Fumbling Towards Ecstasy

by sunken_standard

Summary

Everything was such a mess sometimes. But then, when ever hadn't it been?

Sherlock and Molly, in the days after everything changed.

Notes

Post-TFP; Updates may be irregular. Rating is for later chapters.

A million thanks to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

Title is from the song of the same name by Sarah McLachlan.
I promise I'll explain soon. Didn't do it to hurt you. SH

She wanted to believe him. She really, really did.

And then the bomb squad showed up outside of her flat.

It was six years ago all over again. It was starting to make sense; Sherlock had been... off, even for him, and if she hadn't been blind-sided she'd have realized sooner. That did nothing to make her feel any better about the whole conversation.

His stupid phone call had just been the icing on the giant shit cake her day had been up to that point. Seeing Tom with his pregnant wife, exchanging a glance and being pointedly ignored was just the start of it. She'd come home to discover a padded envelope in Saturday's forgotten post from Mary Watson.

“I've already told Sherlock he has to look after John for me,” Mary said, her face grim. “You know them, how hopeless they can both be. Keep an eye on them.”

“But more importantly, be there for Rosie. Be the mother to her I can’t be. Even if John remarries. There's no one I trust to love my little girl more than you. You're a good, clever, strong woman—and you are so very strong—and I want Rosie to have that. I need her to grow up knowing that she's the most important person in the entire universe, and that she can do great things. I need someone to show her what a woman can be.”

Mary paused, discreetly knuckling tears from her eyes. “Fourth video I'm making today,” she said like an explanation; without apology.

“I'm sending you a second video I made for her, when she's old enough. I couldn't send it to John, I just couldn't. I know you'll make sure she gets it. Probably when she's about sixteen. Nothing naff like a birthday or anything. When she needs it, you'll know. She's going to be a handful.” Mary's eyes twinkled and her lips twisted into that mischievous little smile of hers.
“And Molly, take care of Sherlock. I mean it. He needs more than John to keep him on an even keel. He needs to know he’s loved.”

Then she’d knocked one of her plants down into the sink, breaking the pot (a favourite, too) while filling the kettle. It was probably good that Sherlock called right after that, since nothing could have topped those two minutes of agony short of the building falling down on her.

Except there she was, being shuffled behind a cordon with the rest of her street because her flat might yet literally blow up.

Her phone rang. It was an unknown number; she thumbed the call over to voicemail.

A minute later, a younger woman in a pair of flannel pyjamas carrying a dachshund approached her, face screwed up in confusion.

“Excuse me, are you... Are you Molly?” she asked, a phone held to her collarbone.

“Yes,” Molly answered tentatively.

“It's for you,” the woman said, bewildered, like she couldn't believe she was saying it. She handed Molly her phone.

“Hello?”

“Miss Hooper, this is Mycroft Holmes. I’m sure you're curious as to why your flat is currently being searched for explosives—”

“Oh, I think I have an idea,” she said faintly. “Is Sherlock okay?”

“’Okay’ is a relative term, but physically he's unharmed,” Mycroft answered.

Molly let out the breath she hadn't consciously been holding, hating herself all over again for the way relief made her legs go just a little wobbly.
There was a pause. “Miss Hooper—Molly,” Mycroft began, his voice dropping to something less smarmy and more gentle and he knew, oh god he knew.

She was mortified. Had Sherlock told him, or had there been an audience? She thought that maybe there had been a woman’s voice in the background, but dismissed it as just a TV or something.

“Your... conversation with my brother this afternoon... It was not something he initiated of his own volition. He was coerced into doing it by a psychopath with the sole aim of causing pain to teach a lesson.”

“Was there a gun to his head?” she asked sharply, shame flaring into anger. What kind of a sick game—

“No, but there was one to yours. Metaphorically, of course.”

That was why Sherlock had pushed and pleaded, urgent; the explosives. It was starting again.

“Oh God,” Molly whispered. She felt the blood draining out of her face. “Jim? M-Moriarty?”

He was dead, of course he was, but there had been the thing with the TV screens months before and bombing was kind of his thing...

“Someone worse. Someone who makes James Moriarty look like Mr. Bean.”

“Oh,” Molly said, barely more than an exhalation.

“I can assure you that she no longer poses a threat,” Mycroft said quickly. “As for the damage that’s already been done...” He cleared his throat. “I do apologize. I can’t recall seeing my brother that upset since childhood.”

She made a bitter little noise. She swallowed down an incredulous “He was upset?”; she wasn't going to start ranting at a (relative) stranger.
“I'm constantly surprised at the depth of emotion he's capable of,” Mycroft said, more musing to himself than addressing her. There was something raw and tender in his voice that seemed out of place from what little she knew of him. “You'll have to excuse me, that would be the sedatives talking. It's been a very trying day.”

He hesitated a moment, drew in a breath. “The number I used to dial your phone is my personal line. I would appreciate if you saved it... should an emergency arise that requires it.”

He didn't wait for her response before ending the call.

Molly handed the phone back to the confused woman, apologizing profusely. The woman just wiped the screen on her pyjama top and pocketed the phone as she wandered back into the crowd.

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It was late but he knew she wouldn't be sleeping. He typed out a text and deleted it. He'd sent her the one while standing around waiting for Lestrade to clear the scene, but nothing since.

He tugged at the neck of his borrowed t-shirt (“You are not sleeping on my sofa naked. Just take the damn clothes.”); it was too small and he felt like he was being strangled.

There were only so many permutations of I'm sorry and we need to talk and it's more complicated than you think, but he'd be damned if he could figure out just the right one to open with. He had so many other things going on in his head that he'd yet to process, but the one thing that still itched as IMMEDIATE ATTENTION REQUIRED was the situation with Molly.

He just needed to know that she was okay. He wanted to hear her say it, because even if it wasn't true, just saying it made it closer to true.

He wanted to phone and actually hear her voice. He really wanted to go and see her in person and make her understand with the things he didn't say as much as with words; she was fluent in Sherlock in ways no one else on the planet was. He could look at her with it's not my fault and she'd look at him with I know, and you're a hopeless git, but you're you and I've resigned myself to the fact that I lo—

Christ.
Just thinking about her saying it knocked the air out of his lungs and made something ache behind his ribs.

Why did it ache?

*Oh Sherlock, you know why*, Mary's rich voice rang in his head.

Yes, fine, he knew why and there was no point denying it to himself now.

What he didn't know, what he needed help figuring out, was exactly what the hell *I love you* meant. Fake-Mary wasn't being forthcoming, just smirking at him like she'd eaten a canary. John would just back away from the question with a nope, and Mycroft knew fuck-all about human emotion. That would have always left Molly, first on his reference list under the heading of feelings.

That in itself should have probably been a sign at some point, when he started looking to her for cues.

It wasn't as though he had much personal experience in love as a concept. The first thing he'd ever loved—his dog—hadn't been a dog at all (and that thought was entirely too big to process without something to inject, snort, swallow, smoke or, if nothing else was available, shove up his arse). Familial love was a funny thing and not something he actively felt, at least since before puberty. Familiarity and a degree of warmth, but no acceptance. He always thought he'd been the odd one, the one who created the distance because there was something wrong with him and he didn't fit, but that was getting filed in the "to examine under the influence" bin.

The way he loved John and then Mary was something between the memory of Redbeard as a dog (Victor, Christ, Victor; a biscuit tin of buttons and pennies and plastic strings of beads, booty buried in a flower bed)—he blinked his eyes hard against the flash of memory, shaking it out of his head. *NOT. NOW.* Not yet.

John and Mary were family, simply put. John was the missing piece he'd been looking for forever, Mary was John's missing piece; she'd been a *safe* woman because she already belonged to John and there was no danger of predation of her on Sherlock or Sherlock on her. Very juvenile, very patriarchal, but anything that worked to keep her firmly as a sister (*no*) and not someone his mind wandered to when his hand was on his cock.

Which brought him to Irene Adler. He didn't know if he could call that love. Intrigue, to be sure. Admiration, grudgingly, and not without the sting of wounded pride. Lust, most certainly. She
knew every button to push, texts and picture messages that didn't appear suggestive on the surface leaving him breathless, red-faced, ashamed (a bespoke black leather glove, well-worn, draped casually over a wrought-iron footboard; a heavy line of bright silk scarves at a market stall somewhere in Gujarat; an extreme close-up of red satin drapery cord coiled over black raw silk).

Love, though? He tried to picture her death, her dying in his arms like Mary had John's. She would be cold and artfully lit even in her final moments, locking the pain and fear away so no one would ever have the satisfaction of seeing her bested. He would be very sad she was gone.

And then he let the image vanish and blinked Molly into Irene's place. "It's okay, I'm okay," she would struggle to reassure, but he'd see everything in her eyes—terror, apology, acceptance even while fighting to the bitter end. He'd see the radiant warmth of her fade into nothing right in front of him while the reflection of the water played over her face, everyone around them looking on as helplessly as he was.

His breathing hitched unexpectedly and he came back to himself, realizing that he was lying on John's sofa under a blanket that smelled very faintly of baby sick and washing powder and not in London Aquarium with Molly's blood leaking between his fingers. And he was crying.

That was mostly physiological, he was sure, the freshest wave of stress hormones in his body bypassing his overtaxed renal system and pouring out his eyes. Regardless, it was something he never wanted to picture again. Thinking about Molly dying right after she'd already almost died was sick and horrible and it just proved once again that there was something really wrong with him.

He would sooner die himself than let her die. He was very glad right then that the suicide option hadn't crossed his mind when he was in the coffin room.

Would he dive in front of a bullet to save Molly? Or would he freeze, like he sometimes did when he was overloaded?

*NO*, he said to himself, stopping that train of thought before it derailed him entirely. We are figuring this out. From every angle.

He pictured 221B, his room, standing just inside the doorway, observing. Molly, propped up against his headboard in one of her normal outfits that made her look like she'd burgled a care home for her wardrobe. And the lab coat.

*Really, Sherlock?* Mary asked from behind him, leaning against the door jamb with her arms and ankles crossed.
"What? She always wears a lab coat. I always wear a coat."

_Matching outfits, how cute._

He narrowed his eyes at Mary and she just raised her eyebrows, daring him to keep going.

"Fine," he relented.

And yes, _fine_, it wasn't like it was the first time he'd thought about Molly sexually. He had needs, too, and porn wasn't always readily available. Her mouth, mostly, after that terrible Christmas. She was so careful never ever to wear that shade of red around him again, even though he knew she still had it and used it after he'd drawn attention to it. He'd looked once, when he was in her flat, ostensibly to stow something he didn't want to drag back to Baker Street in her spare room (but really because he'd just needed a place to be for a few hours that wasn't alone); he'd even thought about pocketing the lipstick, but ultimately put it back because that was dangerously close to serial killer behaviour.

He called up a wardrobe of everything he'd ever seen her in, swiping through until he found something sexy. Christmas Dress? Too desperate. Christening dress? She'd looked nice that day, but too much like she'd stepped out of 1952. That yellow monstrosity from John and Mary's wedding? Nooo.

He was stalling, he realized. He was nervous. Afraid of being rejected, afraid of getting it spectacularly wrong. Afraid he'd accidentally let her see something he shouldn't or that he'd unintentionally hurt her, or that (oh god, even worse) he'd actually _want_ to hurt her (sex was violent and primal and what if he wanted to go too far and what if he _couldn't stop himself_)—

_Sherlock_, Mary said sharply. _What you've seen in porn isn't actually what real sex is like. And you're not automatically Ted Bundy just because you know he exists._

"Yes. Right," he nodded, wiping his hand over his mouth. "Right."

_You could try lingerie_, John piped up from behind Mary. Sherlock scowled and John blanked his face into that butter-wouldn't-melt look before he backed away, palms raised in surrender and chin tucked to his chest.
Regardless of what part of his subconscious it came from, it wasn't a bad idea. Satin, silk, French knickers and suspenders; all nice things. She even owned some, though most everything in her drawers was brightly-coloured and mismatched, boypants with cupcakes or cartoon strawberries and lime green lace. Plain white cotton was fine, too, a less distracting compromise.

Molly on the bed realized she was almost naked immediately and rushed to cover herself with one of the spare pillows, drawing her knees up protectively. She scowled at him in that way that made her look like a plucky Disney heroine.

He huffed in annoyance. The only way he'd get to see now was if he went over to the bed and actually uncovered her himself, which would require touching her.

She always shied away when he touched her. Not afraid of men, afraid of him. Why?

_Probably the same reason you never touch other people unless you're acting or moving them around like furniture. You don't want to make a habit of it because you might—shock horror—like it_, John shouted from somewhere in the kitchen.

She'd touched _him_ quite a bit, though. He tried to conjure all the sense memories of those times and apply them in a different context. Aside from bony elbows to his ribs and warning kicks under the table and pinches to his arms, most instances of touch had been clinical; she'd given him more medical examinations than he could count (Sixteen, Molly supplied from the bed, craning her neck over the pillow). She probably knew the state of his body better than he did.

_Oh, was that a tingle? John, I think that was a tingle_, Mary called over her shoulder down the hallway.

"Yes, fine, that's enough now," Sherlock said, hustling her out the door and closing it behind her.

He liked the idea that Molly knew his body, what was under his skin.

He remembered the feel of her thumbs firm while she traced veins, fingertips light over the punctures, gentle on his eyelids as she checked pupil reactivity, ghosting pressure as she changed the dressings he'd been too proud to ask John to help with. Every time she took his pulse, counting his heartbeats.

Molly was in front of him, then, fully clothed (including the lab coat).
Her fingers were firm on his chest; she stared straight ahead, the furrow of her brow indicating concentration as she traced his sternum, the lines of his ribs. *Cute,* some distant, loathsome part of his brain supplied. *She looks cute when she's thinking.*

He let out a breath. While he was sure he was in no state to get an erection, his cock twitched with a valiant effort at the thought of her learning *every* part of his body.

And that was clearly enough of that.

So yes, sexually attracted to Molly Hooper as a person, on an emotional level and not just another pin-up from the wank bank: check.

Just to make sure, he brought her hand up to his cheek and held it there, steeled himself, and looked into her eyes. He didn't just look at her eyeballs in a parody of eye contact, as he sometimes tended to do with people; he held her gaze.

Yep. Warmth in his gut creeping lower, electricity under his skin like coke bugs (if coke bugs felt like champagne bubbles), his mouth actually watering with the desire to put it on hers.

It was his Mind Palace, there was nothing stopping him from tilting his head down just so, letting her hand slide into his hair, feeling her breath against his lips before he—

The fantasy shattered like a mirror with Rosie's wail from upstairs.

He huffed a breath and checked the situation in his lap (everything ship shape and Bristol fashion, thank God) before throwing back the blanket and rolling off the sofa.

He made it up the steps just as John was staggering out of his bedroom.

"I can get her," Sherlock offered, suddenly feeling a bit awkward. He hadn't spent a lot of time with Rosie since getting clean again.

John deliberated for a bit, the fog of being pulled from an exhausted sleep making his mind work slower than usual.
Really, he didn't blame John. No sane parent would want a junkie spending any amount of time with their baby.

John inhaled sharply through his nose and blinked a few times. "Yeah. Yeah. If she doesn't stop, just bring her in to me. Ta." He patted Sherlock on the arm, turned and sniffed and swallowed, smacking his lips a bit as he shuffled back into the bedroom. He left the door cracked open just enough to throw a sliver of light from the hallway into the room.

Sherlock went into Rosie's room and scooped her out of her cot, checking her nappy while he cradled her to his chest. Just wet.

He'd never changed a nappy, nor even observed the process close up until Mary had bullied him into it. It wasn't on his top ten list of things to do on a Saturday night, but it wasn't the horror show a thousand overheard conversations had led him to believe. More than anything, he'd been flattered that Mary had trusted him enough to do something so intimate and so familial.

"Yes, I can imagine how dreadfully uncomfortable this is," he said quietly as she tried to fight her way out her romper or out of his grasp, probably both. "Cold and wet is rather yucky, I think your Daddy can relate to that."

Sherlock tilted his head and winced. "Which I probably shouldn't tell you about until you're older. Maybe we'll just not tell stories tonight. Instead, Watson, you can help me solve a problem."

He tickled her tummy after securing the tabs on the fresh nappy. She was still crying, but it had tapered off from wailing to unhappy fussing. She seemed a little more drooly than he remembered her being a few days ago; he suspected she'd be cutting another tooth soon.

"Rosie, you love your Aunt Molly, don't you?" he asked, doing up the snaps of her romper.

"Of course you do, she makes funny faces, you love funny faces," he said, swooping her up against his chest. She groused at him, possibly winding herself up for another cry.

"I think I made her feel very bad today," he continued. Rosie howled and fisted the neck of his t-shirt, tiny nails scratching the skin underneath.

"Yes, you're cross with me. I'm very cross with me, too," he said, patting her back and bouncing
her as he walked her back and forth in the small bedroom.

"Today someone made her say something to me that was very scary, but she would only do it if I said it to her first. She thinks I was being mean to her, so she wanted to be mean to me, too."

Rosie kicked twice in a half-hearted attempt to squirm away, yelling at him without actually crying in that loudly discontent way babies do.

"Aunt Molly isn't mean, you mustn't ever think that," he continued quickly. "Sometimes I say and do things to her that I shouldn't and she..."

He groped for simple words to describe how she punished with her disappointment and used her rare, hot anger like scalpel, how she had a (thankfully underdeveloped) sadistic streak in her. Granted, he was probably the only person on the planet that could bring it out in her, but he'd never actually met her family. Family, he had on good authority, brought out the worst in people.

He cleared his throat and shifted Rosie to his other arm, picking up her rattle so hopefully she'd squish that instead of clawing at his neck. "Well. Anyway. The problem is this. Today I worked out that I love Aunt Molly too. It took me a very long time because I'm not nearly as clever as she is. This is all very new to me for a lot of reasons, and I'm very afraid that I might make the wrong choice when it's important. Something is quite broken and I don't know where to begin to fix it."

