not use it often. However, as we are in Buckingham Palace and this is a formal occasion, needs must,” Mycroft assured him as he joined the group.

“How recent? And Lord as in... what exactly?” John asked, still not quite believing that the Holmes brothers, but especially Sherlock, who wanted a flatshare, were part of the British peerage.

“Our father passed away two years ago, at which time the title passed down to me...” Mycroft started to explain.

“Mycroft is a Baron, it’s all very fascinating, can we please move away from the door? We’re attracting attention,” Sherlock cut in and ushered them further into the room.

Mrs. Hudson had joined Harry and the two were listening just as intently to the brothers’ explanation as John was.

“Hang on,” John said and turned to Sherlock.

“Your father died two years ago? How come I didn’t know about that? And how long have I known the two of you now? And you couldn’t even mention that – surprise – you hold titles?”

“We were not close to our father. He died while on a scientific research project in the Galápagos Islands and he hadn’t lived in England for quite some years despite remaining married to our mother. He was buried in Ecuador as per his wish, which is why we did not attend the funeral. As for the title, there were hints John, like Mycroft’s tie pin with the coronet emblem for example, but as we do not use our title in public, there was no reason to divulge that particular piece of information. Mycroft is the one with the title, at any rate. I just inherited an old-fashioned style for formal functions such as this,” Sherlock explained.

“Honestly, you two! Keeping secrets like that from me! First you don’t tell me that one of my tenants is a war hero and then you don’t mention that I have members of the gentry living in my house!” Mrs. Hudson admonished Mycroft and Sherlock.

“Mrs. Hudson, please believe me that this style does not make any difference to me! It never has and it never will,” Sherlock reassured her.

Harry, meanwhile, was busy taking in her surroundings, tapping excitedly on her brother’s arm whenever she spotted something else that caught her interest, still not quite believing she was actually inside Buckingham Palace and not just in the tourist bit either.

John noticed that the room had filled quite drastically. He estimated that close to four-hundred people were now milling about.

He turned back towards Sherlock to comment on this when a door to his right opened and the Lord Chamberlain stepped out.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, could I have your attention, please. The Investiture ceremony will begin shortly. The ceremony will take place in the Ballroom, which lies a bit further down this corridor, about halfway between here and Victoria Station,” the Lord Chamberlain joked.

Some of the guests giggled.

“I would ask that all guests follow the ushers to the Ballroom to take their seats. Please be informed that you will be required to stand for the arrival of Her Majesty The Queen and throughout our National Anthem,” he gestured towards the ushers, who started directing the guests away.

“I’m proud of you, little brother,” Harry said and hugged John before she joined Mrs. Hudson and the Holmes brothers on their way to the Ballroom.

Once the guests had filled out of the room, the Lord Chamberlain continued.

“Ladies and gentlemen, in a few minutes I will take you to the back of the Ballroom, where you will wait in a small annex just outside of it. You will be lined up in the order in which your awards will be presented.”

John glanced around the room and found that about one hundred people remained, along with him.

“When your name is called, you will then walk in a straight line until you reach the middle of the Ballroom. There you will turn to your left and face Her Majesty. You will receive your award from her and she may speak with you while you receive the award. Once you are dismissed, take five steps backwards, quickly bow or curtsey, depending on your gender, turn right again and walk a straight line towards the other end of the Ballroom, where an usher will wait for you and direct you further. Military personnel, you should salute before you retreat backwards. Any questions?”

He looked around the room expectantly. Everyone there shook his or her head.
He looked around the room expectantly. Everyone there shook his or her head.

“If you would like to follow me, then,” the Lord Chamberlain said and led the way.

It really did feel to John like he was walking halfway to Victoria Station, the Palace really was spacious. Once they had entered the annex, they were arranged in the order they would receive their awards. It did nothing to calm John’s nerves to find out that he would be first, as the Victoria Cross and George Cross take precedence before all other honours.

The Queen, wearing a knee-length primrose dress, entered the Ballroom, accompanied by two Gurkha orderly officers as was tradition. Members of The Queen’s Body Guard of the Yeomen of the Guard were also on duty and stationed throughout the room.

All members of the audience stood as a military band started to play God Save The Queen. While the audience members took their seats again, the Queen remained standing.

Before John knew it, he was ushered forward to wait at the entrance to the Ballroom, and he was literally waiting in the wings.

He tried to keep his head still as he took in the room. The Queen’s Guards stood at attention behind her while she addressed the audience. The audience was sitting to his right, and on the far side, he could make out Sherlock’s mop of dark curls in the first row, towards the far side of the room.

“Captain Doctor John Hamish Watson, holder of the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross and Bar,” the Lord Chamberlain called out, John’s cue to move forward.

With precise steps, he walked to the centre of the room, where he turned on his heels to face the Queen and saluted.

He performed a quick turn on his heels and faced the Queen, then he saluted and moved forwards, towards the raised platform she was standing on, at her beckoning.

“Congratulations, Captain Watson,” she said as he came to stand in front of her.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he replied, hoping that his voice didn’t betray his nervousness.

“No need to be nervous, Captain,” the Queen smiled.

“You’re very special, you know. It’s been a long time since I have awarded one of these to a living recipient”, she said and took the award out of its box.

She took a step towards John who nearly held his breath as she attached the bronze cross pattée with the superimposed lion and crown, hanging on a crimson ribbon, to his uniform.

He stood at attention, arms straight down at his side and not daring to move, feeling like this was the hardest muster of his life. However, he smiled at her, standing tall and proud.

“I want you to know that I am aware of the footage of your rescue and I thank you for your sacrifice,” the Queen explained and extended her hand for him to shake.

“It was an honour, Your Majesty,” he replied and quickly shook her hand.

The click of his heels as he came to attention again was audible in the entire Ballroom. He saluted, then quickly took five steps backwards and bowed, before he performed another quick turn and strode out the other end of the Ballroom as the next honouree was called forward.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw his sister and Mrs. Hudson with tears in their eyes, and a consulting detective smirking at him, looking mighty proud himself.

[1] The uniform is that of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, the red over white plume on the beret is a leftover from the historic 5th Northumberland Fusiliers still worn today

[2] It is Palace protocol that recipients wait in the Picture Gallery and the ceremony takes place in the Ballroom.

[3] In German, Baron and Freiherr are interchangeable. Freiherr translates to Freeman.
The actual Lord Chamberlain made this joke, as can be heard and seen in a video on the Royal Family website.

Official protocol for award ceremonies attended by The Queen.

The quote about being rare as well as a part of John's citation was altered from real quotes by the Queen and the real citation of Private (now Sergeant) Johnson Gideon Beharry, who was the first living recipient of the VC in more than 30 years in April 2005.

Chapter End Notes

Not long to go now until this story is finished!

The Lord Chamberlain really made the Victoria Station joke once, it's in a video about investitures on the website of the Royal Family.

It has been said that the Queen can be quite informal while talking to honourees. The quote about being rare as well as a part of John's citation was altered from real quotes by the Queen and the real citation of Private (now Sergeant) Johnson Gideon Beharry, who was the first living recipient of the VC in more than 30 years in April 2005.

I've tried to stick to Palace protocol where I knew it. Recipients really gather in the Picture Gallery and are then being led through the East Gallery and the back of the Ballroom to the annex. I also have footage of actress Catherine Zeta-Jones receiving her CBE and retreating 4 to 5 steps (it's hard to judge from the footage). The ushers, Gurkhas and Yeomen of the Guard are also real.