Rosie had begun to quiet while he spoke; he bent his head and pressed a kiss to her fine, silky hair. She kicked again, but less to try to get away from him and more because he thought.

"So, Watson, what should I do?"

"I'd say send her flowers, but I don't think they make a card that really covers that," John said dryly from the doorway.

Sherlock whipped around, caught red-handed.

John walked into the room, his arms up and gesturing for Sherlock to hand the baby over. "Talking to her's always a start. Explain the situation sooner rather than later."
Once John had Rosie, he pulled her mouth open and looked in, then stuck his index finger inside, narrowing his eyes as he felt around. "Then give her—and you—some time to work through it in your own heads. Yep, that's number five," he said, extracting his finger.

John tilted his head, indicating Sherlock follow him. "I wasn't intentionally listening, by the way."

He paused thoughtfully. "Molly Hooper. Never saw that coming."

"I think it's a safe bet to say that no one did. Except my omniscient, criminally insane sister, apparently," Sherlock said, trailing John through his bedroom to lurk in the doorway of the en suite.

John ran a flannel under the tap and wrung it out one-handed, giving it to Rosie to chew on.

Sherlock shifted out of the doorway, allowing John to pass. He wasn't really sure what to say next.

John sat on the bed and propped himself against the pillows, Rosie snuggled to his chest and determinedly chewing on the flannel. He indicated to the other side of the bed.

It was a bit odd, making himself comfortable in Mary's spot, like he was defiling a memorial to her. He would never stop carrying the weight of her death; he missed his friend.

"It really is worth it. Maybe not so much nights of passion in High Wycombe as his-and-hers microscopes and kidneys in the salad drawer at Baker Street, but you'd still be hard pressed to find a better match."

He was thankful John hadn't mentioned the bit about Molly already being in love with him for years. Probably more because of his own discomfort at having to witness it and the pity he'd directed her way than for Sherlock's sake, but still welcome all the same.

"John, you don't have to convince me, I did actually arrive at that conclusion myself. You were there," Sherlock said, scrunching his shoulders to resettle them against a fold in the duvet, his hands resting on his stomach.

"So what about, ah, Irene Adler?"
"I don't know. I haven't seen her since Karachi and a handful of texts a year hardly constitute a relationship." He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. Exhaustion was finally catching up with him.

"Mm, probably for the better. There's more to it than just great sex."

"Who says we had sex?" Sherlock asked, feeling defensive. John didn't need to know about that single night in the desert, how she'd left him half-dressed, hard and aching, a smile on her face that proved she'd won. That round, at least.

"So you... didn't? I just assumed—"

"Yes, and you know what happens when you assume."

"Cute, yeah, that's cute," John said, real amusement behind the too-wide plastic smile he gave Sherlock. "What about Janine, then? You two must've...?"

"Neewp," Sherlock answered, feeling uncomfortable. He wasn't about to start a conversation with what is sex, really? because he was sure John meant actual penetrative sex, and that didn't happen. He had brought her off with his hands a number of times and participated indirectly while she got herself off a few other times and, quite possibly if not for the coke, he'd have at least let her do the same for him. Probably would have drawn the line there, though, because he wasn't that much of an arsehole.

Honestly, though, it was no one's business but his own.

"Why is everyone so interested in my sex life? Even my sister asked me if I've had sex."

"That's disturbing. That's... not normal."

"John, what part of today—well, yesterday at this point—struck you as normal?"

John laughed, not so exuberantly as to disturb the baby, but with enough genuine mirth to make Sherlock feel a little more at ease with everything.
"I think this is a new level, even for us," John said.

"We'll find a way to top it. Give it a week," Sherlock replied, twisting his head to grin up at John.

They settled into companionable silence for a few minutes; Sherlock finally began to doze. He cracked an eye open when John settled Rosie between them, pulling the wet flannel from her grasp and tossing it on top of the laundry basket. He looked down at the wet spot on his t-shirt and stripped that off, too, before sliding under the duvet.

"Sharing a bed with Sherlock Holmes while half naked. Oh how people would talk."

Sherlock snorted and rolled over onto his stomach, bunching the pillow under his head.

*

“Is it true,” Wiggins asked as though announcing something of grave import, “that dead people fart?”

Molly gritted her teeth. Of all the people Sherlock could have sent to make sure she was alright...

“Yes,” she ground out.

“Ah.” He nodded his head, pondering, as though she'd just handed down some deep bit of wisdom.

Then again, maybe she had. Kid was weird.

She rubbed her arms briskly. It was warm for March, but not that warm. Half the crowd had dispersed, some going to neighbours' flats and others to whatever was open at this time of night. Molly had VIP privileges, of course; she got to lean against one of the bomb trucks while the uniformed officers watched her suspiciously, a drug dealer as her body guard.
At least he'd brought her coffee, even if it was done wrong. She would have preferred tea, anyway.

Finally, finally they let her back into her flat, forty-five minutes after the rest of the street was cleared to go back into their homes. She wondered what the hell the police had been doing, but then decided she didn't want to know.

The place was a tip. Nothing was broken, as far as she could tell, but it looked like a bomb actually had gone off.

She kicked a basket aside and plopped down on one of the sofa cushions scattered on the floor. She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her forehead on them, her arms bracketing her calves. She buried her hands in her hair and cried for God only knew how long because sod it, she needed it.

Eventually she dragged herself to her bedroom and straightened the mattress on the bed. She didn’t bother to remake it, only grabbed the duvet from the floor and curled up under it, falling into an exhausted sleep almost immediately.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Monday.

Chapter Notes

A million thanks to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

I'm going to try for regular updates of Sundays and Wednesdays until I run out of chapters or I finish the story, whatever comes first.

This chapter is another slow one, sorry. It really does get more interesting later. Well, more or less.

*

He slept and slept and slept, periodically surfacing enough to become vaguely aware of John getting out of bed and taking Rosie, a blanket being tossed over himself, John in the bathroom and then getting dressed, Rosie crying, John on the phone.

He dreamt. He didn't remember the dreams upon waking, just scattered images and impressions. Being surrounded by water, enclosed, claustrophobic. Long hallways and the smell of old wood and furniture polish; dark, dark corners. The feeling of bare feet inside wet wellies. Smoke.

John woke him before leaving to take Rosie to nursery; Sherlock rolled over and went back to sleep for what could have been minutes or days. He woke again to a pounding headache; he was nauseated and dehydrated and every muscle ached. The only bad part of a fix was the comedown, he thought.

He started ordering his to-do list while he went about the morning necessities, sending texts as appropriate. He needed clothes and his own toiletries; he was halfway through a text to Wiggins when the weight of the day before slammed into him like a truck.

I have a sister. My sister killed my best friend. My sister is criminally insane and tried to kill everyone I love at some point in the last few years, all just to hurt me. Because I hurt her.
He sank to John's bathroom floor, toothpaste still smeared on his teeth.

He was at that beach again. His adult sister was crouched at the water's edge with her back to him, wearing the same blue dress and oatmeal cardigan and red wellies she'd worn at age six, hair in bunches.

"Eurus," he said softly. Loss and regret were knives pushing through him, opening him up and hollowing him out.

Himself at seven ran by, stopping on an outcropping of rocks to wave at a hazy memory of a little boy in an eyepatch next to an Irish Setter that kept glitching out.

He went up to himself and crouched down, looking the little boy in the eyes. "You couldn't have saved her, not then. It's not your fault. Listen to me carefully. It's not your fault. Not Eurus and not Victor."

*It is, though, Sherlock*, Moriarty's voice droned behind him. Sherlock spun to face him, using his body to block his younger self from view.

He was dressed as Eurus, of course he was.

"You knew," Sherlock said. "You did everything because of my sister, yet you never said a thing. Why? What did you have to gain by hiding it?"

*Is that really what's on your mind, Sherlock? Aren't you more curious as to how I missed this?*

Molly appeared next to Moriarty, her face pinched in pain, clutching her mobile to her ear like a lifeline. She was wearing her favourite jumper.

*I mean, I did know. Everybody knew*, he said, drawling out his dopey Jim-from-IT voice. *About her, I mean. You know she had pictures of you in her bedroom. I saw them. In big, glittery heart frames. I felt a little sad for her, I did.*

"Shut. Up."
You know why I was in her bedroom, right? He's not gay! We're together! he exclaimed in a falsetto, his face twisted and cruel in his impersonation of Molly.

You know what together means, don't you, Virgin? You toss it and leave it, and I pull up quick to retrieve it, he droned, roughly grabbing Molly's arse and pulling her closer.

"Shut up!" Sherlock roared, grabbing Moriarty by the jumper and crowding his space.

Moriarty's eyes flew wide and his mouth formed a perfect O, malicious amusement in his feigned surprise. Ow ow ow, You wouldn't hit a girl, would you? You wouldn't hit your baby sister!

"You are not my sister! It only took my sister five minutes to manipulate you into splattering your brains over the roof of a hospital. Who's the clever one? I took your network apart, you were no better than a second-rate Mafioso. You weren't a genius, you were the lowest form of opportunist. And my baby sister played you like a fiddle," Sherlock sneered, pushing Moriarty away.

You wound me, Sherlock. We really had a special something, too, Moriarty pouted. Don't worry, though, lover. I'll never leave you. Never, ever, ever. See you again soon, sexy.

Moriarty winked and blew him a kiss, whipping the wig off his head and tossing it into the water as he strutted away.

Sherlock willed his hands to unclench, made himself relax. He hated seeing Moriarty in his head more than he despised seeing the man when he was alive.

He looked around; he was still alone on the beach with Molly and he wasn't really sure what to say or do next.

Molly fiddled with her mobile before jamming it in her pocket. She took a step closer, putting herself directly in front of him.

He thought, dimly, that he shouldn't be dwelling on this so much, on her. He should be digging deeper through altered and repressed memories to gather enough data to start processing his childhood. He'd rather avoid it entirely, but he valued truth above all else.
Sherlock, Molly said gently, tentatively, but without the apprehension often inherent in her tone.

_Maybe you don't love me as a girlfriend. Maybe, all these years, you've been using me to fill the hole that Eurus left here._ She patted the centre of his chest and smiled up at him sadly.

_Ah_, he thought. There was a point to her being there.

_Think about it_, she said, willing him to transpose her image over the one he kept seeing of Eurus, all wide eyes and heart-shaped face.

Was it true?

"No," he said, unsure of himself.

Molly was small, physically small. From the day he'd met her he'd felt a kind of annoyed antagonism toward her, but not like what he'd felt for Sally or Anderson (both of whom, at one time, he'd hoped to if not befriend, then at least impress with his cleverness; he'd been so young and naive then). More like he wanted to poke her in the ribs just to make her squeal or pull on her ponytail. He wasn't exactly trying to make her feel bad back then, but there was something... Like he wanted her to know he was better. Cleverer than her. Bigger, stronger, more.

And then there was the curious fact that the first time she showed interest in a man that wasn't him, he got mean.

But wasn't that what big brothers did? Defend their little sister's virtue or some nonsense. Defend their hearts.

"No," he repeated more vehemently, gripping her shoulders.

What else did big brothers generally do, besides annoy and protect? Feeding. Mycroft had forever been trying to cram food down Sherlock's throat as a child, trying to fatten him up into a carbon copy of himself—

_That's a little harsh, brother mine_, Mycroft said around a mouthful of cake somewhere off to Sherlock's side; he dismissed him with shake of his head.
He brought Molly food in the lab all the time. Mostly as a bribe. Not always. Sometimes just because she looked hungry. Sometimes because he wanted the company and eating together was a thing people did.

*Girlfriends feed you up,* John supplied helpfully from his side. *Just saying.*

"I'm not the girlfriend in this hypothetical situation, John," Sherlock scolded—loudly—twisting his head to look at the smug bastard.

John raised his eyebrows and just stuck his chin out, tugging down the corners of his mouth in a patronizing *whatever you say mate.*

*You bought me chips,* Eurus-as-Faith said, coming to stand behind Molly, fixing him with her eyes wide and blank like a cobra. *You tried to buy her chips once but she ran away. You were sad that day.*

"I thought you were going to kill yourself," he defended, blinking her away before she could muddy the waters any further.

Right, yes. Brotherly affection. Food was generic, platonic—

*Let's have dinner,* Irene whispered, her lips grazing the shell of his ear.

"Not you too. Fuck's sake, this is getting ridiculous! Where's Mary, she should be here too, we could all take a group photo, then go down the pub for a pint!" Sherlock snarled in frustration, fisting his hair. His own goddamn head was too crowded.

*Take Molly somewhere nice and talk to her,* Mary said, appearing at Molly's shoulder. She dipped her head to catch his eyes, locked his gaze. He felt calmer.

*There, see, not as bad at this as you think,* she said like a Mum. Her eyes twinkled then and a smile played around her lips as she added, *I mean, you are still pretty bad, but you're not completely without hope.*
He stepped closer and slid his hands into Molly's before closing his eyes and willing them somewhere else. He let his brain pick for him.

When he opened his eyes, they were on his favourite rooftop in the entire city, right on top of the Home Office. It was night time, spring, just enough of a chill in the air to make his breath fog. London stretched out around them in all directions for miles, vibrant and alive and comforting. It always felt like the safest place in the world, like being in the womb of his mother city. He'd never considered bringing anyone up there before, not even John.

That had to mean something, yes? Romantic. But, some part of him had drawn attention to it being womb-like and he and Eurus had come from the same one... He huffed.

He had to get this sorted, once and for all.

"Sorry, just one more test to make sure," he said quietly to Molly. She flinched at the word test and he felt an echo of fear-anger-shame go through him.

Beside them he conjured his sister; his real adult sister, as she was when he saw her being led away the night before. Not the raging animal or the terrifying machine, but the little girl, lost and alone. The one that he didn't remember, but knew existed in there somewhere.

He let go of Molly's hands and took a deep breath. He turned to Eurus.

"I love you," he said.

He was hit with a memory like a punch to the gut. He was four, five at the oldest. Eurus was in front of him, wearing a dusty pink corduroy dress over a white long-sleeve shirt, white tights, black patent leather shoes. Her hair was down, parted on the side, held back with a skinny plastic headband decorated with a pink corduroy bow to match the dress. It was Easter.

He picked her up, his little back bowing with the effort of it, her belly pressed to his and her tiny feet thudding off of his shins. She shrieked with delight as he spun, around and around and around until he was dizzy. They both fell to the ground and laughed and laughed; Mummy scolded them for the grass stains on their nice outfits but he didn't care because he'd made his baby sister happy.

He staggered back, breathing ragged. He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but certainly not that. It was a pure feeling—cool like peppermint and misty mornings and soft like a kitten's face, light and strong—surfacing from the heart of a child he'd destroyed years ago.
He looked to Eurus. She had the barest suggestion of a smile in her eyes, her face otherwise completely blank.

He wasn't sure what to do, his heart was hammering but he was paused mid-thought, the hollow sound of a seashell in his ears.

A hand in his, soft and small and delicate; Molly.

She reached her free hand up and cupped his jaw, urging him to face her. She used her thumb to brush tears from his cheek. He couldn't look at her face, not now, afraid of what he'd see, or that what he was hoping to see wouldn't actually be there. That it wouldn't exist outside his own head.

"Mycroft always used to call me a crybaby," he mumbled.

*Mycroft is a toss-pot*, Molly said, stepping in closer and wrapping her arms around his waist.

(He'd been hugged by Molly exactly once, a quick, almost violent thing when he'd gone to see her at Bart's his first night back in London after his suicide. She hadn't apologized for it; he should have known then that something about her had changed.)

He wondered if this was what he wanted most from Molly. Someone in his corner, always. Someone to comfort him with soft words and gentle touches. He'd never really got that kind of affection from his mother. At least, not that he could remember, but almost everything before age seven was missing or a fabrication, so it was hard to say if losing Eurus had changed her.

So, did he love Molly for what she did for him, for *how she loved him*, rather than *who she was*? That seemed just as reprehensible and selfish as trying his best to ignore her deepest feelings for so many years.

He pressed closer to her and returned the hug, holding her as tightly to himself as he dared. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since he'd been forced into the revelation of his feelings and he was already scared of losing her from his life completely because of them. Or, more accurately, not because of his feelings, but because of the kind of person he really was.

*Stop it*, Molly warned, a hint of iron in her voice. The kind of voice that threatened a slap.
Mummy had never slapped him, either, not even when he was being horrible. He thought sometimes she should have. He'd even tried to provoke it, in his teenage years. God, he was awful. Rotten.

_Sherlock._

He sighed into her hair. She was right, of course (even if she hadn't said anything)—self-pity suited no one. She was always right. The sooner he got his feelings sorted, the sooner life could go back to normal and he could go back to solving crimes without distraction.

"I lied," he said.

_You lie and lie and lie..._ Janine's voice echoed, carried in on a faint breeze.

"I know and I'm sorry but I was curious, too and—" He shook his head and pushed it away. "One more test."

With a final squeeze, he stepped back from Molly. Eurus was gone, Irene Adler as the first time he'd laid eyes on her in his sister's place.

Sherlock faced her head on.

"I love you."

She gave him a look with a million facets, tease and promise, appraisal and dismissal, intrigue without being impressed. She was picking him apart, unravelling him; that's what always drew him to her.

His phone moaned a text alert.

_You love an idea._

She smiled at him, sparkling and defiant and not at all sad.
She smiled at him, sparkling and defiant and not at all sad.

Another text, this one an image file. Her, barefoot and hair loose, wearing his dressing gown. She was fixing a mug of morning tea in the kitchen of his flat.

Another picture message. Her in a Christmas jumper and a paper crown balancing Rosie on her hip, pointing at the camera with an exaggerated smile. They were in front of the mantle at Baker Street, fairy lights draped over the mirror.

Another picture message. Everyone (John, Lestrade, Rosie, Mrs. Hudson, Molly, Mycroft, Mummy and Dad) crowded close in the frame around a restaurant table; her blouse was conservative and she had a dignified streak of silver in her hair, the lines around her eyes prominent.

Another picture. The two of them, heads angled toward each other while looking at the camera. His hair was silver and hers was on the lighter side of salt-and-pepper. She was smiling; his own face was serious.

None of them look right, do they?

"No," he answered quietly.

The game was fun while it lasted. I think we'll call it a draw.

When he looked up from his phone she was gone.

That seemed entirely too easy, too painless. Really, though, he'd just been hanging on to that one thread of the mutual attraction they shared; the tease of the what-might-have-been so much more interesting than the reality of it.

I think you're ready now, Sherlock, Molly said.

"Ready for what?" he croaked. He already knew he wasn't going to like what was coming.

She stepped back; two children stepped forward to stand in front of her. Eurus and Victor. She
laid a hand on each of their shoulders, protective, motherly.

"No," he said, barely a whisper. "I'm not— I can't. Not yet."

*It's okay, Sherlock. You'll have help. I'll still be here when you're finished. She smiled at him, reassuring and gentle.*

*We'll begin slowly, Sherlock, wouldn't want to overtax you.* Mycroft stepped into his field of view. He looked as smarmy as ever, but not unkind.

This was the Mycroft that sat with him on a filthy mattress in a Camden flop as he shook and shook from too much and never enough cocaine. The Mycroft that brought him his first manilla folder with glossy eight-by-tens of a dead MI6 man and said *Tell me what happened and I'll have you signed out.* The Mycroft that had smiled at the thought of his younger brother being a dragonslayer.

*First, little brother, what do you remember of Musgrave Hall?*

*

Six-thirty came all too soon and, while Molly could barely keep her eyes open in the shower, she didn't feel nearly as terrible as she had the day before.

Tom was forgiven; she was happy that he was happy and had found what she'd ultimately been incapable of giving. Even if the snub had been intentional (and maybe it actually hadn't been), she understood a thing or two about awkward and painful and moving on.

Mary's DVDs were tucked safely into Molly's underwear drawer; finding them had been the first thing she'd done after rolling out of bed. She'd have to tell John about them, sooner rather than later. Not yet, though. Not today, at least.

She could almost laugh about the synchronicity of Mary's last words on the video to what happened not ten bloody minutes later. Another cosmic joke at Molly Hooper's expense. At least it hadn't actually been a joke on Sherlock's part.

She knew she shouldn't be angry at him, not really. He'd done it to save her.
That thought took the edge off, at least. She wasn't dead, so there was that.

Really, that whole getting her heart ripped out of her chest and having it force-fed to her while still beating thing should be the least of her concerns. Until now she'd never been in the line of fire. Not directly. She'd thought she was safe in the background, blending into the wallpaper. Outside of it all.

It was terrifying, actually. Everyone else who'd ever been a target in Sherlock's life had been able to protect themselves. John was a soldier, Mary had been... something (she never said outright and Molly didn't pry, but she'd got enough from casual conversation to know that she was some kind of spy or assassin or black ops or ninja before settling down in the suburbs), Mrs. Hudson was just about as close to a real life Bond girl as one could get, Greg was a copper; Molly once took archery for a term in school and still got lost every single time she drove to Brighton. She wasn't exactly equipped to handle trouble.

She supposed she'd finally hit the big time, made it to the inner circle, guest star to series regular. Wonderful.

*

Sherlock came back to himself to find John standing over him, mobile in hand, the expression on his face somewhere between Army doctor and best friend, calmly restrained panic. He realized immediately what it probably looked like; John had seen a lot but he'd never seen him overdosed (not *overdosed*-overdosed, at least).

He sat up slowly, his back and arse aching from hours? (hours.) on the cold tiles.

"I'm alright," he said, his mouth having trouble forming the words. He used the back of his hand to scrub his lips. "I'm alright, it's just toothpaste."

"Jesus, Sherlock." John disconnected whatever call he was making and shoved the handset in his back pocket, then offered him a hand up.

"I was... Mind Palace," he said, flicking his hand in the air, clawing his way back into the real world.
He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror; he looked like hell.

"Did you, ah, start remembering?" John asked gingerly, as if stepping into a minefield.

"Yes."

"And are you...?" Okay? Suicidal? Homicidal? Going to go on a massive cocaine binge the second I leave the flat? All of the above?

"I'm not finished."

"Not finished?" John licked his lips, preparing to diffuse a bomb.

"I only made it to age four. Working backwards, of course. I suspect there won't be much before the age of three, at any rate. Even my brain is subject to the limits of human physiology."

John relaxed. "Right. Ri—"

The phone in John's pocket rang, and Sherlock had a good idea who it was.

John answered.

"Yeah, no, he's fine. Well," John amended, leaving the fine being relative unspoken.

"False alarm. Yes, sure, he's right here. Of course you know," John muttered, passing Sherlock the handset.

"What?" Sherlock greeted his brother.

"I've sent a car for Mummy and Daddy. There's a reservation for dinner at seven. I'll see you in my office at six."
"I'm not ready for this I'm not ready for this I'm not near ready for this—"

"It's okay, Sherlock. He heard Molly's voice in his head. You'll get through it."

"Fine. Have one of your henchmen bring me some clothing."

"They prefer the term 'minion.' I would say go and check the front door, brother mine, but four minutes ago a cyclist decided to get himself killed and turned the A10 into a car park. I do so hate it when the timing's off."

He had a fleeting urge to make a cutting remark about Mycroft slipping, not being the omnipotent deity he thought he was, but Sherlock's heart wasn't in it. For the first time in his entire adult life, he had no desire to give his brother any more trouble.

"Don't bother sending a car, I'll find my own way there," he said, ringing off.

He tossed the phone back to John. "Find someone to mind Rosie tonight. We've got an appointment." He took the single step needed to stand in front of the sink and turned on the hot tap.

John's mouth worked around the start of a question, but was interrupted by the doorbell.

"John, if you would be so kind," Sherlock said. He stoppered the sink and splashed water on his face.

He looked forward to a shower.

"I'm sorry, you're the henchman? Are you working for Mycroft full time now?" Sherlock heard John say from downstairs.

*Everyone works for Mycroft whenever he wills it. How is that a surprise?*

"Yeah, well, I was already at Baker Street to check on Mrs. Hudson," Lestrade's voice came from downstairs, moving closer. Of course it was him. "She's livid, by the way."
The familiar cadence of his trudging steps on the stairs was oddly comforting.

"Already got an earful this morning," John said.

They both hovered outside the bathroom for a second before Lestrade stepped forward and handed Sherlock a Boots bag full of clothing. He glanced inside; toothbrush, deodorant, razor. Good enough.

Lestrade stood with his hands on his hips, looking back and forth between them for a moment. He clearly wanted to ask if everything was alright, but didn't want to be too much of a mother hen about it.

Sherlock thought it best to keep the awkward to a minimum; a quick dismissal was probably for the best.

"If you're finished here I need you to go and check on Molly, make sure she's alright." He hoped his voice sounded as airy and nonchalant as he was going for.

"Why?"

Apparently Mycroft had made the call to SO15 himself, rather than delegating. Interesting.

"My sister did rig her flat with explosives yesterday," he said, making it sound like the most obvious thing in the world. He didn't need to know about the reasoning behind it.

"Molly Hooper?" Lestrade said incredulously. "Why would anyone want'a hurt her?"

"But she said that was a lie," John inserted himself into the conversation. "She said she hadn't actually done it." It was a question.

"Oh please, John, of course she had the place wired to blow sky high. She had contingency plans."
"But she said—"

"She said what she thought would make the most impact." He gave John a look, stop talking about this now because I'm not explaining it to Lestrade.

Lestrade looked between the two of them like watching a tennis match, trying to puzzle out what wasn't being said. Sherlock was confident he had no idea and he'd like to keep it that way for as long as possible. He couldn't do much for her, but at least he could spare her some (more) humiliation.

"Right then," Lestrade said, giving up. "One more stop on the grand tour before I can actually get back to my real job. Sherlock, let me know when you're back at it. Meantime, I'll just muddle through, I s'pose."

Sherlock smiled a bit, just with one corner of his mouth but real enough, then closed the bathroom door. He could hear John and Lestrade's voices on their way out as he turned on the shower.

Talking about him, no doubt. He felt like he should be more annoyed, but he couldn't be. It felt good to be cared about, to have friends. Family.

Halfway through his shower, John stuck his head in the door.

"Sherlock, I'm going back to the surgery now. This time answer the bloody phone when it rings, yes?"

"Yes," he called over the water, squinching his eyes so no shampoo ran into them.

"What time does your brother need us?"

"Six."

"Is it, ah, is it going to be a problem if I ask Molly to take Rosie? Only, Kate wo—"

"Why would it be a problem?" It was too quick, too agitated.
"I don't know, you tell me. I was just asking."

"It's not a problem for me." It wasn't a problem, exactly. He wouldn't have to actually see her. He'd stay in the car.

"Alright then. I'll be back here by five."

Sherlock hummed a dismissal; John got the message.

*  

“Sherlock sent me 'round to check on you, because apparently I don't really have anything better to do than be his errand boy,” Greg said without preamble, strolling right on into the morgue.

He grimaced when he saw the body in front of her, a teenager they'd fished out of the river under Chelsea Bridge Thursday evening.

“So, you're not in little bits all over Clerkenwell, which puts us firmly in the plus column. Besides that, how're you doing?” He searched her face with those soulful brown eyes and she really wished (not for the first time) she'd met him before Sherlock.

“Better than this chap, at least,” she said, making note of an abrasion (probably perimortem, but so hard to tell with a floater) on his forearm. She tried to keep her voice light. “Did Sherlock tell you what happened? I didn't, ah, get the details.”

“Well here's a funny thing,” Greg started, shifting his weight back and putting his hands on his hips. He'd just been dying to tell this to someone. “The Brothers Holmes have a sister. A secret sister. And of course, with them, you know it's not just any sister.”

He leaned in closer, one hand still on his hip and the other doing that karate-chop gesturing thing he did when he was telling a story. “Turns out, she's been locked away in Arkham Asylum for twenty-odd years because she's like Hannibal Lecter on PCP.”

She made what she hoped was the appropriate oh my! do go on face while she made another mark
on her chart. She didn't care so much about the context (just knowing there had actually been context was enough), she was more interested in knowing if he'd heard the bit about her.

“She was the one who put Moriarty on all the screens in the country and blew up Baker Street yesterday morning.”

“She what?” Molly's head snapped up.

“You didn't hear about that? Calling it a gas leak again. No one was hurt, though I have no bloody clue how those two survived jumping out the windows,” he said, shaking his head. “Not even a scratch.”

“And Mrs. Hudson's okay?”

“Safe and sound, not even shaken. I pop 'round at the behest of Himself and she launches into a story about a speedboat chase in Key West in 1982. Anyway, apparently, the sister was never supposed to leave the island—”

“The island?”

“The island,” he said, giving her a look that said no, I'm not kidding you, and just wait, it gets better. “No visitors allowed, no one can be alone with her at any time. Some people obviously broke the rules and she got herself out an’ back in at least half a dozen times without anybody noticing. Even posed as John's new therapist.”

Molly's mouth dropped open. “I was at her house. Well, no, not her house, but the house she where she was. The therapist's house.”

That's what must have put her on the radar, she thought. She didn't know whether to curse fate or be relieved that it was only a recent occurrence.

“Did you get a look at her?”

She shook her head. “I only saw John and Mrs. Hudson.”
“Pretty,” he said, turning his lips down and bobbing his head in evaluation, *just this side of fair to middling.* "Bit like something out of a horror film, white pyjamas, really long dark hair, completely empty. You can see the family resemblance with Sherlock, though. Still no idea where Mycroft fits in there." He paused a moment, pondering; Molly got the feeling Greg had more contact with Mycroft than he let on.

She couldn't exactly picture them having drinks at the pub every Saturday night, but she supposed they could have become friends, of a sort. Or that Greg was just another one of Mycroft's people.

“So the Three Musketeers take a helicopter and then commandeer a boat to get on the island.” He put his hands out, fanning his palms; *I couldn't make this shit up if I tried.* "She's inside running the show and she has these tests set up for Sherlock, really sick stuff, like making him solve a case and then dropping all three of the suspects into the ocean anyway, making him choose between having to kill his brother or John, which, I mean, he obviously didn't do."

She really tried not to let it show that *Christ she had almost actually died yesterday afternoon*; she thought she was doing a pretty good job of it. Greg was completely oblivious and, by the look of it, didn't know that she'd been part of one of the tests.

"*Then,* she knocks them out, locks Mycroft in her old cell, and airlifts John and Sherlock to the ancestral pile in Sussex. Which she burned down when she was six. She chains John to the bottom of a well and makes Sherlock solve a puzzle to save him before he drowns. Un. Real."

Molly blinked at him while he looked at her, letting her have a moment to let all of it sink in.

"So, typical Sunday afternoon for them, then," she said at last.

He gave her the kind of look that said *just thinking about the shit they get into makes me need a drink.* She thought she'd really like a drink herself right about then.

"Oh, right," Greg said, clicking his fingers. "John said he'd phone you later. Something about the childcare rota."

She was gripped by a moment of irrational fear that John was going to tell her he didn't need her to mind Rosie any longer because he knew about the phone call and didn't want anybody who was such a loser around his child; not even a day after getting Mary's message she'd let her down.

She shoved that away, *stupid.*
"Ah. Thanks. I'll make sure I check my phone as soon as I finish up here."

"I'll let you get to it, then. This," he said, gesturing to the body on the table, "is why I don't eat seafood."

She laughed for the first time in what felt like years, giving Greg a genuine smile and a wave as he backed through the doors.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Still Monday.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone so far for the lovely comments, kudos, recs, and reblogs! I'm falling behind on responding, so forgive me if it takes a while to get back to anyone.

And, as always, thank you to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

* 

Days like this Mycroft regretted many of the choices he'd made in his life that led him to being alone. He envied his brother the ragtag group of people he'd cobbled together, weaknesses that they were. A best friend (and an older sister if one were to count the deceased wife); a mother-figure that was more emotionally invested than their own mother had been; another older brother, more good-natured and open than Mycroft himself could ever hope to be; a girlfriend.

And wasn't that a novelty. He'd met her a handful of times and he'd never suspected anything between them; she'd obviously had some romantic inclination from the start, that much had been evident upon their first meeting. Interesting now to look back on the way his brother had treated her even then, something soft and humble to his demeanour that Mycroft had taken for grief.

She'd played her part so well during Operation Lazarus that he'd simply taken it for granted. Sherlock wouldn't trust just any civilian with his life, his secrets. How had that failed to register at the time? And during the funeral, she'd never given any indication of her role as anything other than that of a grieving friend, tending to all Sherlock's mourners as though it were her duty.

She hadn't flown to his brother's side after he'd been shot, opting to stay at Baker Street with Mrs. Hudson to provide a buffer, should the news be bad. She had been there when he'd woken up; Mycroft had seen her through the window holding a straw to Sherlock's mouth so he could sip water. It hadn't struck him at the time as particularly intimate, a nurse would have done the same. Given the benefit of hindsight, though...

Where, then, had she been during his latest downward spiral? He couldn't imagine she'd have willingly abandoned Sherlock by that point; if Mycroft knew his brother, it was safe to assume
he’d been the one to draw away. At least she had been there for the aftermath.

He wondered if their late-night walks had been some sort of courtship ritual, if Sherlock had even realized he was doing it. He’d taken her to all his most sacred secret spots, places he only went when he was feeling particularly sentimental.

He shuddered to think what would have happened to his brother had the timer reached zero. He felt a terrible certainty that if that had come to pass, he’d have been burying him inside of two months.

At least that was no longer a concern. Her reaction to the phone call he’d placed to her last night had told him all he needed to know; Sherlock’s safety was her first priority and she wouldn’t abandon him over the incident, no matter the pain it had caused her. He even allowed himself the faintest, tentative hope that he may yet find himself a true ally amongst Sherlock’s nearest and dearest.

He supposed Greg Lestrade could be counted as such, though he had his own motivations for keeping Sherlock clean and sane and whole, of which genuine affection only played a part. It was a pity that things were what they were; in a different life, he would have liked to know a man like Greg better. Bisexuality was unfortunately misunderstood at the best of times, a vicious alienator at the worst, especially for a man in a position of power.

He had more pressing matters than his own mawkishness to attend to. He checked his watch; Father should be back from his mid-morning constitutional by now. It was a telephone call he’d hoped he’d never have to make.

He had to believe he’d made the right choices.

For twenty-five years, he’d borne the deepest family secret alone, the fact of Eurus’s very existence shared only with the highest levels of Government and on a strictly need-to-know basis. None of them could even begin to understand it, even Elizabeth, whose own skeletons were tame, common. Uncle Rudy had cared in his own way, Mycroft supposed, though he’d seen her as a potential asset from the beginning.

He always felt as though it had somehow been his fault. If he’d kept a closer eye, hadn’t spent so much time by himself, hadn’t favoured Sherlock. If he’d have been able to see her during the remainder of her formative years, been able to speak with her, maybe he could have helped her. Prevented the worst of what she became, possibly.

Her very presence was unsettling. She would speak in her own kind of poetry, lines even he could
not follow. His parents couldn't have been allowed to see that, he couldn't have done that to them on top of everything else.

His lies were a kindness. He knew they would never see it that way, but they chose to see what they wanted. Always.

It's just teasing, Mikey, all children do it. Sticks and stones. It won't matter when you get to secondary school. Don't be silly, you're a lovely boy. A healthy young lad. It won't matter when you get to University.

He fumbled with a cigarette; he really shouldn't, especially not this early in the morning. Cigarettes were a reward, an occasion, not a crutch; he'd done nothing to earn himself a treat. Sherlock would smell it on him later and it would be a temptation, setting a bad example. He put the cigarette back, tapped out a blackcurrant pastille into his palm from the box in his desk. The dental work was still preferable to lung cancer, he supposed.