And Mycroft's title... In my native language German, the titles Baron and Freiherr are interchangeable.

And Freiherr means: Freeman!
Country House

Chapter Summary

A trip to the country for the Baker Street boys

Chapter Notes

There should only be one, two chapters max to go.
The front of the Holmes Estate is modelled on Guzow Palace in Poland.
I wish you all a Happy New Year!

Country House

Once he reached the annex on the other side of the Ballroom, one of the ushers greeted him.

“Congratulations, Captain Watson.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“If you’d like to follow me, there are seats in the next room over, where you are to wait until the end of the ceremony. You will be able to see into the Ballroom from there to watch if you like,” the usher said and showed John the way.

As he was the first to arrive, he had free choice of his seat. A waiter offered him a glass of champagne to celebrate, which he accepted.

One by one, the honourees were called forward. John actually recognised many of the names from the news or because he knew them as actors or musicians. There were ten other soldiers there next to him, some being awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Military Cross.

John wondered why the rest of his unit wasn’t here if they were all to receive the Military Cross as well. He knew he had been the exception when he received his, as he should have received it from a member of the Royal Family at one of the palaces, but by rights, he felt his team should be here.

Slowly but surely, the line moved forward. They had been asked to keep an exact distance to the person in front, members of the Lord Chamberlain’s office making sure they complied.

He had thought the ceremony would take longer, given how many people were to receive honours. The room he was waiting in continuously filled with people and congratulations were exchanged. The military men who had been honoured came up to John and saluted. He returned the salute and noticed that one of the men was a General, who had received the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath and would have out-ranked him under normal circumstances.

“I may have been overshadowed by you today, Captain Watson, but quite rightly so. It’s an honour to be standing here with you,” the General said.

“Thank you, Sir. The honour is mine,” John replied and returned the salute he was given.

Once the ceremony was over, all honourees and their guests were ushered into the inner quadrangle where the official photographers were already waiting. Once again, they were called forward in the order in which they received their awards and their official photos were taken.

Now that the ceremony was over, John could relax a bit, and he actually managed one of his usual, sunny smiles in his photographs. One of the ushers handed him a box in which he could place his Victoria Cross, as some photos called for him to hold it up.

The photographer then asked John’s guests to join him and took a few more photos of the group.

Mrs. Hudson, however, didn’t seem to get enough pictures. She went up to some of the other guests and asked them to take pictures with her camera. She even asked Mycroft to join them for the photos.

Pictures were taken of all the military men together, each holding up their award with their right hand. The last picture was one of all the honourees together before everything moved back inside.

While the photos had been taken, the staff had finalised the table settings for the banquet. Each round table seated three honourees and their guests. There was a good mix of people, to
encourage conversation. So when John, Sherlock, Harry, Mrs. Hudson and Mycroft sat down, they were joined by an elderly actor who had been knighted, and the founder of a charity who had been awarded an OBE.

When the scrumptious feast arrived, Harry was stunned to see all four-hundred guests being served at the same time. When one of the waiters came around to offer drinks, John was very proud when Harry ordered water instead of the offered wine.

“So, John, tell us! What did the Queen say to you?” Harry inquired after their first course.

John shared the conversation he’d had with her, and the other honourees at the table told their stories as well, their guests fascinated by how informal the Queen seemed to be while speaking to them.

Plates were taken away and replaced with new ones, glasses were refilled and conversation flowed. Even Sherlock had to join in, as he had been recognised and the people at their table wanted to know more about their cases while Mycroft successfully managed to deflect questions about his line of work.

After five courses, the guests were allowed to mingle again before tea and coffee would be served. Many people approached John to congratulate him, and he took the chance to talk to some well-known celebrities he would never have to chance to talk to otherwise.

He knew that Harry would fully take advantage of this opportunity as well, as he knew she carried a pen and paper for autographs in her purse, as well as a camera.

It was after eight o’clock when the celebrations came to a close. A long line of black cars filled the courtyard, doors were being held open and goodbyes were said.

Mycroft excused himself from the group, but not before he collected Harry’s and Mrs. Hudson’s cameras with a promise that one of his agents would drop off print-outs within the hour.

John and Sherlock helped Harry and their landlady into the car. But instead of telling the driver to drop them back at Baker Street, they told him to drive them to Regent’s Park as they would walk the rest of the way. The reason for this was that they wanted to enjoy the last few rays of the evening sunlight, as well as walk off the massive meal they had just consumed.

Once they were out of the car, the two women took John between them, leaving Sherlock to trail behind. People in the park moved out of John’s way, some of them even calling “Good evening, sir” after him; people who probably never would have given the time of day to Doctor John Watson dressed in a woolly jumper.

Sherlock was fascinated to study the effect the uniform had had not only on John, but also on his surroundings.

By the time the four of them reached Baker Street, one of Mycroft’s agents was waiting for them. She handed over the women’s cameras and an envelope containing pictures of the afternoon.

John was surprised to find some of the official photographs the Palace photographers had taken among the print-outs, but he suspected that was one of the perks of being Baron Mycroft Holmes and Liaison to the Crown or whatever his job title was this week.

Mrs. Hudson cooed over the photos, promising to frame them as soon as she had the chance.

The agent also handed a note to John, reminding him that they would be going to Rickerby Hall the next day.

They had decided that Harry should spend the night at Baker Street, as she had been invited out to Rickerby Hall as well and it didn’t make sense for her to leave the city now, only to travel back in early the next morning.

Mrs. Hudson had graciously offered Harriet her spare room so none of them would have to sleep on the sofa, but also because she didn’t want Harry to worry in case John had another nightmare.

She’d been aware of most of them over the last two weeks and it really worried her to see John in distress like that. This was one thing his sister didn’t need to see, and John appreciated being able to keep face in front of Harry.

Even though the Watson siblings have had heart-to-hearts, John was loath to seem desperate and weak in front of his sister. John was always careful to show his sister he was strong. That he had survived and moved on and that nothing could shake him. The last thing he needed was for her to witness one of his extravagant episodes.

While the women stayed downstairs, the boys made their way up the seventeen steps to 221b.

“You did well today. You looked like you belonged,” Sherlock commented as they sat down in the living room.

“Thank you. It felt good to be back in uniform. This was such a big part of my life. It helped keep me relatively calm. Although I was nervous about meeting the Queen,” John confessed.

He stood back up and unbuttoned his jacket and took off his belt.

“Phew, finally. One more bite and I would have had to loosen the belt a bit,” he laughed as he sat back down, more relaxed now than he had been all day.
“I felt kind of sneaky, though”, John confessed.

“How come?”

“Well, I was wearing a badge I wasn’t strictly authorised to wear. But it was hidden out of sight.”

Sherlock looked at him and tried to deduce what medal John could have worn. He ticked the limited possibilities off in his head. Sherlock frowned and looked at John again.

The soldier laughed and opened the left side of his jacket, revealing the dress shirt underneath. And there, right above his heart and underneath where the Victoria Cross now rested on his uniform, was the little yellow smiley face of the button Sherlock had given him.

“You wore that under your uniform all day?” the detective asked.

“Well, it seemed wrong not to. And it’s not like I pinned it next to any of my ribbons. But I felt it belonged there. So yes,” John grinned and Sherlock smirked.

“I still can’t believe you’re the son and now the brother of a Baron, though!”