He took a breath, straightened his tie, and picked up the phone.

*

"Molly? This is John. I hate to ask this right now, but could you maybe take Rosie for a couple of hours tonight? It's a work thing and Sherlock's... Yeah. No. If you could ring me back at the surgery by three... Not on my mobile, that's sitting in a tub of rice because it got a little wet—"
The last words were clipped; she imagined he was giving Sherlock a look whether he was in the room or not.

"—or you can leave a message with Sherlock, either on his mobile or the house phone. Ta."

Molly glanced up to the clock in her office, a relic that had probably hung in that same spot since the wars. 2:36, not a lot of time left.

Her first instinct was to say no, owing to the state of her flat. Really though, she could just park Rosie in front of the telly for a bit while she started tidying; that didn't make her some kind of negligent nightmare nanny.

She didn't really want to have to talk to John just yet, either, with Sherlock being the elephant in the room. She didn't know how to bring up Mary's message, or when doing so would be appropriate—she didn't want him to get weirded out and think she was going to turn into some
kind of crazy childless old maid babysnatcher or something.

She left a message for John with the receptionist at the surgery that he could drop Rosie any time after 5:30 and he should ring if that wasn't going to work for him.

She spent the rest of her lunch break on the web looking for self-defence classes that would fit into her schedule before having the bitter realization that Krav Maga wasn't going to do anything to stop a sniper or a bomber or any other kind of trouble that followed Sherlock right up to her door.

*You know, Molly,* she said to herself for possibly the millionth time in six years, *maybe it's time to end this.*

Except she knew there was no end to it. Even if she walked away now, she'd never be free.

* *

John splashed water on his face, ran the comb through his hair.

Sherlock was downstairs with Rosie; the distraction was good for him.

He wasn't worried, leaving his kid alone with a—former, hopefully—smackhead (who'd just uncovered the kind of Gothic horror family secrets that apparently actually happened to posh people in real life) was a perfectly sane thing for a single father to do.

*Well, yeah, it is,* Mary said behind him. And yeah, she was right.

At least he wasn't seeing her anymore. Her voice was just inside his head, one among many he'd integrated over the years. The loudest, and sometimes the one he least wanted to hear because it was the one he'd give anything to hear one more time.

Christ, Sherlock. And, apparently, Molly Hooper.

John knew that helpless rage better than anyone. Seeing it on his best friend's face brought it back, emphasis on the helpless. He'd been watching the loss of the only woman in the world all over
again, only from the other side.

He'd done wrong by both of them, right after Mary. So blinded by everything, he'd taken away the one thing Sherlock would have had to cling to by monopolizing Molly's time.

She'd stayed at his flat for a week straight. He didn't trust anyone else with Rosie, couldn't bear the thought of someone who wasn't family holding his daughter when he was afraid to even go near her. Well, Mrs. H was family, too, but she wasn't up to it for more than a few hours at a time to give Molly a break.

He'd made her give him that note, made her chase him off. Made her blame herself for what Sherlock did to himself afterwards.

Jesus.

He ran his hands over his face.

Just once, just bloody once, he wanted things to be easy. For somebody, anybody, to get a goddamn happy ending.

*

Her doorbell rang at 5:34. Even though she'd left work early, she'd barely had time to shower and change, let alone start tidying. At least she'd cleared pathways through the debris and got the cushions back on the sofa and chairs.

"Wow," John said by way of greeting, taking in the state of her flat. "Redecorating?"

"Bomb squad," she answered, stepping aside to let him in and taking the changing bag.

"Bit unnecessary," he said, walking over to the sofa.

"How do you mean?" she asked. Surely John knew about Sherlock's phone call yesterday. Unless he hadn't been there for it, knocked out or suspended over a tank of laser-sharks or something.
"Oh, uh, well," he groped, clearing his throat as he set the baby on the sofa. "Just thinking they really didn't need to make such a mess. I bet they didn't even find anything."

There was definitely something wrong about that, but Molly could never get a good read on John. She didn't really need to; he rarely held back on much of anything, preferring the truth even if he stumbled to get it out tactfully. As best as she could tell, he wasn't lying, but he was covering something with a half-truth. Doing it poorly, too.

John took off Rosie's hat and smoothed the static out of her hair, then went to work stripping her out of her jacket while she tried lunge away.

"I assume they didn't. I didn't ask and no one was saying much of anything." It wasn't meant to be a pointed comment, exactly, it just came out that way.

John set Rosie's jacket aside and let her flop over to grab it. He straightened and smoothed his hands down the front of his legs, facing Molly while he kept the baby in his field of vision. His tongue flicked out to wet his lips.

"Look, Molly, I, uh, lied about it being a work thing. It's a government thing," he began, clenching and unclenching his hand by his side. "I don't know how much Greg told you this morning."

"Oh, he told me about Sherlock having an insane sister and the tests and everything," she rushed out, falling all over herself to cut off any pity or moral support John might be getting ready to offer. "It's okay, I understand what happened, just like last time with Jim—"

"Molly, it's not okay. I was in the room for the whole thing. I'm sorry about that, by the way, even though it wasn't by choice."

"Oh, it's fine—" Oh god he had been there, let me crawl in a hole and die.

"It's not fine. Sherlock... It's not my business and it's not my place to say anything, but if you'd have seen him... Well."

He inhaled sharply through his nose, then relaxed his posture. "Really, all of this is a conversation for the two of you. Just—no matter what happens, I still want you to be in Rosie's life."
Molly covered all her questions with a smile. "I'd really like that, John, thank you. Just, ah, wait here a second?"

She hurried to the bedroom and grabbed Mary's DVD from her drawer.

John was unpacking Rosie's changing bag onto the sofa; his face did a complex series of contortions before settling into something politely blank and professional when she handed him the envelope. He already knew what it was.

"Christ, another one?" he asked quietly to himself, turning the envelope over by the corners.

"It came in Saturday's post. I only noticed it yesterday. I was watching it just before... Anyway. I wasn't sure when I should tell you about it, but, um, she said something about Rosie, too, and I know I'd want to see it..." she trailed off, rambling. "If it's alright with you, I'd like it back after you watch it. No rush or anything."

"No. Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I, uh, I'll watch it tonight." He cleared his throat.

"I should, ah, get going. Her dinner's in the bag and she's still doing a bottle around eight. She's cutting another tooth, so she's probably going to be fussy. We should be back before nine, I hope, although with Mycroft, who the hell knows sometimes. I'll call if there's a problem."

He bent to give Rosie a kiss. "You be good for your Aunt Molly. Daddy loves you," he said quietly.

Rosie babbled loudly and reached for him as he began to pull away; Molly stepped in and scooped her up, trying to distract her before she realized John was leaving.

"Let's wave to Daddy, bye bye Daddy!" Molly cooed, bouncing her with an exaggerated smile while she waved to John.

She was always thankful that interacting with babies made everyone look like a tit and, moreover, it was expected behaviour.
"So, how are you, my Rosie-girl?" Molly asked once the door had been locked behind John. "What shall we do tonight? First, let's get you some dinner, then you can help Aunt Molly with tidying! It's an important skill to have, because even if you're very clever and successful and independent, you'll be cleaning up men's messes your whole life, no matter what you do."

That's right Molly, instil bitterness, defeatism, and sexism early, she thought to herself.

"Actually, let's just pretend Aunt Molly didn't say that."

*

"Sherlock, we are family. I am your family. But in there, right now, is not somewhere I should be." John said, calm and firm, dipping his head and holding Sherlock's eyes until he relented.

Mummy and Dad were waiting inside already with Mycroft; Sherlock didn't want to go in without John and had said as much, rather loudly.

He was afraid of what was going to happen, simply put. Afraid he'd be blamed; afraid Mummy would get angry and shout at Mycroft while Sherlock stood on, helpless; afraid she would cry. He'd always had something to hide behind, snarling or sarcasm or complete detachment, but as of late he'd been stripped of every defence he'd constructed for himself one by one. He'd be going in raw and pink and tender, a barely-healed wound ready to split under the gentlest of pressure.

John was right, though; he was family, but all of this predated him by quite some time. He didn't belong in that room.

John must have seen Sherlock's posture shift into acquiescence.

"I'll wait out here and try to pull Anthea in the meantime," he finished, straightening, the mood in the room turning on its side by ninety degrees. He glanced to his left and flashed her his lady-killer smile.

"No you won't," she said, never looking up from her phone.

"No I won't," he corrected. The mood shifted another ninety degrees along a third axis. "Look, I'm not going to say it's going to be fine, but it is what it is. You'll get through it."
Sherlock smiled a thank you. He leaned in closer. "Her name is actually Andrea," he said quietly (but just loud enough for her to hear, because she had ears like a bat, and Sherlock was absolutely an arsehole).

She rolled her eyes.

He drew himself up to his full height and walked into Mycroft's office, closing the door behind himself and settling back against it.

*

Molly's night was uneventful; between Rosie and trying to get her flat in order, Molly didn't have any time to dwell on her embarrassment and the whole Sherlock situation.

John came to collect Rosie a little after nine; they had a brief status update chat while Molly got Rosie's bag packed and John struggled her into her coat. She was out cold and neither of them really wanted to rouse her.

John paused with his hand on the doorknob when Molly was seeing them out. He looked uncomfortable for a moment, and she really, really hoped this would end soon because it reminded her of the early days of their acquaintance, when she was still just a weird outsider hanging off of Sherlock like a groupie.

He smiled, opened his mouth, pressed his lips back together, tilted his head. Finally spit it out.

"Just, ah, I know I have no right to ask this, but if he calls... Please pick up. He's only been clean again for a few weeks and I'm really worried this whole thing with the sister and the best friend could pull him right back into it," John said quietly, as though he didn't want anyone to overhear.

"He's at mine, but I can't be there twenty-four hours a day, and Mrs. Hudson is going to have a lot going on at Baker Street with repairs..."

Molly nodded, quick to reassure. She wondered if there would ever come a day she could stop putting aside her personal needs in favour of Sherlock's. "It's fine. I don't want to think about him relapsing, either."
They shared a split-second look of mutual understanding. "Thanks again for taking her on such short notice. I'll be in touch with you about Thursday, since I'm not sure what the rest of the week is going to bring."

She usually had Rosie all day Thursday, seven to seven, so John could get paperwork done and have an hour or so only for himself. If Sherlock were in danger of relapsing, really in danger, all their schedules would have to be juggled again. At least if he was at John's, she wouldn't have the overnights again. Unless John didn't want him around Rosie, which might be for the best, in which case he'd probably end up in her flat since Baker Street was uninhabitable and she doubted anyone else would take him.

She'd cross that bridge if she came to it.

John and Molly said their goodbyes; Molly waved to Rosie over John's shoulder while he walked down the pavement. She very deliberately didn't look out into the street so she wouldn't see Sherlock in the car.

The desire to hide was childish, like a bashful little girl peeking out from behind Mummy's skirt; she hated how she still had that impulse after all these years.

She didn't make it to bed until after eleven, but at least the sheets were clean and her clothing was all back in the proper places. She even put rollers in her wet hair so she could do something nice for herself in the morning; if she went to work put-together, she felt more put-together. She set her alarm, rolled over and tried to sleep.

And tried.

And tried.

She lay awake staring at the bedside table, trying not to think. Of course she had the phone call playing over and over again on a loop in her brain.

She'd just had to taunt him, didn't she? She'd always been the one to respond to a dare with *darers go first*, mostly because she was a coward and wanted someone else to get in trouble for whatever stupid thing it was.
Stop thinking about it, brain.

He was one hell of an actor, she had to give him that. At least, when she couldn't see his face. If she wanted to (and Jesus Christ how she wanted to), she could pretend it was real. Breathy, throaty, she'd feel it vibrate through her skin against that spot just behind the corner of her jaw—

Shut up brain or I'll stab you with a Q-tip.

Masturbating would help her sleep, and just thinking about Sherlock's voice was enough to wake things up downstairs, but she couldn't. That was the one place that was completely off-limits. Even though—no matter the fantasy—most of the time she drifted right back around to thinking about him seconds before she came. At least it was only seconds, though, heat of the moment, and not some whole sad, elaborate scenario where they were on their honeymoon or trapped on a desert island like Blue Lagoon or something.

Depending on how much she wanted to hate herself the next day, sometimes she did let herself indulge in playing out a cuddle afterwards, though. Cuddling was somehow less profane. Friends cuddled, sometimes. Well, not her friends, but it was a thing that happened with some people somewhere. Probably.

Really, though, when was the last time she'd even got off?

A month, at least. Definitely not since Sherlock was in hospital. Actually, no, much longer. Not since before Mary died. Over three months. Jesus.

You can't, she told herself, glancing at the clock. 12:17.

She rolled onto her back and closed her eyes, trying to visualize herself floating on a lazy river like she'd read in a book. It didn't work. Her fingertips drifted along the strip of exposed skin between her shirt and the waistband of her underwear, tracing patterns over the hollows of her hipbones. She imagined Sherlock's mouth there, all hot breath and soft lips and sharp teeth.

You're going to the special hell, Molly Hooper, she told herself as she let one hand tickle over her stomach and the underside of her breast before swirling over the nipple. Her legs fell open and she tipped her head back, imagining him hovering over her, cradling his hips between her thighs while he kissed her neck.

Fuck it. You deserve it. Guilt later, biological imperative now.
Her fingertips looped patterns over her inner thigh as she imagined them doing the same on Sherlock’s stomach, what his breathing would sound like as she teased lower—

The text alert was like a bucket of cold water.

She burned with shame and paranoia; what if he knew?

Don’t be stupid. Might not even be him.

Who else would it be at 12:23 on a Tuesday morning?

Could be Ellie, it was almost lunchtime in Sydney.

No, if it were an emergency, she’d call. Otherwise, email.

*Just... if he calls, please pick up.*

Goddamn it.

She withdrew her hand from her breast and flopped it over to the bedside table.

**Are you awake? SH**

No.

She hit send before thinking better of it. She should have just asked him what he wanted instead of getting snarky.

**Are you okay?** she followed with when she didn’t immediately get some smartarse answer in return.
Her phone vibrated in her hand and her heart stopped in the split second before it began to ring.

*It's okay It's okay You're okay breathe breathe be normal* she chanted to herself as she answered the call.

"Hello Sherlock." She tried to keep her voice even, neutral. It came out breathier than it should have.

"Hello Molly," he said. His voice was quiet, subdued. He sounded bone-weary, like in those first few days when he was getting clean.

Something in her eased while an entirely different kind of fear coiled around her guts.

*If you're thinking of using, please don't. Please, please don't. I don't want it to be my fault.*

*(She thinks highly of herself, doesn't she? Fuck off, brain)*

She heard a measured exhale down the line.

"Are you smoking?" she asked, trying to keep the scolding out of her voice.

"Just the one," he said. He sounded off. Sad. Wistful.

"Is that alright?" she asked. She didn't know if it could be a trigger. It was probably a sign, though. After the hospital he was adamant that he was giving it *all* up.

"For now," he said vaguely.

She sat up. "Sherlock, where are you?"

"Outside."
"Are you outside at John's, or did you go for a walk?" Walking helped, walking was good, except when there was no one there to stop him from walking somewhere he shouldn't.

The tap-tap-tap of an iron door knocker echoed through her flat and through the phone.

Molly threw back the covers and grabbed her dressing gown. Her heart rate kicked up again to the point where she felt dizzy for a second; she took a deep breath.

"I went for a walk," he said.

She didn't say anything as she struggled on her dressing gown one arm at a time while walking down the hall and tromping down the stairs to cross the lounge; Sherlock simply took another drag of his cigarette.

She could hear the deadbolt and door lock through the phone on a delay as she unlocked them, and then there Sherlock was in front of her. He held his phone in front of him and tapped the screen with his thumb, disconnecting the call.

"I forgot my keys," he said simply. Then, because he was him: "Have you done something new with your hair? It's a good look on you, Molly."

Oh. The rollers. She looked like a homeless foam-noodle haired Medusa.

The embarrassment was almost enough to make her forget everything else for a minute. Almost.

"Did you use my flowerpot as an ashtray again?" she accused, trying to roll with 'normal.'

"Nope. Used the neighbour's," he said as he slid past her and into her flat.

He was trying for smiley, for charming (or well, what passed for those things from him), but he sounded off. Like he'd been carried out by the tide and was trying to struggle back to the shore.
"Mm," she said, giving a little shrug. Caroline had gone from slightly annoying to obnoxious cow in the last six years that Molly had been her neighbour, so she really wasn't bothered by Sherlock killing her flowers.

"Tea?" she asked, starting for the kitchen.

"Please," he answered. He hung his coat on a peg by the door like it was something he did every day.

She filled the kettle and switched it on, got down another mug from the cupboard, lined them up and put the bags in them.

Sherlock remained quiet, hovering just inside the lounge.

She wasn't sure what to say, how to begin, so she just leaned her back against the sink and started unrolling her hair. If she was going to have the inevitable conversation that was going to leave her gutted all over again, she was going to have it with some goddamn dignity, at least.

"You weren't asleep," he said finally. "You replied too quickly."

"Did you really walk all the way from John's?" she deflected.

"I needed to clear my head."

"Does he know you're—" she tripped before the word safe, too mother-hen, "{—here?"

"Texted him before I phoned."

The kettle clicked off and Molly set down the hair roller she'd just pulled free. She poured the water into the mugs and went to the fridge to get milk for Sherlock's, then pulled the honey and sugar down from the cabinet, got spoons. She hated that he was watching her like he was.

He drew in a deep breath. "Molly, I should say th—"
"Don't, Sherlock," she said, not looking up from the mugs in front of her.

"Mo—" He took an aborted step forward.

"I said don't," she said sharply. "I know what happened and I understand. It's fine. We don't need to talk about it."