“It’s not like I had any choice in the matter, John. The title was created hundreds of years ago, it’s hereditary, so it’s always passed on. Unless Mycroft never has any offspring, I will never hold the title. I despise still being called ‘The Honourable’... imagine what the roll call at my prep school was like! The Honourable This, The Honourable That, Lady So-and-So. In the end, it didn’t make any difference. The title Honourable is such a misleading one. Honour should be something that is earned. I know many who are called Honourable who have no sense of honour whatsoever, and yet I know just as many people, like you, who would deserve to be addressed as such, because your actions do make you honourable. And yet, you’re unlikely to ever be introduced as The Honourable John Watson.”

John hummed in agreement. The army had taught him all about honour.

“So what does it mean to be a Baron in this day and age? I know it’s part of the peerage but if I remember correctly, it’s one of the lower ranks of British nobility, correct?”

“Well, yes. The title doesn’t really hold much sway these days. Mycroft could get elected into The House of Lords, but I dare say that would be a step down from his current position in our government. Barons are considered part of landed gentry and that our family owns land won’t change in the near future. But really, as far as I am concerned, that is about the extent of it.”

“I nearly choked when Mycroft was introduced as Lord Holmes,” John chuckled.

“I know. As if his head needs to get any bigger!” Sherlock concurred and joined the laughter.

Eventually, John got up to get changed. He put his uniform back into the garment bag and put his pyjamas on before he returned downstairs. Sherlock had also got changed, relieved to finally be rid of the dreaded bow tie.

Before he retired to his bedroom, John drank a glass of water with Sherlock’s herbal soother drops in it. It had been a big day and he really wanted to sleep properly again.

The night passed quietly and even though John tossed and turned a bit, he did not scream or wake up crying. By morning, he had forgotten all about the dream.

Sherlock let John sleep in because he knew his friend could do with the extra rest. Around nine in the morning, John came downstairs for his shower, feeling more refreshed and better rested than he had in a long time.

He had just finished getting dressed when Harry and Mrs. Hudson entered the flat, carrying breakfast.

John helped clear the kitchen table of the remnants of Sherlock’s experiments and put the kettle on for coffee and tea.

While his back was turned, Mrs. Hudson placed a thin, gift-wrapped item on the table.

“What’s this?” he asked and picked it up.

“Oh, just a little something for you, dear,” the landlady answered, and moved around the table to finish making tea.

John sat down and carefully opened the present. It was a photo album. Inside, Mrs. Hudson had collected all the articles that had been written about John and his unit over the past two weeks. She had even managed, no doubt thanks to Mycroft, to get hold of a copy of the candid photograph that Noel Liss had taken of John and Sherlock. The scrapbook included John’s invitation to the Investiture, which Sherlock had provided for her, and a cut out of John’s Victoria Cross citation as published in the London Gazette.

The last few pages contained a collage of all the photos that had been taken the day before.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. This is very thoughtful,” he said and got up to hug her.

“I’m glad you like it, John.”
After breakfast, the four of them got changed again and packed their overnight bags. While Harriet and Mrs. Hudson put on new dresses, John changed back into his uniform. Sherlock decided just to wear one of his standard suits.

Mycroft’s car picked them up around noon. He had actually sent two cars, one for the women and one for Sherlock and John so they wouldn’t be too cramped on the way out to Berkshire.

The journey took them more than an hour, even though it should only have been a forty-minute drive. As it was sunny and warm and a Saturday to boost, hundreds of people were on their way out of London.

Somewhere between Windsor and Maidenhead, their cars turned off the main road and down a well-maintained private road. Tall trees lined both sides of the road.

While John was still wondering how much further they would travel, Sherlock sat up just a tiny bit more. John knew Sherlock well enough that he interpreted this as a sign that they were nearing their destination.

They reached an ornate gatehouse, where they turned down a private driveway. John was admiring the elegant ironwork of the gate when something caught his eye.

While the words Rickerby Hall had been carved into the stone of the gatehouse generations ago, the golden top of the gate carried a different name.

“...Holmes... Rickerby Hall... Rickerby Hall is the Holmes Estate?” John asked incredulously.

“Well done, John, I wondered how long it would take for you to notice,” Sherlock said.

“We’re going to your family home?”

“Well, yes, the other Holmes families in the area didn’t want to let us use their manors. Of course it’s my family home!” Sherlock exclaimed.

“Wow. I’ve always wondered where you’d grown up,” John confessed and he had imagined a variety of scenarios, but none of them even came close to reality.

Then again, he hadn’t known that his eccentric flatmate was the son of a Baron.

Behind the gatehouse, the tall trees gave way to a landscaped park. The drive was miles long, and John couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw the house.

“Here? You grew up here?”

“I think we’ve established that. Yes, this was my childhood home, at least when I wasn’t at boarding school.”

On a slight rise in front of them stood a building that could easily have passed for a French chateau and wouldn’t have looked out of place in the Loire Valley.

The grand manor was built in the Renaissance Revival style and heavily influenced by French architecture. The central part had three floors and a slate Mansard roof with a balustrade on top. Above the main entrance was a balcony onto which three floor-to-ceiling glass doors opened. The balcony was supported by sixteen columns of Greek design. This gave the entryway a porch-like character, which was emphasised by a slightly curved stone railing, mirroring that of the balcony above, which opened to stairs which led onto a narrow terrace and from there down into the landscaped park.

The whole building took up a massive amount of space and John was sure that it was even bigger than the front view suggested.

While John was ogling the manor, Sherlock looked decidedly disinterested.

The driveway led to the front entrance in a semi-circle, and as soon as they pulled up an elderly butler was at the car.

“Sherlock, so good to see you again, lad. And you must be Captain Watson,” the butler said as the two men climbed out of the car.

“Michael, good to see you again.” Sherlock turned to John.

“This is Michael. He has worked here for as long as I can remember. Is my brother here yet?” Sherlock asked.

“Yes, he arrived a half hour ago.”

The second car pulled up and the women got out, extremely flattered to be helped by a butler.

Before John had a chance to pick up their bags, Michael had taken them and carried them towards the door.

“Sherlock, your old rooms are ready. I’ve organised for Captain Watson to stay further down your corridor and Miss Watson and Mrs. Hudson on the floor directly above. Will that be alright?”

He glanced at Mrs. Hudson when he said that, noting her bad hip.
“Yes, Michael, that is excellent, thank you. Well, come along, I’ll show you to your rooms, and
don’t worry Mrs. Hudson. The stairs are manageable,” Sherlock said and disappeared in the
spacious house, bounding up a grand staircase to the first floor.

Sherlock led them down a seemingly endless corridor before he stopped at a double door.

“This is my room. And yes, before you ask, it’s my childhood room.”

He then continued down the corridor and stopped outside another double door on the other side of
the hallway.

He pushed the door open to reveal a spacious bedroom with ensuite bathroom. The bedroom was
furnished elegantly in a vintage style, but more fin de siècle vintage and Golden Twenties than
genuinely antique.

“My grandfather had the entire house remodelled and refurbished after a fire,” Sherlock explained.

“This is one of the guest rooms. You’ll be staying in here, John. Your sister and Mrs. Hudson will
be in exactly the same rooms as us just one floor further up. You can sort who sleeps in which
room by yourselves. Come on, I’ll show you around, seeing as I know you will nag me until I
do,” Sherlock sighed and started back down the corridor.

Within the house, he pointed out Mycroft’s rooms and study, the library and the sitting room.
However, he pointed out that the upstairs east side of the house was off limits. The downstairs
contained a spacious ballroom spanning the entire width of the central part and fit to hold at least
four-hundred people.

“Social dance soirées for the gentry were the fashion when this current house was built,” Sherlock
explained as if it was normal to have a ballroom in your house.

But the most stunning feature was the winter garden. One side of the ballroom was covered floor
to ceiling in delicate, Victorian style glass windows and doors with rounded tops. They opened
into a sunlit conservatory about half the depth of the ballroom but just as broad. Ornate iron beams
supported the delicate roof panels. Five glass doors along the width of the room and one on each
end opened up onto a terrace and the gardens beyond.

Once again, John was speechless. A small staircase led down from the centre of the winter garden
into the landscaped garden below, but he could also see that the doors at the end led to curved
ramps. A path led straight down the middle of this park-like garden, towards a small forest.

“Is that a lake?” John asked as he caught a glimpse of water.

“Oh no, that’s the Thames,” Sherlock explained.

From the back of the building, they had a clear view of its shape. Two wings extended into the
garden, one on either side of the central part. A short way off to the side, another small building
was visible, although this one looked to be timber frame.

Sherlock followed John’s gaze.

“That’s the garages and stables.”

“Stables? You kept horses here?” John was sure he’d wake up any minute back in his bed at
Baker Street.

“We still do. Mummy breeds them. Mainly Friesian horses, as mother does have a soft spot for
them, but we also have a few English Thoroughbreds, or at least we did at last count.”

“Is your mother here today?” John asked and it occurred to him that he had never actually asked
Sherlock whether his mother was still alive, despite both Sherlock and Mycroft talking about her
every now and then.

“I’m sure she is. You will meet her soon enough.”

They continued their tour while the staff was busy setting everything up in the Ballroom. The
ceremony was supposed to start at four o’clock.

Michael brought them refreshments and they leant against the terrace wall when the first guests
started to arrive. Because this was John’s former team, they all immediately zoned in on him.

He chatted with a few of them. They all looked well, even though some had been more severely
injured than he had been. He was saddened to see some had lost limbs and now required
wheelchairs.

Luckily, the access to the house and ballroom as well as the gardens was all on one level or
reachable via the ramps.

The crowd of people milling around the ballroom grew and grew. There had been no limitation to
the number of guests each soldier was allowed to bring, although most brought around five
people, in most cases their immediate family.

So when John spotted a few familiar faces from London, he was surprised.

Making their way through the crowd were Greg Lestrade, Molly Hooper, Mike Stamford, Sally
Donovan and Phillip Anderson, as well as several of his old mates from university.
It occurred to John that in all his hectic and worry about the Investiture, he had completely forgotten to invite anyone himself. Luckily someone had taken care of that and he suspected the names Mycroft and Holmes behind it.

Colonel Carlyle entered the room, together with a tall, dark-haired woman. She was strikingly beautiful in a classical way, and her piercing light grey-blue eyes and dark curls immediately gave away her identity.

The seats were arranged in rows, and the soldiers were asked to sit in the front two rows with all friends and family sitting behind them. A small lectern had been placed at the front of the room and the Colonel made his way over to it while Mummy Holmes took a seat next to her sons.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Today is a special day, a day the fifteen men sitting here in front of us and I never thought would come. Today, we celebrate the achievements and courage of fifteen men, who were held prisoner for two weeks and escaped. They did so by staying calm, by being organised and efficient. Unfortunately, not even the best-laid plans always work out. While attempting their escape, every man in those two units of 4th Battalion The Rifles and the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers sustained injuries, some of them life-threatening, as I am sure you are all aware. But these two units worked together as one, they rescued one another, gave each other cover and fought their way out of enemy hands back to freedom. For this, all fifteen of these men will be awarded the Military Cross.”

He looked around the room.

“It is highly unusual to have a ceremony such as this outside of one of the Royal palaces. However, Lady Vivienne Holmes and her son, Baron Holmes, have kindly offered their home for this occasion. As I am sure you know, Captain John Watson received the Victoria Cross yesterday for his actions, as his medical knowledge saved the lives of his men.”

There were cheers and claps for John from all of his men.

“Captain Watson is now the colleague of Consulting Detective Sherlock Holmes, the younger son of Lady Holmes. It is thanks to this connection that we are granted the use of this beautiful location to honour a team the way it should be honoured.”

While all eyes were on him, Colonel Carlyle kept glancing towards the windows overlooking the driveway. Eventually, he saw a Rolls Royce come to a stop outside.

Michael, the butler, gave him a thumbs up from the door.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you are able to do so, please be upstanding for Her Royal Highness, the Princess Royal.”

[1] Quote from a General who had received the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, speaking to and about real-life VC recipient Johnson Gideon Beharry

[2] The Queen is said to be quite informal when speaking to honourees during these Investitures

[3] Modelled on Guzow Palace in Poland in its heyday
Chapter Summary

John's team are finally honoured the way they should!

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry about the delay in posting this. This is the penultimate chapter and I don't really want it to end, it's been so much fun!

Thank you so much for reading, leaving kudos and commenting on this story! It really means a lot! If you like it, pass it on :)

Mentioned service of real people is correct as far as my research goes, as is the fact about Princess Anne's horsewomanship. She actually is an Olympic athlete.

Everyone who was able to stood up. John risked a quick glance down his row and noticed that even Parker was standing. It took John a second to remember the prosthetic leg Parker had proudly shown around and that he was walking again. He didn’t even need a cane.

As the door to the Ballroom opened and Princess Anne entered the room, all soldiers saluted her. Her two bodyguards remained by the door as she made her way to the front of the room.

John had always had respect for the Royal Family, seeing as even the Queen had served during the Second World War as a truck driver and mechanic with the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

Unlike her parents, siblings, nephews as well as her current and former husbands, the Princess Royal had not been part of the Armed Forces, but chose to wear uniform instead of dresses to ceremonies regardless. For this occasion, the Princess Royal was wearing the uniform of the Master of Trinity House, complete with blue sash and her own honorary decorations.

As they were already breaking with normal protocol for these ceremonies, the soldiers were allowed to sit again once Princess Anne had greeted them. This had mainly to do with the fact that so many of them had been injured and several were unable to stand at all.

A silence fell over the room as Princess Anne began to speak.

“Today is a very special day, for it is not often that two entire units are honoured and awarded with medals for bravery and gallantry at the same time.”

She paused and looked each soldier in the eye, inspecting them individually as well as taking in how they sat there, two regiments, together as one unit.

“However, these men sitting before you now are not ordinary men. They spent weeks as prisoners of war in Afghanistan and I am sure the likes of us can never truly imagine the horror and despair that this entails.”

The Princess Royal looked up again, this time scanning the crowd of civilians sitting right behind the soldiers, while John and his men stared straight ahead, trying not to show any emotions at all.

“But they weren’t discouraged by their situation. Far from it. They demonstrated all the qualities that make a good unit work together, even though they came from different regiments. They remained calm while under extreme stress and they worked as a team, deriving an escape strategy and executing it as soon as they had the opportunity to do so. These fifteen men before you now fought their way out of enemy hands because they wanted to live.”

She took in a breath and scanned the row of men in uniform in front of her again.

“However, sadly, not all the men who were captured made it out alive. In addition to the men here before you now, Captain Nicolas Riley Featherton of Fourth Battalion The Rifles and Captain Timothy Cooper of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers will also be posthumously awarded the Military Cross today. Both Captains gave their lives so that the men under their command would live and that is the greatest sacrifice a commander can make. Their captors cowardly took the lives of Captains Cooper and Featherton to make their prisoners more compliant, but they only succeeded in making them more determined. That these fifteen men now sit in front of us today is a testament to that determination and the way they honour the sacrifice made by Captain Cooper and Captain Featherton every day.”
She nodded at Colonel Carlyle, who stepped forward and stood to the left of Princess Anne so he would be second in line to congratulate the honourees.