*You're a fucking coward,* she said to herself. *You're taking the easy way out. Call him on his bullshit. Make him apologize. Make him take it all back.*

"Are we still... friends?" Sherlock asked tentatively after a moment's hesitation.

She nodded, willing herself not to get choked up. There was something young and raw in his voice that snagged her heart and pulled.

"Good," he said. "Good. Because I need that. I need you. To be my friend." His words were stilted, unsure.

*Of course you do,* she thought. Before Sherlock, she never knew just how deeply bitterness could twine itself through the warmth of love.

"I am," she affirmed quietly, stirring the sugar into Sherlock's tea. *Always,* she added in her head, unable to say it out loud.

She slid the mug to the end of the worktop, about as much of an invitation as she was willing to give.

Sherlock finally uprooted himself from the lounge and collected his mug with a quiet *thank you.*

There was something about the middle of the night that made all conversations softer, she thought. The intimacy of darkness. The hush of a world asleep.

Sherlock sipped his tea, casting her a furtive glance while she continued to unroll her hair.
"I saw the DVD from Mary," he said after a time.

She made a little noise in the back of her throat.

"John watched it first. Alone. I had the baby," he said, and Molly wasn't sure what he was getting at. She wasn't sure he knew what he was getting at.

"Tom got married and his wife looks to be about five months gone," she replied. It was a non sequitur, but he seemed to understand it for the context it was. Her bad day.

"I'm sorry," he said, and she flinched involuntarily.

She didn't want to hear that from him for any reason.

"It is what it is. He deserves to be happy," she said, setting aside the last roller and ruffling her hair with her fingers so it fell together normally. So much for doing something special for herself tomorrow.

"My sister has long hair. Dark. Waves, like that. Not curls like mine. It was lighter when we were small."

"Oh," she said.

She'd been so wrapped up in her own heartbreak she'd forgotten pretty much everything that had happened to Sherlock yesterday. She hadn't really even thought about it. She was ashamed of her own pettiness.

"If you want to talk about it, I'll listen," she said.

Sherlock shook his head. "I just want to sleep."

"Your things are still where you left them," she said. The invitation wasn't even a question in her mind, even if it should have been.
There'd been a while there that he'd been treating her flat like a hotel, mostly when she was at work or at Tom's. He left all kinds of things behind; she put them away in drawers and cabinets so they were there when he needed them. And maybe to hide them from Tom. She tried not to read too much into it.

"Thank you," he said again, putting his mug in the sink before disappearing upstairs to her bedroom.

She took her time washing the mugs, putting the sugar and honey away. She gathered up the hair rollers and stuffed them in her dressing gown pocket, then finally forced herself to go upstairs.

She knocked lightly on her own half-closed bedroom door before pushing it open; Sherlock was already propped up against her headboard texting someone. Probably John. Hopefully John. She ducked into the en-suite to put her rollers away.

She bent down to unplug her phone charger so she could take it into the spare room with her. She remembered she hadn't cleaned up in there yet and sighed before she could stop herself. It was bad enough the bed in there was absolute rubbish, but she'd have to dig out sheets and make it, too.

"Stay," Sherlock said quickly. "Here. It's your bed. I don't want to be alone."

He'd stopped texting, but his eyes were glued to his phone; he wasn't fooling her, though. She knew he was watching her reaction from the corner of his eye.

"I slept with John last night," he added.

"You what?" she said, knowing he couldn't mean it how it sounded.

"In his bed. With Rosie between us. It reminded me of when I used to sleep with Mycroft. I had night terrors as a child. Now I know why," he added, more to himself than to her.

She had an uncomfortable sensation in her spine, the unease that could blossom into fear; Sherlock was close to unravelling in front of her and she couldn't let it happen. She just couldn't.
She might hate herself for being a doormat, but she loved him too much to stand by and do nothing.

"Alright," she said, plugging her phone back into the charger and slipping off her dressing gown.

Sherlock set his phone aside and moved from the centre of the bed to the side that wasn't hers, rearranging himself to be flat on his back with his head on the pillow, his hands resting on his stomach over the duvet.

She tried very hard not to think about what she'd been doing right before he texted. She would have plenty of time to be mortified later. If she put her own feelings aside to deal with Sherlock's, that just meant she could go another day without confronting them. That in itself was appealing.

She slid under the covers and mirrored his position, except with the blankets pulled up to her chin and her hands underneath. If she were alone, she would scrunch the covers up around her neck and ears; she didn't like to be cold when she slept.

They lay in silence for a few moments; she was just working her way up to a goodnight, Sherlock when he started to talk.

"Molly, do you think it's possible I had some kind of traumatic brain injury while I was using and I'm completely unaware of it? Sometimes I wonder if I'm lying in a coma somewhere slowly dying."

Oh, she thought. He wasn't being facetious. Understandable, given the last few days. Well, weeks. Hell, months. Fuck it, years.

"Sanjay in Imaging owes me a favour, I could arrange for a scan if that would make you feel better," she offered.

He was quiet for a moment, maybe deciding if he was worried enough about the possibility of losing his mind to get his brain actually looked at. For someone like him, it was probably a scary prospect.

"You always help," he muttered to himself, a question.
"Not always. I mean, when I can. I try?" she said, trying to explain it away while puzzling out where he was going with it.

"Oh," he said, a few seconds later, a quiet revelation. "You were raised by your grandmother. No, not raised, but spent a significant amount of time with her. You loved her very much, looked up to her."

"I— What?" She twisted her head on the pillow to look at him. He wasn't wrong, but what was he getting at? Whatever it was, she had the sinking feeling it wasn't going to be good.

"It's why you help people. It's why you do everything you do. Your grandmother was the archetype of her generation—make do and mend, keep calm and carry on, beauty is a duty. Civic-minded, practical, always in good spirits. Always the first to pitch in and lend a hand, dig for victory. Your clothing. Your hair. Your lipstick."

"Lipstick." Sherlock was racing, zero to sixty, and Molly wasn't sure if she should be afraid or relieved that at least his brain wasn't turning against itself.

"You still prefer red, just not that shade, because of the nostalgia it evokes. Fernweh, in a sense —"

"Fern-vay?" The word was strange on her tongue.

"Fernweh. German," he said, rolling over her to grab his phone from where he'd left it on her bedside table.

The solid, warm press of his body lasted just a second, but she knew she'd be spending years trying to forget it.

He rolled onto his back and sat up, typing something into his phone before twisting to hold the screen in front of her so she could read it.

*Fernweh, n :*

1. wanderlust, a desire to travel, a longing for far-off places
She sat up as he pulled his phone back.

"The past is another country, and there's none farther away, so Fernweh, more or less. Saudade, ish." His face did a thing, it couldn't be less important; he tilted his head to the side, leaning back into the current he'd been riding.

"Red lipstick. Like a poster for wholemeal bread or recruiting Land Girls. You do it for confidence, not to cover insecurity, but because you're remembering someone you love and you're trying to draw on that. You're trying to live up to your own ideal."

The more he went on, the faster he spoke, disjointed phrases and narrowed eyes; he was processing something else on a deeper level and he was groping his way towards it.

"Everything points to grandmother, it's much more personal than mimicking an aesthetic. Your parents were divorced and your dating history indicates a fond but distant relationship with your father; you lived with your mother but spent more time with your grandmother, probably without siblings present—you've just got the one, older? older sister, age gap five? mm, four years—obviously the happiest memories of your childhood. Judging by the way you look like you're three seconds away from slapping me—which I'd appreciate if you saved for later—I'm close but got something wrong. Doesn't matter, the point is that at your core, you are the person you loved most in the world, who loved you most, and everything you do stems from that memory. I need to phone my brother."

He dropped his phone on the bed and grabbed her face. His grin was a bit manic and unhinged and his eyes were blazing like his brain was on fire, but there was something else in there: hope.

"I'm the only one that can save Eurus. I can save my sister."

He leaned in before she had time to turn away, before she could even process what he was doing, still stuck on the saving his sister bit.

He kissed her.

Actually kissed her.

Not an exaggerated 'mm-wah!' smack of lips or just a peck, but not a ridiculous Hollywood snog, either.
Definitely started out as thank you, a bit of you're brilliant, then a curve of a smile that was I'm brilliant, and at the very end a catch of slightly parted lips and breath that might have been a to be continued.

She knew her mouth was gaping open as he launched himself off the bed, giving a triumphant laugh as he flipped his phone in the air, caught it, then hit a key and put it to his ear in one smooth movement, winking as he swirled away out the door (or, well, would have swirled had he been wearing his coat).

She clenched her fists in the blankets, refusing to touch her lips.
**Chapter 4**

Chapter Summary

Tuesday.

Chapter Notes

Once again, thank you all for the kudos and comments and recs and reblogs. And more thank yous to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

Did I, uh, mention this is slow-burn? Because it's reeeeeeally slow. Like trying to toast bread with Christmas lights.

*  

He was an hour and change into composing (made exponentially harder without his violin to hand) after an unsatisfying phone call with his brother (yes he knew what time it was, no he didn't care, yes it was important, no he wasn't on anything, get me back into Sherrinford ASAP because I can fix this, well, not all of it, but some of it, please do this for me Mycroft) when he realized that he had kissed Molly Hooper.

*Just noticed that now, did you?* John's smug voice supplied from the depths of his psyche.

*Oh shit, he thought. Also, shut up.*

She hadn't pushed him away, that had to be a good thing. Did she kiss back? He hadn't noticed. It was all a bit of a blur.

Mixed signals; they'd established *friends*, and then bed, but bed wasn't *bed-bed*, just ~sleeping and talking and then her being her and *why was she her?*, and then it *all made sense*. Clarity. It was all so simple, not elegant but symmetrical. And that was Molly, she was a mirror for a missing piece but *so much more*, of course she was.

He grabbed a new sheet of A-4 and made notes for something else before he lost it; music was fleeting, a phantom, a cluster of notes on a breeze against consciousness and then gone unless he could put it outside himself, get it out so he could take it back in later and make it fit.
No, he had to focus. He had to focus on Eurus, what he wanted to say to her, how he wanted to say it, how much he wanted to tell her about everything. Time was of the essence! He had to show her beauty, creation, belonging—the flip-side of everything she knew and what she longed for without understanding. He'd make her understand, he'd get to her, he'd save her, he'd save himself.

*

Sleep happened, eventually. Faster than she'd expected, actually. Not enough of it, but when was there ever?

Her morning was uneventful; her only contact with Sherlock was when he staggered past her on the stairs on her way down to the kitchen. He was dead to the world, face-down on her bed when she went back upstairs to get ready for work.

She taped the spare key from her kitchen drawer to a sticky note and left it on his phone since he said he'd forgotten his; even she wasn't sure if it was a subtle way of telling him not to be there when she got back or if she just wanted to make sure he could lock up behind himself if he wanted to go.

She had a lot to think about. The I love you was already forgiven (well, his, at least; her own confession would be years of you're so stupid, Molly, why do you do this to yourself) and she was sure that, with time, she'd be able to wear down the memory until it was blunted and dull. The kiss was another matter.

Friends? Friends didn't kiss on the mouth. Well, some probably did somewhere, but they were young and either bohemian or foreign and not her. Cheek kisses were even iffy things, especially across gender lines and outside of family. Sherlock, for all the norms he ignored or refused, knew exactly what he was doing every time he'd kissed her.

The first time, he'd been a scolded little boy and she'd been the spinster aunt. The second had felt very much like a breakup (and she'd examined it over and over and had never come to a satisfactory explanation for that, only that maybe it was because John had moved on, too, and Sherlock was feeling sad and left behind all around). Third time was the charm, apparently, because he'd really fucking done it with that one.

The teenage boy next to her at the bus stop edged away with a look that said danger! scary mum face.
She really didn't know if it was an experiment, or if he was assuming he could do whatever he felt like even more now that she'd knuckled under and admitted she loved him in so many words, or... Whatever. Most likely, he was trying to figure it out himself and he was using her to do that without even realizing it was something that required a degree of mutual consent. He wasn't being deliberately heartless and it really was on her to start putting boundaries in place.

She stepped into a cloud of waaaay too much cologne; somebody was trying to hide something, either a a night out that hadn't ended until the early morning or an affair or just insecurity. She didn't even have to be Sherlock to get that.

Not that he hadn't changed the way she saw the world. He did, irrevocably.

Walking with Sherlock through London was nothing short of amazing. Where she normally saw buildings and people and rubbish, Sherlock saw life. He saw the blood and the breath of a city alive with an infinite number of stories. It was—simply put—beautiful.

When he was getting clean and he couldn't sleep, they walked and walked and walked, sometimes talking, sometimes not. They were both night people, something that hadn't ever seemed remarkable to either of them; it was hard to understand how the rest of the world wasn't. Truthfully, she'd never really seen much of London on foot by night; part of being a woman in the city was constant vigilance, get where you're going, stay under the lights, pay attention to the people and not the scenery. With Sherlock, she was safe. He was the apex predator in his own territory. Part of her resented that and part of her was thrilled by it, but it was what it was.

In those few weeks, it had been almost like they were going out. She tried not to notice it or draw comparisons, but there were so many soft smiles and fond looks on both sides it was like she was falling in love with him all over again. Maybe (oh God Molly don't even think it please don't do this to yourself don't even think it) he'd started to feel something more, too.

Then again, he'd been going through hell with the withdrawal, so maybe it was any port in a storm. Florence Nightingale Syndrome (or no, wait, that was when the doctor fell for the patient, so what was it when the patient fell for the doctor? did it even have a name? besides Impossible Thing That Never Happens). She'd been there with home-made soup when he was ravenous and a cold flannel and ginger tea when he was nauseated, she listened when he talked to her, she talked to him when he couldn't bear silence. She sat on the floor in front of the sofa with his laptop and answered his emails when he was so twisted up with cramps and aches and chills that he couldn't uncurl himself from a ball.

She even made him cry once. Well, sort of.
God, that had been a terrible night.

They'd had a bitter shouting match and she'd gone for blood because she'd had a bad day and she'd been sleeping on a sofa for a week and a half and she was tired and he just kept provoking her. Finally, he'd told her to fuck off back to her flat, he didn't need her there anyway, and shut himself up in his room.

She almost had left. But there was no one else to relieve her and Mrs. Hudson had dealt with his bullshit all day, so she sucked it up and slammed around the kitchen a bit making dinner because she knew she should eat even if she wasn't hungry. Sherlock wouldn't come out to eat and she would have been fine with that, but her anger had cooled enough to make her feel bad for making him feel bad and she'd gone in to check on him.

She'd apologized first and then he did, but it didn't end there. He'd fallen down a rabbit hole while he'd been alone in the dark and so many things had come out in a twisted jumble through chattering teeth (chills again) that she didn't even know where to begin to start untangling it.

And then he'd said it was his fault that Mary died and she never should have done it because he was just a worthless junkie that no one would miss, John was an idiot for forgiving him.

She'd really wanted to slap him then, but instead she sat down next to him and told him what she'd been thinking about for weeks. Namely, Mary's death wasn't for or because of him; it was the one way she could ensure her daughter would grow up safe. Molly didn't know much about Mary, but she knew that she'd had a past that had been catching up to her and would likely never stop. She'd had a chance for an honourable suicide that would mean something and she made a split-second decision. It wasn't his fault.

His face crumpled and he'd buried his head in his hands and just sobbed quietly sitting on the edge of his bed, his whole body still shaking from the chills. She grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around him, then put an arm around him and just did what she could to comfort him. She'd confessed that she'd never had a female friend as close as Mary, other women always judged her profession or the weird things she liked or the choices she made. Even though plenty of her friends had had babies, none of them had ever considered her for a godparent.

Then she'd started crying and she all but ran from the room to make tea because it was just too raw and she couldn't let Sherlock see that.

_Ugh_, she thought to herself as she got off the bus, _great memory to start a morning with._

Everything was such a mess sometimes. But then, when ever hadn't it been?
She let herself into her office and looked over the files of the overnight arrivals, prioritizing and shuffling folders around, ordering her day. It was going to be a long one, since she had court tomorrow, presenting her findings in a criminal negligence case against a care home. Those were always so hard because, while the evidence was clear as day to her, convincing people without her knowledge base could be difficult. Usually the lawyers asked her the kinds of questions that were yes-or-no or basically wanting a rephrased confirmation of what they'd just said. And the smarmy dick defence lawyers would always use general ignorance and apathy to try to cast doubt on her “interpretation” of the actual, objective, quantifiable evidence.

If they'd just let her explain things in her own way, give demonstrations, it would be so much easier. They only really got into that for the murder trials, when she got to use diagrams and props; something so mundane as a negligence case didn't usually warrant it in the eyes of the prosecutors. Who cares about some old people, right?

It really made her blood boil sometimes.

That was tomorrow's problem, though. Today she had a rush on toxicology from an alcohol-related death (if there was GHB in his system they'd have enough for a warrant and DI Donovan was a demanding hard-arse, but only because she cared about the job more than almost anyone else at the Yard) and a probable intentional overdose with enough circumstance to warrant criminal investigation, plus there was a teaching rotation going on and she'd have to work around the fresh-faced young things dissecting tumours and making slides and just generally trying to keep their lunches down.

Work was good. Weighing, measuring, making notes; that was her Zen. And dear God did she need some of that today.

*

He heard music. Slow, choppy, discordant; learning. He followed it through the house, running fingers over flocked wallpaper and scarred woodwork. He stopped in front of a door half-open, peeked inside.

"It's wrong and I hate it!" she screamed at the yellow flowers on the wall. Her back was to him. "You do it!"

She held the violin out to the side, careless; he knew she was going to drop it if he didn't take it. Mummy and Daddy would be cross. Again.
He scrambled over and caught it just before it hit the ground. The bow clattered to the floor, but it was okay, not broken.

"It was wrong. Fix it!" she screamed, her tiny face red and angry.