“Mrs. Claire Featherton, accepting the Military Cross on behalf of her late husband, Captain Nicolas Riley Featherton,” the Colonel announced and a young woman stepped forward.

As with the Palace protocol, she curtsied before accepting the award. Captain Cooper’s widow was called forward next and she chatted briefly with the Princess Royal before moving on to Colonel Carlyle, who also congratulated her.

John took a long look at these two women. Both were in their late thirties or early forties, around his own age. He couldn’t imagine being a widower this young and for once he was glad that he had had no spouse while he had been deployed, as this could have been her reality as well, accepting an award on behalf of a brave man who wasn’t with her any longer.

Both of the women smiled, however, clearly pleased with their husbands’ achievements and that they were finally being honoured properly. John suspected that their tears would wait for another day.

One by one, the soldiers were called forward. First the unit from 4th Battalion The Rifles and then the Fusiliers, called forward by rank and in alphabetical order. Colonel Carlyle supplied extra information for each soldier concerning their roles during the rescue operation and the injuries they had sustained, as they approached the front of the room and saluted.

John knew he would be the last one to be called up because he technically had already received his awards.

Princess Anne took a step back to allow Colonel Carlyle to speak to the audience.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you have counted, then you will have noticed that so far fourteen of the soldiers sitting in front of you have been honoured with the Military Cross today. However, there is one more honouree. It is thanks to this man’s repeated selfless actions that there were no more casualties during their imprisonment and the siege that led to their freedom. This man is Captain Doctor John Hamish Watson, who has been invested with the Victoria Cross yesterday for his acts of unquestioned valour.”

John rose to his feet and walked to the front, saluting both his commanding officer as well as the Princess Royal. She stepped forward again.

“Despite holding the rank of Captain, Captain Watson had been sent with his unit of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers due to his medical expertise gained during previous service with the Royal Army Medical Corps and was to act as a medic, rather than take command. He received the Victoria Cross for tending to the wounded while their position was still under fire, carrying his men to safety and providing first aid despite severe personal injury during their fight for freedom. But before that, after the loss of Captains Cooper and Featherton, he found himself as the highest-ranking officer there and took charge of both units, devising an escape strategy that would eventually lead all of them to freedom. Captain Watson is a previous recipient of the Military Cross, and it is, therefore, my great honour to award him the Military Cross and Bar for his actions.”

John had to admit he was still nervous though a lot less nervous than he had been the previous day at Buckingham Palace.

Mycroft had taken his Military Cross clasp off him again after the banquet the night before, so he could receive his award at the same time as all of his men.

He had insisted on this as even though they came from two units, they were one team, and he wanted all of them to stand proud together.

Princess Anne attached the clasp herself to his ribbon this time, knowing full well that he had previously received it so he could receive his Victoria Cross with full honours.

“The army needs more men like you, Captain Watson,” she said as she shook his hand.

He saluted her and then turned to Carlyle, who saluted him first because of his Victoria Cross. It still felt weird to John to suddenly receive salutes from his commanding officer first.

“Captain Watson,” the Colonel prompted as he and Princess Anne took a few steps to the side, giving the stage, as it were, to John. He had tried to prepare a short speech for this eventuality and had his notes in his trouser pockets. But looking out over the room and the familiar faces in the front row, he felt his speech was stiff and inadequate.

As he took a second to scan the room, he noticed that there were more people there than he had thought. And he spotted quite a few familiar faces of people wearing uniforms but sitting further back. He realised that someone must have contacted his old units, even from his RAMC days, as there were fellow doctors and RAMC nurses as well as a few soldiers he had served with on their special missions. Members of their rescue team were present as well.

Before he said a single word, he took a deep breath and saluted. Everyone wearing a uniform immediately raised their hands in salute to him, and those who could rose to their feet.

“Ladies”, he nodded in the direction of several nurses, “gentlemen”, another nod, this time directed mostly at the front row.
It is an honour to have served with each and every single one of you. I am immensely proud to be standing here today and see these two units acknowledged and honoured this way. The whole operation depended on teamwork more than anything else and while I am immensely flattered to have been awarded such prestigious honours, I still maintain that all I did was my job and I couldn’t have done it without these men right here. As a unit, we have each other’s backs and we don’t leave anyone behind to fall into enemy hands. Our actions that day may have gained us freedom, but it came at great personal cost. It pains me to see so many good men and fellow soldiers being invalided home, retired before their time, thrown back into a civilian life we were not ready for. I know how hard it is to readjust, to go from the role of protector to being the one who needs help and protection in a familiar environment that all of a sudden feels more foreign than the desert sands of Afghanistan.”

John looked up and found Sherlock listening intently, his gaze fixed on his best friend. John glanced at Mycroft with the most imperceptible of nods, swallowed and looked down at his men.

“A friend, who shall remain anonymous, once spoke to me about what he called ‘the bravery of the soldier.’ He said that in his opinion, bravery was by far the kindest word for stupidity. On a day like this, I’d like to invite him to dare say this again in front of us all, in our faces. Because what he called stupidity is the same reason we are all still here today, and I can’t see anything stupid in that.”

Mycroft knew that John was talking about him, thankful to the soldier for leaving his name out of it, even though Sherlock was quietly tsk-ing next to him. John saw Mycroft lift his glass in a silent salute and knew his message had been understood.

“I would like to take this opportunity to thank you because I never got the chance before. I thank you for saving my life that day, for getting me out of there. I know many a medic who would have classed me as a lost cause and wouldn’t have expected me to make it. To be honest, I didn’t expect that I would make it out of there alive. Had the roles been reversed, I am not sure whether I would have wasted the time and resources. However, I am extremely grateful that you did and that my emergency triage lessons were not completely lost on you.”

This gained a few chuckles, despite the seriousness of the situation. All eyes in the room were on John and he demanded their attention just like he had done back on the battlefields in Afghanistan and Iraq.

John was just about to continue speaking when Lieutenant Parker Llewellyn got to his feet.

“With respect, Sir. You said you only did your duty, but so did we. All of us knew what was at stake, and we did it regardless. And if it wasn’t for you, I for one wouldn’t be standing here today. Being humble is an honourable trait, sir, but I doubt you realise what an impact you have had on us.”

He turned around to address the room at large.

“Please raise your hand if Captain Watson has ever patched or stitched you up or assisted you in other medical matters.”

The entire front row raised their hands, as did the Colonel. Several of John’s other army buddies did too, as well as some of the nurses and RAMC doctors. Apparently, ‘patching up’ constituted everything from applying a plaster to surgery.

John scanned the room again and did a double take. There, at the back of the room, Molly, Mike, Donovan, Anderson, Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade, but most of all Mycroft and Sherlock Holmes had raised their hands as well.

John’s breath caught for a second. These people here were his friends, not even patients. He looked at Parker.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Parker nodded and sat back down, only for Lieutenant Martin Fields to get up.

“Captain. Those were the people you have treated as a doctor. But I for one am alive today because of you. You know full well I would have died that day if it hadn’t been for your intervention.”

A Lance Corporal rose to his feet.

“Me too, Captain.”

“I learned a long time ago to trust you with my life, Captain. If you tell me to duck, I bloody well duck,” a sniper, who had been on special missions as part of John’s team in Iraq, said as he got up.

One by one, all the soldiers who could slowly rose to their feet, while those who couldn’t raised their hands. This included several of his former team members from his top secret missions. At some point, one of the civilians had started clapping slowly, and the more soldiers got up, the louder the applause got.

John looked out over the room and found at least one person standing or with their hands raised in each of the many rows. His breath caught again and he really had to fight hard to keep his composure as he was overwhelmed by his emotions.

He had never really counted or kept a tally, so seeing all these people alive today because of
something he’d done filled him with pride and tears were hot in his eyes threatening to spill. His gloved hand came to cover his mouth to muffle his gasp.

The soldiers were standing at attention, their gazes fixed on John. When it became clear that nobody else would be getting up, one last person rose to their feet. John’s eyes immediately zoned in on the dark and curly head that slowly became visible and had been missing until now.

There, in the back row of the Ballroom at Rickerby Hall, Sherlock Holmes stood tall and proud, acknowledging that John Watson had saved his life more than once in the years they had known each other.

Left utterly speechless, Captain John Watson saluted.

“Thank you. I... thank you. It’s been my honour,” he managed to get out before he performed a quick turn and strode towards his seat.

As soon as he left the front, the whole room exploded in applause.

Men and women approached him and his unit members, congratulating all of them and patting them on their shoulders.

Michael the butler opened the glass doors onto the conservatory and gardens and ushered everyone through. Waiters provided drinks while the soldiers mingled with their guests.

One of the people who approached John was Jamie Fields, the brother of Martin, who had performed that song at the Trainyard.

“Captain Watson! I knew you looked familiar!”

“Hello. Well, we were undercover, I couldn’t say anything at the time. I really liked your performance, by the way, even though it did bring back memories.”

“And I liked yours! Quite some skills you’ve got there. Listen, I really meant what I said at the Trainyard. Thank you for helping my little brother,” Jamie said and extended his hand.

“You’re welcome,” John said and shook the offered hand.

Before long, Sherlock’s mother came up to him, a glass of champagne in her hand.

“Captain Watson! Or do you mind if I call you John? Everyone else in my family seems to call you John. I’m so glad to finally meet you!” she beamed at him.

“Pleasure to meet you, Lady Holmes,” he said.

“Oh, none of that Lady Holmes nonsense. Please call me Vivienne. You’re my son’s best friend and you two share a flat, I couldn’t possibly make you call me Lady Holmes, especially not after saving Sherlock’s life”, she said and smiled at him.

It struck him how different she was to her sons. She had the same hair and piercing eyes as Sherlock, but she was warm and welcoming and not as cold and distanced as Sherlock always pretended to be.

He decided there and then that he liked Sherlock’s mother and had to grin when he remembered that even the British government called her ‘Mummy’.

“You know you’re welcome here anytime, John, with any guests you may want to bring along. My boys barely spoke to one another before you moved into Baker Street and now they actually get along. They will probably deny it, even under oath, but I know my boys,” she said and patted John on the arm.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have something to discuss with Anne,” she said and wandered off just as quickly as she had appeared by John’s side.

It took him a second to realise that she had just casually referred to the Princess Royal by her first name and he wondered just how well-connected Vivienne was.

The guests were all mingling, some strolling through the garden and along the terrace, enjoying the afternoon sun, others sat in small clusters in the winter garden and exchanged stories. There were a lot of proud mothers and fathers and photo cameras all around and John wondered for a second what his parents would have said if they could see him now.

The question was partially answered when a teary Mrs. Hudson hugged him.

“Oh John, my dear boy! I am so proud of you!”

She brushed over the shoulders and arms of his uniform jacket as if removing lint. She caught the look in his eyes as he looked towards where his sister was trying to flirt with one of the other female guests.

“I’m sure your parents would be very proud indeed, John. Stop selling yourself short. Everybody here can attest that you are a most courageous soldier and a superb doctor, and it’s okay to take pride in your achievements, my dear.”

Instead of giving her a response, he simply hugged her.
For a while, he was pulled this way and that by his mates, wanting to pose for photos and exchange news. At one point, all the soldiers were called together in the garden for a team photo, showing the Fusiliers to the right and the Rifles to the left with John right in the middle. By the time the official photographer was done, dozens of mothers and friends had their cameras and phones out for a shot as well.

After this cocktail hour in the conservatory and garden, Michael, the Holmes family butler called everyone back inside.

The Ballroom had been transformed and tables arranged so everyone could sit down for another opulent dinner. There were two soldiers and their guests to every table.

John was glad to see that even Sally Donovan and Phillip Anderson were suitably impressed and kept their remarks about Sherlock and his upbringing in check. But then again, he suspected that if all this could come as a surprise to John, who had known and lived with Sherlock for years, then it would be a downright shock to those two.

John glanced around the room again and found that Mycroft and Colonel Carlyle were seated at a table with Vivienne and the Princess Royal. The two women were seemingly chatting away like old friends. He must have raised his eyebrows at that because Sherlock noticed and followed his gaze.

“They’re old friends, Teammates.”

“Who?”

“Mum and Princess Anne. They first met at three-day-events in the early 70s and later competed as part of the same team. They would both have been on the British equestrian team at the Olympics in 1976 if my mother hadn’t been preoccupied with my imminent arrival.”

“What? Your mother was an Olympic-grade horsewoman?”

“She still is, John. The stud should have been a bit of a clue, even for you! They still ride together sometimes, Princess Anne has bought several horses from mum or had them trained here,” Sherlock explained before someone completely changed the topic of the conversation again to something that Sherlock immediately called trivial and tedious.

A man, who John recognised as one of Mycroft’s minions, approached Mycroft and handed an envelope over to the government official.

John watched out of the corner of his eye how Mycroft handed the envelope to Carlyle, who accepted it with a nod. Then he excused himself from the table and walked over.

“Captain Watson? This just arrived for you.” Colonel Carlyle held the rather thick envelope in his hand as he came to stand next to John.

“Oh, erm... thank you, sir”, John said, slightly puzzled as he accepted the item.

Just as quick as he’d appeared at the table, the Colonel vanished again, leaving John perplexed. He turned the item this way and that, checking all sides, but all it said was ‘To Captain Watson.’ John had no doubt Sherlock would have deduced what it was within seconds.

“Go on, then. Don’t you want to open it? Find out what’s inside?” Molly asked as he turned it over yet again.

Eventually, John gave in and opened the envelope with a clean knife. It revealed an album, much like a guest book one would expect at a reception.

When John opened it, he had to look twice to believe his eyes. While Sherlock had shown him, Harry and Mrs. Hudson around the grounds, John hadn’t seen any of the guests actually arrive.

It appeared that someone must have been stationed near the entrance and asked every guest who knew John, whether they were members of the armed forces or not, to sign.

But after a few pages of well wishes and congratulations regarding his Victoria Cross and even more pages of people thanking John for saving them, the handwritten messages made way for print-outs.

John read the names attached to the messages and did a double-take. He knew that these people were still deployed abroad with various regiments and on various missions. There were RAMC doctors who had supervised John during his first few years as well as some doctors and nurses he had supervised once upon a time, who now outranked him.

Other messages were from mates he’d made at Sandhurst while others still were from units he had been with in Iraq and Congo before he’d been permanently attached to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers.

John sat in stunned silence as he read through the messages. He could tell this was Mycroft’s work as he couldn’t think of anyone else who would have the connections of getting absolutely everyone John had met in the military to send messages within two weeks.