He didn't know what he was doing, but he mimicked what he'd seen her do, settling the violin in place until it sat in a way that wasn't uncomfortable. He picked up the bow and drew it across the strings; the screech made his ears hurt.

"No! Do it right!" she yelled, pinching his arm. Her little thumbnail left a bloody half-moon on his skin.

He tried again and she pulled his hair.

The third time, he managed to hold the bow properly and pulled one single mourning note.

"Why?" she asked, cocking her head and fixing him with eyes that saw past time.

He didn't know. He looked away from her, to the wallpaper. She hated yellow. Red had been her favourite colour.

She told him that when she'd pushed him off a rock and he'd ended up with bleeding palms and pebbles in his knees.

"Why?" she screamed again, towering over him, her long hair forming a curtain over her face.

_I don't know I don't know I don't know_

She reached out and grabbed him by the hair, tugging his head as far back as it could go, the violin strings reverberating as it thunked to the floor.

Her face had changed to something sinister and distorted, elongated and the colour of a bloated corpse, her eyes bigger and blacker. Her unnaturally wide mouth opened to show rows and rows
of sharp, shiny teeth like needles as she lifted him by the hair—

He was awake and he knew he was awake but he couldn't move; he fought for a second to draw breath as blood pounded in his ears.

You're safe it's fine you're safe just relax and open your eyes you know where you are—

He inhaled, not nearly enough; he felt phantom sensations of his demon-sister's needle teeth ripping through his arms, first the left until the veins collapsed and then the right—

Sherlock, you know what's happening. You know it's just a chemical misfire. In four more seconds, you'll be fully awake. Until then, I need you to breathe.

It was Molly's voice, faint; he couldn't see her because everything was black.

Oh god I hate this and I can't get out and what if I never do— his own voice in his head was high, a child's.

Breathe, Sherlock. Three.

Molly, please.

It's alright, Sherlock. You'll be conscious soon. Two.

A distant hum like machinery kicking on, sodium lights buzzing. Awareness of red-black; sight.

Now, Sherlock.

His eyes came into focus, lids already open and optic nerve coming back online. He drew in a lungful of air. His ears were ringing, his body broken out in a cold sweat.

Molly's ceiling. Molly's bed. Safe.
He never should have told her about the night terrors; it's like he'd been tempting fate. That had only been a nightmare, but that didn't preclude future parasomnia.

Thank god she wasn't there to see him. He wished she was, though. He wanted to just crawl into her arms and curl up like he had with Mycroft, when Mycroft was big and soft and safe. Normal children were lucky enough to forget most of the experience by the next day; he hadn't been so fortunate. He never remembered all of it, but just enough to make him afraid to sleep, which would create a negative feedback loop and he'd have them nightly for weeks at a time.

He groped for his phone; just after ten. He'd been asleep for about three hours. He also had a text from John, just a simple **Just checking in. Text me when you have time.**

He knew he should try to sleep more because seven hours over two nights was pushing into dangerous territory. He still had a lot of work to do, though. For that, he needed supplies (unfortunately for him, not the fun kind).

**Meet me at Baker Street at noon. SH**

* 

She came to the decision to phone Sherlock's brother after realizing she'd checked her mobile a dozen times in the half-hour since she'd started running samples through the mass-spec.

She knew she should talk to John first; he'd been the one to coordinate Sherlock's recovery, for the most part. She made excuses to herself as to why she didn't want to call John; he had enough on his plate with Rosie, she didn't want to complicate their (hers and John's) relationship, she was still embarrassed about John having witnessed her laid bare like that, worse than if she'd been actually naked.

In truth, she really wanted to learn more about Sherlock's childhood, both before and after Eurus. Forewarned was forearmed; she wanted to be ready in case it got bloody. And any chance she had to know more about Sherlock was a welcome one, because she was still her and still ridiculously in love with him. There was a lot she'd been curious about over the years.

She checked the timer and peeled off her gloves, then selected the contact she'd listed simply as M.
"This is Mycroft Holmes."

"M-Mycroft?" She stumbled just the littlest bit on his name; he wasn't the type of person she was comfortable assuming familiarity with, but she needed to come off as confident and equal. "This is Molly Hooper. Sherlock's friend."

"Yes." It was neither a *do continue* or a *yes, he's spoken highly of you*. It was weird.

"I know you're probably very busy, but you said I should use this number if there's an emergency. I'm sorry, it's not an emergency, exactly, but I'm very worried about Sherlock and I'm not sure who else to talk to about it."

"I see. Are you free this evening, or will Sherlock be joining you again?"

"Wh— Oh, no, it's nothing like that!"

"Miss Hooper, I can assure you that what happens between you and my brother behind closed doors does not interest me in the slightest. I'm thrilled that he has somewhere safe to go that won't compromise his sobriety."

She felt like there was a threat so delicately woven into his words that she couldn't tease out the exact thread she was picking up on.

"Oh, um, about Sherlock being there, I don't know. I haven't talked to him since I left for work this morning."

"Hm. I'll have a car sent. Your lunch break is at 1:15." It wasn't a question.

*

"Jesus," John muttered, taking in the devastation.

It was a sobering sight. A uncomfortable shade of memory from far, far away tickled Sherlock's subconscious, the scent of charred books and melted plastic toys and heavy morning fog; he
pushed it away.

He shuffled through the debris, picked up the skull that had hung on the wall. John had picked up the headphones; he snapped them into place because they had to start somewhere, Sherlock supposed.

Another few minutes of silence ticked by, picking things up at random, putting them in vague piles of salvageable and bin it.

"I won't be coming back to your flat for the foreseeable future," Sherlock began.

John looked up, surprised; Sherlock watched him run through and discard drugs again? Mycroft? Oh, he shagged her, that was fast, at which point a slow smile bloomed across his face into yeah, good, he shagged her.

Sherlock ignored it. He wasn't going to kiss and tell, quite literally in this case.

"I'll be composing and Rosie's head is too small for noise-canceling headphones."

"Composing. That's what they're calling it these days," John said lightly.

Sherlock gave him a look, the only one in the room you're amusing is yourself; John just gave him that smug, expectant smile in return.

Sherlock relented. "No, we didn't have sex. We're friends and her flat is more conductive to the creative process than y—"

"Just friends?"

"That's what we settled on, yes."

"Oh," John said, face doing a complicated fall, hitting a few different emotions on the way down. "How, ah, how are you feeling about that?"
"It's irrelevant, I have a project," he said, avoiding eye contact.

"You didn't actually talk about anything at all, did you? I bet she said it's okay, don't mind me, and you just took the easy way out, didn't you? And now you're just going to move in with her until you can come back here? Jesus, Sherlock." He was disappointed.

"And what was I supposed to say, John? Oh yes, the last six years were flirting, now let's go get a mortgage on a semi-detached in St. Albans and get to work on filling a touring car with little Holmeses. She didn't want to talk about it so I respected her wishes. I'd rather keep her as a friend than lose her from my life entirely."

"If you don't talk about it, you might lose her anyway. 'S all I'm saying," John said, backing down. He moved to the salvage pile with a half-melted laptop, keeping his back to Sherlock, giving it a moment to sink in. "What's this project, then?"

*

The car dropped her off outside of a pastry shop in Belgravia.

Mycroft was the only one in the shop, a bit out of place against the decor of whites and pinks and unobtrusive black accents that spoke of young women with high heels and casual button-front dresses that cost more than her lease payment, all too-white smiles and perfect, shiny hair. She thought Kate Middleton probably bought cakes there before they locked her away in the palace to make more heirs.

Not that Molly really looked like she belonged there either, with her dark circles and bad hair (she'd been going for a loose, flippy chignon thing and it ended up like someone had taped a bird's nest to the back of her neck) and boho hobo bag that had gone out of style five years before. At least she didn't smell too much like the morgue since she'd mostly been in the lab.

Mycroft gave her a thin smile as she sat down clumsily, chair leg scraping against the floor as she pulled it out.

"Today is a 'cheat day' as they call it. If ever a week required cake, this would be it," he said, as though he needed to explain.

Two plates were set in front of them. Mycroft's was a thick slice of the most elegant Victoria
Sponge Molly had ever seen; hers was a perfectly pink-frosted chocolate cupcake with a fresh strawberry rosette on top. Mycroft thanked the server and spread a cloth napkin on his lap, then took a dainty forkful of the cake.

His eyes closed and the barest hint of a smile graced his lips; she had a feeling she had just got to see a side of the other Holmes brother that very few ever had (and lived to tell about it, at least).

_Anorexia_, she realized suddenly, a flash of intuition.

"Quite," Mycroft said, confirming what she'd just thought as if she'd said it aloud.

_Please don't have let me have said it out loud._

"Do try your cupcake, Miss Hooper," he prompted, taking another bite of cake.

She did as she was told and took the neatest lips-over-teeth bite of icing she could; there was no dignified way to eat a cupcake and using a fork was just weird.

It was amazing, of course. Fresh strawberry buttercream with a hint of vanilla and something else she couldn't place but tasted classy and expensive, the texture like a creamy cloud. It was orgasmic.

Mycroft's eyebrow twitched just the slightest bit and she had a moment of panic that she'd said that out loud, too. Or worse, _made noise._

"Sherlock and I baked a cake once for Mummy's birthday," Mycroft began, apropos of nothing. "I was twelve, he was five. Eurus was having her violin lesson. Our parents thought it was... therapeutic.

"He was so very precise with the measurements. He lined up the raspberries around the edge with the care and meticulousness of an artist." Mycroft's face looked softer, truly fond. Molly could almost picture it herself, the crease between Sherlock's eyebrows and his little pink tongue poking out in concentration.

"We had the cake after dinner," Mycroft continued. "Eurus insisted on serving and we thought for just a moment that maybe something was finally working. She was four. Sherlock still has a scar
on his lip from the broken glass she'd slipped into his slice."

Molly's eyes widened; their sister really did sound like a horror film.

Mycroft set his fork down and propped his elbows on the table, folding his hands together and resting his chin on his interlaced fingers. "He said it was an accident and that he'd only bit his lip, despite the quite obvious truth of the situation. He doesn't know it, but he always tried to protect her.

"I know my brother, and I'm afraid he's got a very dark road ahead of him. This morning he asked me to see Eurus again, as I'm sure you know. She's become catatonic and he thinks he can reach her."

Molly put down her cupcake and drew herself up straighter, setting her jaw. "How can I help him?"

"I don't know," he said enigmatically, sitting back and taking up his fork again. He looked like he'd got the answer he was looking for.

"I assume you have questions."

"Should I start with asking about embarrassing stories?" she asked, trying to go for light to ease into what was going to be unpleasant.

"You do only have an hour for lunch, I'm afraid," he said dryly, and yes, he was making a joke.

Maybe he wasn't as bad as everyone made him out to be.

"I, ah, I'm pretty much in the dark about most of this, to be honest. I got the, um, highlight reel of what happened Sunday from Greg. Lestrade. But, um, anything else you could tell me would be great. Sherlock didn't really talk a lot last night. At least, about himself. He had a deduction and then ran out to call you and I found him asleep in the lounge this morning."

"Has he told you much about his childhood? Or rather, what he thought he remembered of it?"
She thought about it a bit, wishing she had a Mind Palace like Sherlock's that she could just go into and start pulling things out of filing cabinets.

"Only little bits. Really, I think he talked more about being a teenager. Not a lot of that, either. Mostly about school and the things he liked. And getting into fights. I know he did mention R-Redbeard." Her mouth caught on the word, as if unwilling to spit it out because the thought of Sherlock turning his dead best friend into a dog was so heartbreaking. "He thought that your parents had him put down because he got too old."

"Mm. Yes." Mycroft looked at his plate and his fingers twitched on his fork before he put it down. He folded his hands in his lap this time.

"I suppose you think it cruel that we allowed him to believe the lie he'd constructed for himself, Miss Hooper?"

She opened her mouth to deny it, a reflex. She couldn't find any words, though. She didn't think it was right to let him grow up feeling so out of place and not knowing why.

"Why did you?" she asked quietly.

"My parents were... not the same after the incident with Eurus. Their son's best friend had gone missing and their six year old daughter was a murderer. They knew it. I knew it. We never knew what she'd done with his body. No one, myself included, had ever thought to look in that well; it had been boarded up for years, we didn't even know she knew it existed."

Mycroft took a sip of water from the glass on the table.

"Immediately after Victor had gone missing, Eurus burned our house down. Some things could be salvaged, thankfully, and of course no one was injured. Their daughter, my baby sister, had just tried to murder our entire family. Though she did later admit she was only trying to kill Sherlock."

"Oh god," Molly whispered. She set her cupcake down; the lingering sweetness in her mouth turned sour.

"As you can imagine," Mycroft continued, "people began to talk. Eurus was taken away almost immediately, into the care of our uncle, but many suspected that Sherlock was the one to blame. We'd moved into a house in the village within days of the fire and Sherlock's mental state had become... less than stable, so he wasn't going to school. Parents forbade their children to speak to
him, people crossed the street to avoid our house. They whispered."

Molly swallowed thickly and she felt pressure in her eyes; she willed herself not to cry.

"My parents were already having a hard enough time coping with the loss of Eurus. They'd blamed themselves for her problems, as parents do. You must understand, they never blamed Sherlock. Not for Eurus, not for the things he did later. They were simply... unable to cope. Our father travelled frequently for business and our mother... She became detached. Not to the point of dissociation, but a husk of the mother she'd been."

Mycroft shifted back in his chair and sat up a bit straighter. "I'm going to say something and I hope you don't take it as inappropriate. You remind me very much of the way I remember her. She was very kind. Open with her affection. Generous with it, even. Without being too Freudian, I do think that's what's always drawn Sherlock to you. Like a moth to the flame of your unconditional love, as it were."

Her cheeks flushed and she bristled, anger rising through the sadness she felt on Sherlock's behalf. She didn't need to be reminded of it by everyone.

"Don't misunderstand me, Miss Hooper. Molly. I'm not mocking you," Mycroft placated. "I'm inexpressibly grateful for your presence in his life. I regret that I'd so thoroughly underestimated it. I rather hope it continues indefinitely, no matter what form it may take. But I digress.

"As for why we allowed Sherlock to reconstruct his memories... There was simply nothing else we could have done. My parents were understandably wary of professional help at that point, wondering if all the experts they'd sought out for Eurus had had a hand in shaping her into what she'd become. You can't imagine what he was like for the first year after Victor's death. He was... feral. Vicious one moment and simpering the next. He was often withdrawn, lashing out unexpectedly and quite violently for no discernible reason.

"I was the only one who could reach him when he was like that, the only one able to calm him down. Teaching him to use logic, to show his work, helped him order his thoughts and process the things he had no other way of dealing with. 'Deductions' began as a game to draw him back into the world outside himself.

"When he began to refer to Redbeard the dog, we were all very scared. My parents did have him put on medication, then. He became, for lack of a better word, a zombie. He gained quite a bit of weight, became lethargic, disinterested in most everything. I was the one who finally persuaded my parents to take him off of it. He was eight."
Molly's heart broke for Mycroft, then. She couldn't imagine what it must have felt like to be in that situation at fifteen. He'd missed the end of his own childhood, too.

"In the end, it seemed as though the best thing to do would be to let him continue living with the reality he'd created for himself. The next alternative would have been institutionalization, and that was something we simply could not do."

"I'm so sorry," Molly said quietly. It was inadequate, but it was the best she had.

Mycroft tilted his head and looked into her, through her.

"Yes, you are," he said, a note of bemusement in his voice, as though he were going to follow up with how novel.

And just like that, he shifted back into the Mycroft Holmes she'd met before, clipped and aloof and prim. He checked his watch without making a show of it, a genuine frown turning down the corners of his mouth for a split second.

"I'm afraid we've run a bit over time on your lunch hour. My apologies. Do finish your cake though. It's quite worth the week of salads to make up for it."

She wasn't exactly sure if it was self-deprecating humour or an insinuated takes one to know one; her own eating habits were restrained, but hardly what she would call disordered. She wasn't going to think about that now, though.

"Thank you," she said hurriedly. "For the cake, I mean. And ah, for the talk."

He gave a slight incline of his head in her direction in acknowledgement "Do give my best to Sherlock."

And because she was completely defective, she gave a little wave and said, "Bye."

With a twitch of an eyebrow, he turned and strolled out of the shop, his umbrella swinging a bit as he walked.
She took an actual bite of her cupcake now that there was no one there to watch her get icing on her nose; dear god he wasn't kidding. It was transcendent.

*

Music was harder today. His speech wanted to turn into a dissertation and he had to pare things down, streamline it—brevity is the soul of wit—all while keeping it in the right order and keeping the flow.

Maybe he was going about it wrong. Maybe a casual letter was better. Dear sis: How are you? Things are fine, the weather is nice, wish you were here and not locked inside your own head.

Bit more of a postcard, that.

Hm. Visual. That wasn't a bad way to go. Paint pictures of the moments he wanted to share, a scrapbook of photographs, rare happy memories.

Working backwards; last memory of feeling happy. Not the slightly malicious (okay, really malicious) glee he'd felt planning out his little bit of theatre for Mycroft, only things with soft edges. No schadenfreude.

Tuesday a week ago, holding Rosie while John paged through a file folder, Sherlock telling him about the case. It always felt good to be clever in front of John, but there was a feeling of true contentment that came from having a warm, sleepy baby against his chest. It made him feel strong and grown up; the little, defenceless person trusted him implicitly. He was a safe place. She wasn't screaming or trying to get away, she was burrowing into his neck to get closer. It was pure. Gentle.

He noodled around on the D string until it felt right, periodically stopping to make notes.

Satisfied (for now), he thought back farther. He wandered Molly's lounge, idly swinging his bow, looking at things but eyes never settling on any one thing. It would be easier at home; the lighting was softer and the colours darker, absorbing all the extraneous detail and leaving silhouettes, emphasizing line and form. Molly's lounge was clean, refreshing, like toothpaste or... petrichor, actually, because there was something less sterile and more earthy about it. A nice place, better for breathing rather than thinking.