It was almost comical, as John seemed to be one of the smaller men in all the photos. One seemed
to be deliberately arranged, the whole front row consisting of men easily taller than six feet, with John in the middle, the only one a whole head shorter than anyone else.

“Who are these from?” Molly asked as she leaned in to take a look at the pages and messages left for John.

“Us, of course. Watson’s Warriors,” a low and slightly hoarse voice said from behind John before the man broke into a laugh and John chuckled, shaking his head slightly in disbelief.

[1] Princess Anne competed as part of the British Equestrian Eventing team at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, becoming the first Royal to also be an Olympic athlete
John turned around to face the familiar voice behind him.

“Bill! What are you doing here, mate? I thought you were still out in Kandahar?” John asked as he got up and embraced the man who had joined the table, clapping him on the back.

“Just returned home three weeks ago. I see you’re doing well,” Bill replied.

“I am. I truly am,” John grinned.

“Everyone, this is Captain Bill Murray. We served together back when he was still a Lieutenant.” John introduced him.

There was a chorus of “Hi” and “Hello” and “Nice to meet you” from around the table.

“Good evening,” Bill said with a nod and knocking the table several times with his knuckles.

“Feels like yesterday, John. You know, back when you could still boss us around,” Bill replied to John’s statement with a chuckle.

“Is that where Watson’s Warriors come in?” Molly enquired.

“Yes, well, it all started harmless enough. We were in Afghanistan and just back from a mission and had hit a bit of a lull back at base. So we decided to play a friendly game of rugby against another unit to pass the time. Watson here was in charge of our unit, freshly promoted to Captain, so one of the crows, who had a thing for making up nicknames, jokingly gave our team the name Watson’s Warriors.”

“Better than some of the other titles Barnes came up with, wouldn’t you agree, ‘Thumbelina’?” Murray groaned.

“Don’t you start!” he warned John, who gave him his best innocent-but-mischievous grin.

“Thumbelina?” Sally Donovan asked.

Instead of giving a detailed explanation, Bill Murray just shrugged, grabbed his thumb, and bent it backwards, showing everyone how flexible the digit was.

“Barnes saw me do that once when I stretched my fingers. It stuck.” He explained.

“It’s not like ‘Three Continents’ here could talk, though.”

John blushed slightly and looked away from the table, clearing his throat to drown out Murray’s explanation when Lestrade mouthed the words ‘Three Continents’ at John with a curious expression on his face.

“Don’t know what you’re getting at, I just served on three different continents,” John quickly explained but his tone of voice was a bit harder and immediately told Murray to drop the subject.

“Anyway, Watson’s Warriors. We played a few matches against various units. John was not only the Captain in charge of our unit, but also team Captain. Once we’d found out he’d been Captain of the rugby team at Sandhurst it was a done deal. He might look harmless but don’t let that fool you! He’s got one of the dirtiest rugby tackles I’ve ever seen! Amid all those 6-foot guys you don’t see him coming straight at ya! Sent me flying once when it was just our unit playing, nearly broke my arm. And once, during a friendly game of five-a-side football, he actually dove between some bloke’s legs to get to the ball. He was at it and scored before the guy even knew what happened. This is one sneaky bastard!”

Bill laughed and John grinned at the memory. To be fair, that particular manoeuvre had been laughably easy to execute.

“Anyway, the name Watson’s Warriors stuck. Eventually, it came to mean any team or unit John was part or in charge of. So Watson’s Warriors... they are all the people who have served with this man right here,” Bill explained.
Sherlock had watched the exchange and studied the body language of John and his army friend. They clearly got on well despite John having been higher in rank at the time. They had faced difficult situations together and had stayed in contact.

“You witnessed the event John received his Military Cross for in 2008,” Sherlock said by the way of greeting.

Bill was taken slightly by surprise but recovered quickly. He glanced at John and raised one eyebrow quizzically, to which John just nodded.

“That is correct, sir. And you must be Sherlock Holmes. Pleasure to meet you,” Bill beamed and shook Sherlock’s hand.

“How did you know I was there? Go on, John has told me that you’re a detective and that you do this sort of thing. What gave it away?” Bill was genuinely interested.

Sherlock inhaled as if to launch into a full-on deduction when John interrupted him by clearing his throat.

“Actually, I told him. When he saw my ribbons for the first time, he asked how I came by it and I told him about what happened and how ‘my mate Murray’ gave me cover,” John chuckled.

Sherlock closed his mouth, slightly peeved at having been interrupted and growled at John before turning back to his plate and attacking the food left on it with his fork, muttering something about it all being blindingly obvious to anyone with half a brain cell from the way Bill Murray had greeted John and how he stood.

“Honestly, any idiot could tell...” Sherlock mumbled, chasing a pea around his plate. He spoke just loud enough for half the table to hear.

“Alright. Shut it,” John chided; the exasperated huff and eye roll more reflex by now than anything else. To John’s immense surprise, Sherlock did actually shut up.

Everyone else at the table laughed. John Watson was one of the very few people who could successfully shut Sherlock Holmes up.

John and Bill chatted for a while until waiters brought out the next course and Bill returned to his own seat. Sherlock took a moment to study his friend out of the corner of his eyes.

Despite being surrounded by military men and women and having seen the extent of the injuries his former colleagues suffered, John seemed more at ease than he had all week. The uniform gave him confidence, everyone here knew him and for once, Sherlock could see John the leader, the Captain in charge of dozens of men who all followed his command without questioning it.

Lestrade must have seen it too. He mainly knew John as a competent doctor, trusted colleague and fiercely loyal friend. But right here, right now, Greg realised that John deliberately stepped back to allow Sherlock to get the attention the consulting detective rightfully demanded.

And Greg knew from experience that it was all too easy to stand in Sherlock’s shadow and be overlooked in the face of genius. But John did so deliberately. He held himself back, yet he was always right there when needed, kept an eye out to keep Sherlock out of trouble and took command if necessary.

Greg couldn’t even remember how many times Sherlock had run off after criminals, deducing their motives and anticipating where they would likely be. But it was always John, not Sherlock, who was two steps ahead and anticipating attacks and where they would come from while the genius was still figuring out the details of the case.

Years on patrol had left John on high-alert whenever they followed a suspect and his readiness had saved Sherlock and several of the Yarders from severe injury multiple times over the years.

For a moment, Sherlock remembered a grey day, years ago, when John had stood at his grave while Sherlock had watched from the shadows as his best friend had said his goodbye. John had stood straight in front of that black marble tombstone and left the empty grave with a quick turn. Usually, this was the way to leave the presence of a higher-ranking officer. Anyone observing the scene would have thought that John had simply tagged along and followed Sherlock’s orders; that he had let Sherlock take charge of their lives, blindly following where genius led him.

But now it dawned on Sherlock that this had been John’s way of telling his friend what an honour he had considered their friendship and showing Sherlock the highest respect he was capable of.

The memory was gone again in a flash and Sherlock blinked. There John sat, laughing and talking animatedly with Molly and Mike across the table and Sherlock found himself immensely grateful that such a brave man could be his friend.

“That’s it John, no more excuses. You’re officially on Scotland Yard’s football team. If you’re only half as good as Murray says you are the fire brigade won’t have a chance this year!” Lestrade exclaimed, secretly hoping for a win.