Home was an interesting theme to explore. Belonging. He conjured Baker Street, began to play.
The creak of the leather of his chair, shifting patterns as the fire played over the floor in front of the mantle, dust, the faintest hint of Mrs. Hudson's perfume and Fairy. All his treasures surrounding him like a fort (so many of them burnt and ruined now, but keep the loss and anger out of it).

Molly trudged past; he stopped her at the bottom of the stairs with a flick of his bow like a tollgate.

He looked her over, reading her day in the line of her shoulders and on her clothes. Not enough sleep, work was okay, nothing particularly interesting; rush on lab work, students, paperwork paperwork; skipped lunch, no—cake, no occasion for that so—

"You were with Mycroft today." It was an accusation; he was sure it couldn't have been anything good.

Worse, Sherlock had been saving Peggy Porschen for when he needed a really important favour that was unlikely to otherwise be granted. Or for her birthday, since cake was a thing they did now, he supposed.

"I was." Simple, defiant. Court tomorrow, of course. Anticipatory.

"Why?" He narrowed his eyes. Mycroft was probably overjoyed he found a new spy. Really, he was an idiot for not trying to recruit her years ago.

"I don't need your permission." Antagonism. He wasn't expecting that.

Should have been; they'd talked about him, of course they did, they hadn't spent her lunch break chinning about GBBO and Laura Ashley. The question was what and how much Mycroft told her, if she now knew things about Sherlock that he didn't know about himself.

Was she going to start treating him like a ticking time bomb, like his parents had, like Mycroft still did?

His mouth started to form a retort before his brain caught up; Molly saved him from saying something that would no doubt be an escalation by deflating in on herself.
"Sherlock, please, I've had a long day and I don't want to argue. I just want a bath."

He withdrew the bow and let her pass; she always had a way of softening him. He didn't like it when she was upset about anything; it made him queasy every time he was the direct cause of it.

That probably should have been a clue, somewhere along the way.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Tuesday night and some Wednesday.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who's commented, given kudos, bookmarked, reblogged, liked, etc. <3 And thank you once again to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

I got some lint stuck on this chapter when I was taking it out of the dryer. Meaning, there's some fluff. Try not to gag, it doesn't last long.

*

She'd let herself daydream about this. Sherlock playing his violin while she had a hot bath, perfumed with the fancy rose oil she saved for special occasions, when she needed to feel feminine, needed that little bit of luxury. More candles and less discordant screeching, though.

She didn't want to think about it.

She had to think about him, though, because apparently he'd moved in (temporarily, obviously, but it wasn't like she had a timeline for repairs to his flat). He'd casually lined up his things on the bathroom sink, I don't have to put them back in their place because I'm just going to use them again tomorrow. Two of his suits and six shirts now hung in her wardrobe, her own clothes squashed over to the side to make room. A mug abandoned on her worktop, a music stand by her front window, dressing gown discarded over the back of her sofa. His messy scrawl underneath hers on the shopping list tacked to the fridge. His t-shirt and pants in her clothes hamper like she did his laundry with hers every day.

What's the problem, Molly? This is exactly what you always wanted. Domestic bliss.

She had to explain to him why this wasn't okay. Letting him stay would have been okay before, was okay before, but now those three words were between them like the tip of a knife pressed to her gut. She couldn't move, she couldn't even breathe, or she'd be run through and left to lie bleeding out.
It was funny. After she'd said it, she'd felt a moment of relief, it was finally out in the open, she was finally free. In reality, it had just been finding her cell door unlocked, only to run outside and see herself surrounded by ocean.

_I need you. As a friend._

Downstairs, he kept drawing out the same note over and over in different ways. So much for a relaxing bath.

She heaved herself out of the water, dried off. Dressed in her pyjamas, actually used the blow dryer on her hair so she could do it properly in the morning. Back in the bedroom, she got her clothes ready for tomorrow.

She hated her court suit. It was everything she wasn't. She'd bought it four years ago, when the grey tweed skirt and limp white blouse just weren't cutting it. It was black and sleek, the kind of thing designed for the frame of a woman five inches taller and with legs like chopsticks. Pockets? Who needs pockets? Not shop dummies, apparently.

She picked it because it reminded her of Sherlock. She wanted his absolute confidence. She wanted to command a room like he did. She wanted to be that cool, that clever. She didn't want to look like some... librarian when presenting herself as an expert. She was an expert; she wanted to bloody well dress the part.

She never felt right in it, though. Like it was a fancy dress costume.

She sighed and took it out of the bag, checked it over. She hung it on the wardrobe door (Sherlock's side now, apparently) and picked out a top from the few she had to choose from that went with it, just a plain white button down. She dug the white stretch camisole from her dresser drawer and looped the straps over the hanger to let any wrinkles ease out overnight. Picked out matching pants and a bra, the kind of bland nude things that went under boring adult clothing, made neither for comfort nor utility. Lineless pants and foam cups to make one into a smooth plastic representation of a woman, the only acceptable kind.

And the heels. Dear god the heels. She needed them for the height they gave her, but oh how she loathed them. She liked heels well enough when she was dressing to be pretty, but she hated them when it came to professionalism. It might not be 1970 and part of the office dress code, but a woman under forty in comfortable shoes still wasn't taken as seriously as a woman in heels. Also, not wearing socks was gross.

Thank god she only had to do it a few times a year.
She shuffled downstairs in her donut-print pyjama bottoms and a free fun-run t-shirt from 2008; she still had to make herself some kind of dinner with whatever she had on hand.

She supposed that the real benefit to friends was that she felt no pressure to look spectacular in front of Sherlock. That ship had sailed long ago anyway, back when her flat had first turned into The Grand Clerkenwell Guesthouse and Suites. If they ever did date, she'd feel like she had to make an effort and it would just add more stress.

Sherlock drifted from the front window to the lounge while she took stock of her pantry; at least the ones who'd searched her flat hadn't dumped out the sealed bags of pasta, even if they'd tipped everything already open into the bin. Macaroni cheese it was, then.

She was filling the stock pot with water when she realized she didn't have any flour for the roux. She shut off the water with a sigh and propped her hands on the sink, staring down into the pot.

"Molly? Are you—" Sherlock's tone was tentative and he was entirely too close.

"Hmm? Yes, fine," she said, straightening. "Just thinking I need to go grocery shopping."

Chin up, Molly-girl, her Gran would tell her. Gran lived through rationing, Molly could make do without flour. Macaroni cheese was a lazy meal anyway.

She turned the water on again and started pulling ingredients down from the cabinets, the fridge, the freezer. She set the pot to boil, got out her cutting board and her favourite knife, pulled her pinny out from the shelf under the worktop, twisted her hair up and fixed it in place with a clip from the drawer, and got to work.

She boned the chicken thighs first, saving the scraps to freeze and make stock later; she cut the meat into bite-sized pieces and got it in the pan with some olive oil.

"If you have time to stand around watching, you have time to help," she said, and yes, she was definitely channelling Gran. Points to Sherlock for bringing that to the surface, she supposed.

She fully expected him to go back to the lounge and start making noise with his violin again; she was genuinely surprised when he set the violin on the sofa and rounded the island to stand next to
"Cheese grater, second drawer," she said. She pulled a bowl from the cabinet under the worktop, then moved to stir the chicken in the pan.

"Which one? You've got three. Why do you need three?"

"The fine one," she answered, moving back to the work top. She opened the tin of artichoke hearts that had been living in the back of the cupboard for a year, mostly forgotten.

Sherlock grated cheese like an amateur, a fact that delighted her to no end. For all his competence and grace with everything, it was kind of endearing and kind of empowering to see him fumble with something so simple a child could do it.

And then she remembered her conversation with Mycroft earlier, the cake story, and everything lost its shine.

"Sherlock, how did you get the scar on your lip?" she asked before she realized it had come out. There were about a million other ways she could have started any conversation, let alone that one.

"I bit it when I was five. Or, I thought I had. I can only assume by the tone of your voice that Mycroft told you something today that I have yet to remember." He didn't sound angry or offended, or much of anything. For the first time in a very long time, she was having trouble reading him.

"I'm sorry," she apologized automatically, pushing the chopped artichokes into the pan with the back of her knife.

"What else did he tell you?" He kept his eyes on his work as if mesmerized by the slow scrape scrape scrape.

"Nothing specific, really. That was the only actual anecdote. No, not anecdote—" that made it sound trivial and it really wasn't,"—story. He just told me, um, about your sister, and the things she did. And a bit about you afterwards."

She pulled two cloves of garlic from the bulb and set the rest aside.
"Nothing bad," she hastened to add.

"It was all bad," he said simply.

Molly had nothing to say to that, so she got on with it, using the flat of her knife to smash the garlic before peeling it.

He was circling one of his black moods, she could see it; she always felt so powerless in the face of them.

"If you want to talk about it, we can," she offered. "Or we can talk about something else. Or not talk at all. Whatever you want."

He was quiet for another few moments, probably deciding.

"What do you want?" he asked her, his voice low.

Her knife faltered as she minced the garlic but she recovered. She didn't know what exactly he was really asking, but there was more to it than I'm out of my depth and I want you to lead the conversation.

"A holiday in Ibiza," she joked, probably too quickly.

Predictably, the joke fell flat. She was hoping for a Spain is overrated or I once solved a case in Spain, there were murders, it was great, but he retreated back into silence, scrape scrape scraping the cheese across the grater.

She added the garlic to the pan and stirred it around a bit, cut into a piece of the chicken to see if it was cooked through. Getting there. The water was almost at the boil, too.

"Molly," he said, hesitating.
She tensed; something in his voice told her he was going to ask her the kind of question she didn't have an answer for, or that she didn't want to answer.

"Why did they lie to me? As a child I can almost understand it, but as an adult? They sat by and let me self-destruct when they could have explained. I can't help but think things... everything would have been different, had I known."

She looked over her shoulder at him from her place at the hob; he'd set the cheese and the grater aside and was leaning heavily on the worktop, his head down. She just wanted to go to him and gather him up in her arms and hold him, but that wasn't what they did.

"I don't know, Sherlock," she said, pushing the food around in the pan. "They thought they were protecting you."

"Would you have lied, if you thought it were protecting me?" There was an edge of anger in his voice.

Would she?

She considered as she added the salt and pepper, then grabbed the milk and turned the heat down before pouring it into the pan. She was going to get this meal cooked if it killed her.

Her silence had gone on too long; much longer and Sherlock would take it as a yes and close himself off from her, lump her in with everyone else who hurt him.

"I think," she began carefully, picking up the pasta packet, "I mean, I know—I would do anything to protect you. Anything. But I don't think lying ever protects anyone. It only catches up with you in the end."

She dumped half the packet in the water and stirred it.

"I would never lie to you, either," he said, the conviction in his voice making her breath catch and heat flood her face.

Thank god she had the excuse of standing over a steaming pot of boiling water, should he look over and see it.
He didn't even know he was doing it. Another one of those times when he said all the right things but had no clue what they meant to her.

"You can lie to me about some things," she said, trying to navigate them back to shallower waters. "Like, you know, 'no, those trousers don't make your arse look fat,' or 'yes, I think those new shoes are absolutely lovely.'"

He huffed a laugh. "Then let me just take the opportunity to say that your current ensemble is the very picture of refined elegance," he said, his lips quirking.

If not for the tension still around his eyes, she could almost pretend he was flirting.

She flattened her mouth into a line and gave him a look; you're not as cute as you think you are.

*

He never wanted so badly to kiss a woman (again) in his life.

The scene was hardly the height of breathtaking romance; they were eating off trays on Molly's sofa in front of the telly and she was completely absorbed in the program, absently forking pasta into her mouth and sipping her water.

"I just love her, she's so... sparkly," she said, doing the most endearing little body-wiggle nose-wrinkle combination as she took another bite of chicken.

"Mm," he agreed for a completely different reason. "Who is she again?"

"Doctor Lucy Worsely, Joint Chief Curator of Historical Royal Palaces," she said like he imagined a teenage girl would talk about a pop star. "She presents all kinds of history programs. She's amazing."

He glanced at the screen again; an impish middle-aged woman with a neat blonde bob and red lipstick talked animatedly with her hands while gesturing to a hill in the distance. He smiled a bit to himself. Noooo idea why she would be drawn to that.
He watched Molly's face surreptitiously as she smiled at the amusing bits and processed a fact she found interesting; he wondered why he'd never felt this way when he'd looked at her before.

Then again, maybe he had and just hadn't understood it. He was very good at lying to himself when he wanted to be. Apparently.

"I wanted to be an archaeologist when I was a kid," she said conversationally. "I wanted to be Indiana Jones."

He imagined her at seven, all knobby knees and pink shorts, hanging off of trees with a jump rope for a whip and fedora that had been dug out of mothballs from her grandmother's wardrobe. He liked the idea that they probably would have got on like a house on fire as children. He really didn't want to think much past that, lest he get into dark waters again.

"All the way up until my A-levels I thought I would do Forensic Anthropology, but then I decided on Pathology," she continued, unaware of his thoughts.

"Why?" he asked, genuinely curious. Both had their points of interest. He took another bite of pasta.

"I think... I was always keen on medicine and how the body worked, and everyone always thought I'd be a doctor anyway because I was such a swot... I think... It was more immediate? I suppose. I think I liked that I could do something that was important in a concrete sense, not just an abstract one. Get answers for people who actually needed them, when they had the best chance of doing the most good. If that makes sense. I mean, identifying a victim and a cause of death from just bones is important, but it's usually too little, too late. Proving or disproving an accidental death or a murder when something can still be done about it is much more satisfying."

I'm going to marry this woman, he thought. It was a moment of clarity.

* 

She wobbled her heel against the marble tile, tensing her calf and pushing her toe harder into the floor. She refused to fidget with her sleeves or her hands.

She knew she shouldn't get emotionally involved with her work, and usually she didn't. Death
happened, people killed people, everybody had a life before it was gone. She wasn't the authority who judged guilt or innocence, she was science—cold and impartial.

Things like this, though, the result of endemic, systemic problems that could be fixed, or at least lessened, if people just pulled their heads out of their arses and spared the emotion to care about their fellow human beings—these were the cases that she really wanted to help win. Small victories that would lead to change, in an ideal world.

The proceedings were running long; she wouldn't be called until after the recess.

They were given half an hour. She went outside to get some fresh air and stretch her legs a bit; she ran into Greg on the steps, having a fag with a small group of assorted law enforcement. He ducked out of the conversation he'd been in and jogged down to her, all easy smile and crinkled eyes. They chatted for a bit; he was there for an armed robbery and assault.

She got out her phone to check the time and noticed it had blown up with texts while she'd been in the courtroom. She must have made a face.

"Let me guess. Sherlock?" he said before briefly checking his own phone, just in case.

**Henry Butler, 20 years. SH**

**John Cobb, 18 years. SH**

**Ravi Prades, 15 years. SH**

**Isaac Winston, 30 years. SH**

**Matthew Milliard, 7 years. SH**

There must have been a dozen texts like that, just names and a number of years. The names were a little familiar, but she couldn't place them.

"What's that, then?" Greg asked, taking one last drag on his cigarette before snuffing it out.
"I don't know," she replied, flipping her phone so he could see the screen.

He scanned the texts. "Yeah, yeah, I remember some of these. Winston—that was one of mine. You were the examiner on that one. Open and shut, the prosecution never even had to call you. Killed his partner with a—"

"—Wusthof. Yeah, I remember that one now. What—?" Ohh.

They were all convictions that had relied on her evidence in court. Well, not necessarily relied, but cases she'd worked on.

Ohhhh.

Was he—? He was, she thought. He was lending her moral support.

Her face flushed, happy and a bit apprehensive as to what it might mean.

Just friends. Friends do that type of thing. Just because he hadn't before didn't mean the definition of friends couldn't shift over time.

"Oh my God, really?" Greg asked, incredulous.

"What?"

"You an' him?"

"What? No. I was just a little on edge this morning and he's trying to make me feel better."

"This morning." Greg said flatly, eyebrows raised.
"He's staying at my flat until he can go back to his."

"I thought he was with John."

"He was, but then he decided he wanted to compose," she drew the word out, letting a little bit of her annoyance seep into it, "and he didn't want to disturb the baby."

"So it's just that?"

"Of course it is. We're friends," she said, plastering on her brightest smile. Tried not to titter.

Whatever might or might not be happening between her and Sherlock was between them and them alone. Not that there was probably anything happening.

"Yeah. Yeah, alright," he said too fast, nodding too much.

His face grew serious, then. "How's he doing, though?"

"He's... I don't know. He's trying to be normal. Well, normal for him. He hasn't really talked about it, yet. I'm just afraid the longer he goes on not talking about it, the worse it's going to be for him. I mean, I can't even imagine..." she let her expression say the rest.

"I don't think he's going to start using again. At least, not by how he is now. I might be wrong, though. He acted pretty normally after John got married, and look at that."

She might not have missed it so completely if she hadn't been splitting from Tom at the time. Sherlock hadn't given any indication. She hadn't even known he'd been seeing that bridesmaid (even if it had been fake). And she didn't believe for a second the drugs had just been for "a case," just like this last time hadn't been for one, either.

"Well, let's just hope you're right, then," he said. "I should get back. Tell Sherlock I have something for him whenever he's ready. I mean, I don't, but I've got stacks of files. Gotta be something in there." He left with a grin.
Molly looked at her phone again, scrolling through the texts. She smiled softly to herself, then smiled wider and took a deep breath of cold air.

\textbf{Thank you. x} she typed out, hit send before she could erase the kiss.

*

"Yeah, I think you better get round here," John had said.

It was another message from Mary; Sherlock really needed to find out who she was using to send them.

John was gutted. Quietly, of course. Sherlock wasn't sure what to do, exactly, as he was feeling pretty shaken himself.