It had been five long years since Scotland Yard had even reached the quarter-finals let alone won anything in London’s public services’ tournament. This was something the fire brigade and the paramedics often liked to remind the Yarders of, and Lestrade, although a fair sport by all accounts, really wanted to shut them up good and proper.
The conversation slowed down again as the food was consumed. At some point, the butler announced that there would be a short interlude now until coffee and desserts would be served and for everyone to mingle and enjoy the landscaped grounds. He also mentioned that there would be evening entertainment later one.

“I hadn’t realised that this was going to last this long,” John said to Sherlock.

“Neither did I, but I assume this is Mycroft’s doing. He did ask us to stay the night, after all,” Sherlock replied and John nodded.

John got up to mingle with his friends and colleagues some more while Sherlock went to Mycroft’s study to confront his brother about the plans for the evening. He knew it had been a while since anything this big had been hosted at Rickerby Hall.

Waiters in the Ballroom walked around the room, carrying trays with drinks ranging from wine to water. A redheaded woman had just managed to snatch the last rosé when he joined her.

“Didn’t expect to see you here, Amber,” he smiled and hugged her.

“Couldn’t resist, John, especially not after you helped my sister land the exclusive of the year! It’s so good to see you,” nurse Amber Fountain smiled.

“Likewise! She did help me as well, you know? Is Heather here?” he asked and craned his neck to look around the room.

“She should be here somewhere, yes. We came together and she’s driving so she’d better not abandon me,” Amber laughed.

The two of them talked for ages and were joined by other members of John’s former staff, including a heavily pregnant nurse Montgomery.

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The two of them talked for ages and were joined by other members of John’s former staff, including a heavily pregnant nurse Montgomery.

“Due in about three weeks,” she grinned as the group enquired how far along she was.

John kept floating between different groups of people, trying to speak to everyone who had made the effort to come out, especially his old teammates.

He was chatting to Corporal Liam Rivers, who had also been honoured today when he noticed a blonde lady approaching one of the waiters. Just before she reached him, though, someone else had snatched up the last glass of red wine.

John watched bemused as she grumbled and stalked off in search of the next waiter and, hopefully, a glass of wine.

John saw her approach and, having scanned the drinks still available, intercepted the waiter. He grabbed two glasses of red wine and heard an annoyed “Oh not again!” behind him.

He grinned and turned around, offering the blonde woman one of the glasses.

“I could tell you were getting desperate...” he started before he got a good look at her.

“Thank you. Oh! Hello, Doctor Watson! Sorry, Captain Watson,” she smiled as she took the glass from him.

“Sorry, you all look alike in uniform,” she grinned.

“Hello, Mary! I didn’t expect to see you here,” he confessed when he recognised the blonde receptionist from the clinic he’d been working at recently.

“Oh, and it’s John, please. We’re colleagues, sort of.”

“He was a bit hasty there, wasn’t he?” Liam Rivers said, hugging her.

“You two know each other?” John asked.

“Oh, yes, sorry, John. This is Mary Morstan, my cousin,” the Corporal said.

“I wasn’t sure whether I could be here tonight, so I didn’t want to say anything at work,” Mary confessed.

The three of them talked for a while and John and Mary kept talking even after Liam had gone off to speak to someone else from their old unit.

Coffee and desserts were served and John went to sit back down at his own table.

“She’s lovely,” Mrs. Hudson commented.

“Hm?”

“That girl you’ve been talking to, dear. She seems lovely,” Mrs. Hudson repeated and gave him a knowing wink and a pat on the hand before she rejoined a conversation with Molly and Lestrade.

Once the tables had been cleared for good and the seating chart thrown out, John saw Sherlock approach the front of the room, edged on by Mycroft and Vivienne, with a violin in hand.

He started playing without a word and the whole room grew silent. John instantly recognised the
melody as that of one of Sherlock’s own compositions, one of the songs he had composed for John.

It was one of the more upbeat numbers but still hauntingly beautiful.

The applause Sherlock got was as deafening as the silence before it had been and he found John’s gaze, bowed to the room and retreated as dance music started to play over the speakers.

“Thank you, Sherlock,” John said as the consulting detective rejoined their friends.

“That was beautiful, dear!” Mrs. Hudson agreed.

Eventually, John let Molly drag him, Sherlock and Lestrade towards the dance floor, where the three of them stood a bit awkwardly at first.

Then Mary joined them and asked John whether he wanted to dance and John couldn’t for the life of him think of a reason not to.

Sherlock and Lestrade watched from the sidelines as John and Mary danced and laughed among the crowd.

Eventually, they broke apart and John got himself something to drink.

Sherlock just looked at him about to say something.

“I don’t want to hear your deductions, Sherlock. I like her, please don’t spoil it,” John said, anticipating an onslaught of deductions in true Sherlock-fashion.

“I was just going to say she seems lovely,” Sherlock smirked and John broke into a grin.

John kept talking to his old and new mates while he was taking a breather from dancing, yet he remained on the look-out for Mary.

When he rejoined Sherlock at the far end of the winter garden, Molly was just in the process of dragging Greg Lestrade onto the dance floor.

“Sorry, John, I’m under orders,” Greg grinned as he let Molly pull him away from the conversation.

“Corporal Rivers and Miss Morstan left,”’ Sherlock said and it took a moment for John to realise what he’d said.

“They left about five minutes ago. I’m sorry, John.”

“Well, it’s not like I don’t know where she works,” John grinned to Sherlock’s surprise, before he pulled his phone out of his trouser pocket.

He smirked as he typed out a text. After all, he hadn’t received his nickname Three Continents for nothing.

“YOU LEFT AND I WASN’T DONE FLIRTING WITH YOU. THAT’S PRETTY RUDE. – JW”

It only took her a few minutes to reply.

“SMOOTH, DOCTOR WATSON. AND CHEEKY! 😊 – MM”

That’s when John decided he really liked her. He quickly replied.

“SEE YOU TUESDAY AFTER YOUR SHIFT. – JW”

The answer came even faster than before.

“IT’S A DATE. CAN’T WAIT! – MM”

John’s grin lit up his face. He twirled the phone around once and pocketed it when he rejoined the small group of Sherlock, Molly, Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade, pushing his way in next to Sherlock and Greg and clapping both men on the back.

Sherlock gave him a knowing look and smiled, genuinely happy for his best friend. The last two weeks had been hell for John and Sherlock had been worried in his own way. It was a relief to see his easy carefree smile again.

John couldn’t help but think that things were starting to look up.

[1] This is a text Martin Freeman actually sent his partner Amanda Abbington when they first met. She thought it was “smooth”
This is it!
The last chapter, at least for now!

I can't express my gratitude enough for all your kudos and comments. I always feel so inadequate when I reply to a comment with "Thank you" but believe me, it is a very heartfelt thanks!

When I started this story I never thought anyone would ever read it and for it to have gained this sort of support and following is truly sensational! Especially as English is not even my native language!

I do have plans for two more stories. One would be a continuation of this one exploring the new relationship (be warned, though, I do not write slash so if that's what you're after you're out of luck), the other is a look at Sherlock's troubled past. Not sure yet which one to write first.

I'm also quite busy this month, renovating and moving house, so it might be February before I can post anything else. I will, however, proof-read and update The Bravery of the Soldier to get rid of mistakes. The plot won't change though.

The texts at the end are directly influenced by Martin Freeman and Amanda Abbington. Martin actually sent a text like John's and Amanda commented that she found that really smooth. They've been together 13 years so it must have worked.

Again, thank you so much for all your support! I really mean it!
The Bravery of the Soldier wouldn't have become what it is today without you!
Cover Art

Cover idea for "The Bravery of the Soldier", made by me for my printed version of this story.

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!