They spent a bit of time in silence, lost in their own thoughts. John would need to pick up Rosie soon; he always cycled home from work and then walked or drove (depending on time and weather) to the nursery to get her.

"John," Sherlock finally began. "Would you want to come back to Baker Street?"

He'd been considering asking for a while, but not seriously, as he assumed he'd have been turned down. Having Molly on his sofa every night while he was getting clean had made him realize how bad it was for him to live alone.

"I'm sure we could persuade Mrs. Hudson to clear out the room next to yours, she's got the whole top floor to store whatever's in there. Or there's the basement flat. Obviously we'd have to do something about the damp so Rosie wouldn't contract some kind of Dickensian urchin disease, and she'd have to change nurseries, but the inconvenience would be partially offset by being closer to Mrs. Hudson, Molly, and myself for childcare."

John listened with his lips pressed together over his teeth until Sherlock ran out of words.

After a pause long enough to make Sherlock begin to dread the rejection, John said, "I have to think about it. I mean, really think about it. That's not a no, by the way."
"You have time, I don't expect the flat to be habitable for at least another two weeks. Probably a month or better to be in a fit state to bring an infant into."

He didn't tell John, but he planned to start taking cases again as soon as the glaziers got the new windows in, even if he couldn't actually live there. He didn't want John to think that he was going to try to bury himself in the work again, but he did need it. He needed the distraction from Eurus, his memories, the Molly Hooper Problem.

"Alright, yeah. I'll let you know."

Sherlock walked with John to get Rosie from the nursery since he had nothing better to do and he really wanted the company. He wasn't ready to go back to Molly's flat yet because he needed to be away from her presence, lest he get lost in it.

He'd had the guiltiest wank of his life in her shower that morning, right after she'd left the flat. Seeing her in that suit brought back the memory of his mild overdose on the plane just after Christmas last year, when his mind had made her a man to prove a point he'd been too stupid to see.

She'd still smelled of roses from her bath, too. Rose attar, not chemical facsimiles. Usually she used whatever fruity-citrusy mid-range bath products that were on offer at Boots, and that was nice enough, but there was something so enticing about the scent of roses. It was some kind of Victorian-modesty-femininity kink thing in his brain, he'd never examined it very closely before.

All that coupled with the desire he'd felt for her the night before was just too much. He got off thinking about fucking her hard and rough against a brick wall in a dark nineteenth-century alleyway, holding her up and pinning her in place with his body, her legs tight around his waist and her skirt bunched up around her chest.

That wasn't really something he wanted to be remembering while rambling down the road with his best friend and the baby.

"Staying for dinner?" John asked once they were back inside, getting Rosie out of her coat.

"No, but thank you. I was thinking of taking Molly out."
"As a friend."

"As a friend," he confirmed, not as annoyed as he could be. "We can all have dinner tomorrow night when you pick up Rosie."

"That's usually the kind of thing you run by the wife first," John said, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes a little.

The comment gave him the strangest little flutter in the pit of his stomach at the thought of Molly being that person to him, and John's tacit approval of the whole thing.

"I'll keep that in mind, should I ever find myself with one," Sherlock said, covering admirably. "I'll text Molly and ask her if it's alright, which it will be, if that makes you feel better."

"There's hope for you yet."

*

"Sherlock, are you at—" she faltered, almost said home, revised, "the flat? I'm going to stop for groceries on my way back and I was wondering if you could look at the list for me. If not, it's okay, you don't have to ring me back. Bye."

She probably should have texted, he always preferred it, but walking and texting was harder than walking and talking, especially in heels on uneven pavement.

She felt good. It was a good day, after all. Sherlock's texts had given her the little boost she needed; she'd actually interjected a bit during the cross-examination about bedsores and why Mrs. Headly would have naturally rolled onto her right side because of the dressing. She'd seen one of the jury members cock his head just so, I never would have thought of that, that adds a new dimension, and she'd felt vindicated.

A minute later her phone buzzed with a series of texts.

Bananas, other fruit, bread, celery, onions, flour, sugar, quinoa, rice, red lentils, porridge oats, double cream, yogurt, better biscuits, marmalade,
WINE (underlined three times), tuna, chicken, miso, rusks, Alphabites.

Spanish or Italian for dinner? SH

Well, I was thinking neither, but sure, Chez Hooper is always willing to accommodate special orders.

She ducked into a doorway and typed out a response.

Did you have anything specific in mind?

Moro is booked but the manager owes me a favour. SH

Oh. He meant going out.

She smiled to herself. After six years, Sherlock Holmes had finally asked her to have dinner, and not just chips or takeaway. It wasn't a date, but it was still a little victory, and she'd take all of them that she could.
Dinner was awkward. They both felt it; for the first time since Sunday Sherlock began to question
if it ever could actually happen with Molly. He'd been taking it as a given that friends was
temporary, one step along the road to... whatever. Forever, daunting as that seemed. The thought
of not-forever, their time as finite, was unacceptable.

The restaurant should have been perfect. The lighting was low without being dark, the atmosphere
was close but not claustrophobic, there was a dash of the exotic to the decor that hinted at the kind
of holiday that was more sex than sightseeing. The food was wonderful.

Molly looked great; she was a little tired from her day, mostly the shoes, but she shone with that
inner light of hers that he'd always been unable to resist.

*He* was the problem. He'd never been on a *real* date before. Going out with Janine had been play-
acting and so, so much easier.

Was he supposed to pull out her chair? Order for her? He'd done that with Janine to establish just
how debonair and in control and alpha male and impressive he was, but this was Molly. Molly, who
batted his hand away and paid for the cake on his birthday; Molly, who ran ahead to open
doors for herself; Molly, who'd constantly had him on the wrong foot since the very first day he'd
met her.

Pretending she was John and it was just an after-case dinner wasn't working, either. For one thing, his eyes never lingered on John's mouth or where his shirt pulled just so over his chest; he'd never wanted to lace his fingers with John's over the table just to see if there really was something to public displays of affection after all.

Of course Molly, being Molly, picked up on his unease and started to second-guess herself, and everything dissolved into quick glances away while sipping her wine and aborted half-thoughts in conversation.

It went further downhill when he mentioned he'd asked John to stay for dinner tomorrow night. Molly fretted that she wished she would have known when she was shopping, since she wasn't sure what she would make. Sherlock told her not to worry, John would eat anything, which had somehow been the wrong thing to say; apparently she'd done a lot of cooking for him in the month or so after Mary had died and she'd somehow taken it as a slight.

Then he'd gone and told her about the video from Mary and she'd got sad and she told him about one time when they'd watched some stand-up comedian together on YouTube and they'd laughed so hard Mary thought she was going into early labour, and then she'd tried to remember the joke but realized he probably wouldn't think it funny anyway and shut herself off.

Finally, thankfully, the meal was over and they could go. The walk home was quiet, distant. As soon as they got in the door, Mycroft phoned; that was no accident.

"Eight AM on Sunday there will be a helicopter at the London Heliport to take you to Sherrinford, should you still wish to go. You'll have no escort and your security badge will open one door only. You're to have no contact with any of the staff because you were never there. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good." Mycroft's voice down-shifted from dictatorial to smarmy older brother. "I'd love to chat about how poorly your date went, but the entirety of democracy in the Western Hemisphere seems to be imploding and requires my immediate attention. One thing though, Sherlock. Do be careful."

"Where she is now she can't hurt anyone, you said it yourself. Passed beyond our view."

"That's not what I was referring to." The line went dead.
He wasn't sure what his enigmatic bastard of a brother was referring to, either something about Molly or a dig about his mental health or something else entirely, maybe all of the above. Irksome.

"Is everything alright?" Molly asked, fiddling with her coat on the peg to cover her eavesdropping. Not that he minded; it wasn't something he was going to keep from her anyway.

"I'm going to see my sister on Sunday," he said casually, as though he was just taking the train out to Slough for lunch, maybe watch the cricket, back in time for dinner. He worked off his scarf and stuffed it in his pocket.

A shadow crossed Molly's face; she didn't think it was a good idea.

That stung. Molly was supposed to support him in this because she supported him in everything.

"Will you be okay?" she asked.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?" he asked, shaking out his coat before hanging it. He didn't look at her.

"Sherlock." She used that voice, soft and sad, *I can see you.*

"I'll be fine! Why does everyone think I'm a dainty little flower one breath away from the throes of hysterical neurosis or a massive narcotics binge?" He threw his hands in the air and stalked into the lounge.

He flopped down on the sofa and grabbed his laptop from the coffee table; his only reason for doing so was to give Molly an unambiguous dismissal.

She refused to get the message, following him and looming over him. "I'm worried about what might happen if you're in a room alone with her again! She tried to kill you! She was going to kill me, she was going to kill John! How many people did she actually kill?"

"And it's my fault she did all of it!" he shouted, casting his laptop aside and springing up to tower over her.
Molly recoiled as if he'd physically slapped her and he immediately backed away, sinking down onto the sofa. He clasped his hands together, thumbs under his chin and knuckles to his forehead, resting his elbows on his knees. He stared at the floor.

He was ashamed for losing his temper and ashamed for what he'd admitted. That wasn't something he ever wanted anyone to know, not even Molly. No matter how many times he told himself it wasn't true, it was one lie he couldn't believe.

"Sherlock."

He flinched at the way she said his name.

"You were a child."

"So was she," he said quietly. "I was supposed to protect her."

"You can't protect people from themselves, no matter how much you want to." The way she weighted her words made him feel small, unworthy.

"She was so alone, Molly. If I'd only... paid attention to her, she wouldn't have—" he shook his head, unable to get it out.

"Maybe not. She might not have killed Victor," she said, and he knew she was making a point but it hurt so much to hear it from her mouth. "She would have killed somebody, though. Maybe your parents, maybe your brother, maybe a stranger, maybe you."

She charged on, not giving him a chance to protest. "You know enough about psychopathology to know that that's true. It's not because of anything you did, when issues present that young it's all physiological. Nature, not nurture. It would be like blaming yourself if she had cancer. So just stop it."

He knew what she was saying was most likely true, but it didn't change anything.

"I could be like her. I've killed people." don't do it, don't tell her, she'll never be able look at you
again "I killed Charles Magnussen. I shot him. In the head."

He squeezed his eyes shut tight and waited for her to scramble away in horror, to scream, to tell him he was the the most evil, vile, disgusting thing she'd ever met and to get out of her house, get out of her life, go do the world a favour and die.

She sat down next to him, her knee brushing his.

"I know," she said gently.

"H-how?" he all but whispered. He felt a tear run down the bridge of his nose.

"That day after Christmas last year, when you said you were going away for a while and you wanted me to check in on Mrs. Hudson from time to time. You looked... It was the same as the day you jumped. I saw the news and put it together."

He laughed wetly, humourlessly. She always knew. He was so fucking blind.

"Doesn't that disgust you?"

"No. I don't... It's complicated, but I know you, and I know you did what you did because you thought it was the only way to save someone, or a lot of people. You did it because it was more right than wrong."

"I'm not a fucking hero, Molly," he said, sounding more pathetic than angry.

"I know. But you're still a good man."

That was what broke him, then. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes and cried, just like the time she'd granted him absolution for Mary's death.

He didn't deserve someone like her. One day she'd see that, and it would be the worst day of his life.
She put her arm around him, just like that night, her other hand gripping his arm while she laid her head on his shoulder.

He struggled to get himself under control. Molly was the one person he could be weak in front of, but also the one person in whose eyes he never wanted to be seen as weak.

Finally he was able to get enough of a handle on himself to speak again without fear of his voice breaking on a sob.

"I need to do this, Molly. I can't let my sister be alone any more. Alone is hell."

She sighed. She moved the hand rubbing circles on his back to rest lightly against his hair, lifted her head from his shoulder and turned her face to plant the gentlest of kisses on his temple.

"You know I'll help you however I can. Just tell me what I need to do," she said.

You're already doing it. More than you know.

*

She came awake slowly to her alarm, clawing her way up from a deep sleep.

"Fuck off," she growled into her pillow, flailing wildly and failing to connect with the goddamn clock. She just wanted to sleep.

And then there was a very warm, very heavy, very male body pressing against her as he reached over her and turned the damn thing off.

And ohhh, that was not Tom.

Sherlock's arm settled over her waist, comfortable, casual, like it had rested there every morning for years. It felt so right it ached.
She really needed to stop this, whatever it was. She didn't care, though, she just wanted to pretend for four more minutes until the alarm went off again and she had to get up and face reality.

She awoke again with a start, this time to her phone ringing. She looked at the clock as she was sitting up, 7:16.

Oh fuck.

"Sorry, sorry, someone turned my alarm off and I overslept, I'll be right down," she answered the phone, pushing Sherlock's arm off of her lap and throwing the covers back.

"It's alright. I just got here. We had a bit of a late morning ourselves."

Sherlock was sitting up and stretching when she flew out the bedroom door and down the stairs, the floor cold under her bare feet.

She ran to the door and unlocked it, a little breathless, already apologizing profusely.

John handed her the baby straight away. "She wouldn't eat breakfast this morning so you might have to feed her soon. She was running a little warm before. Pretty sure it's the tooth coming in, but just keep an eye on her and text me if she starts showing any other symptoms. There's some baby aspirin in the changing bag if you think she needs it."

Sherlock thunked down the stairs and John looked between him and Molly, that question written all over his face. He probably wasn't even aware of it.

Another time she would be embarrassed or annoyed, but she just shook her head slightly and mouthed bad night.

John's eyes flickered a little darker, alright now?

She gave a half-nod of I think so, probably, hopefully.

"Morning Sherlock," John called past her.
Sherlock grunted in response and went about getting things down from the cabinets.

Molly bounced Rosie to resettle her; she only had eyes for Uncle Sherlock this morning, apparently, twisting around to watch him over Molly's shoulder and squirming.

"Is he... making coffee?" John asked, brows knitted together and a kind of wonders never cease turn to his mouth.

"Phone the Daily Mail," Sherlock said, eyes going wide as he fanned his hands, a spoon held between his thumb and forefinger.

John smiled at that and set the changing bag down; Molly leaned the baby forward and held her under the armpits so John could give her her goodbye kiss.

"Thanks again, I'll be here for seven," he said before leaving.

Molly locked the door behind him and picked up the changing bag, dropped it on the sofa, sat Rosie on the breakfast bar to get her coat off so she could see Sherlock.

Sherlock smiled, tired but genuine. "Good morning, Rosie," he said, smoothing down her hair. He bent and kissed the top of her head and she lunged for him, then made an angry noise when Molly kept her in place to finish getting her coat off.

"Can you take her for a minute so I can pop back upstairs?" Molly asked, folding the coat over her arm.

"Mmhm," Sherlock answered, scooping her up.

One look in the bathroom mirror told her all she needed to know about why John had immediately assumed; she had some wild sex hair going on. Sherlock, too, but he always had wild sex hair, even when it was combed.

It might not have been sex, but the night before had been terrifyingly intimate. Once Sherlock had started talking, he didn't stop. He'd talked about years of being alone, thinking there was
something fundamentally wrong with him, unlikeable, unlovable. He'd talked about boredom and restlessness and drugs and it gutted her to hear it, which led him to the years of guilt for the way he'd treated his parents, his brother, everyone around him while he was using, then on to the new guilt of the sister he'd just begun to remember, the guilt for all the people he couldn't save, for those who'd died in the crossfire of his games.

She'd seen him heading toward an apology to her and she'd cut him off then; she didn't know why, exactly, except that she didn't want to hear it. She didn't want to think of it as a power play, but maybe it was, a bit. As long as he couldn't apologize, she wouldn't have to let it go completely. She wouldn't have to let go of the faint, delusional hope that there was something to it when he'd said it, either.

That wasn't all of it, though. She wouldn't have her own words dismissed in his mind. She wanted them there, inside his head, hanging like an albatross. A punishment for not giving her what she wanted while giving her just enough to stay.

She wasn't a very good person herself, sometimes.

She wasn't being deliberately obstinate, not entirely. She was protecting herself. And she was protecting their friendship. It was so complicated.

The conversation wasn't all one-sided. She'd told him about her family, large and distant as it was. She told him about her Dad, who was a bit of a womanizer, but not a creep and how he just had too much charm for his own good; four kids over three wives and he did love them all, even if he wasn't with them all the time.

She didn't cry when she talked about him dying; she'd already been set on her career path when he'd got the diagnosis and she understood better than anyone in the family what was happening to him. Because of that, he'd relied on her more than anyone else there at the end, telling her she was the strongest one and more than the others, she'd be fine. And she supposed she was fine. If anything, it probably prepared her more for the psychological side of her career than all her lecturers and textbooks had.

Sherlock had laced his fingers with hers, then, palm to palm.

Then he'd asked her about her Gran.

Talking about Gran was harder, even more personal. Maybe it was because of what Sherlock had said before, about Molly trying to live up to her memory, the realization of how true it was and how deep it ran. Maybe it was because she missed her so much sometimes that it was a physical
how deep it ran. Maybe it was because she missed her so much sometimes that it was a physical ache, some sixteen years on.

Gran had been a Land Girl who'd never left Sheffield before they put out the call; she'd kept an allotment and bottled her own tomatoes until the year she died. Her hair was always done and her clothes neat as pin. She was always quick to laugh, never bothered by any of the little things. She didn't believe in frivolities, but she recognized the need for giving yourself a bit of a treat sometimes.

Molly shook her head at the memories; she'd cried a little bit over them last night. It had been dark and she'd turned her face away, but Sherlock had squeezed her hand and drawn it closer to himself, dropping the barest ghost of a kiss to the web of her thumb before positioning it more comfortably between them.

She finished making the bed and smoothed down the duvet; that was enough of that. She'd fold that memory up in tissue paper with the kiss and the words and every other bit of tenderness he'd shown her and tuck them into a drawer in her heart where she kept everything too precious for everyday.

Back downstairs she found Sherlock on the sofa. He supported Rosie around the stomach with one hand while she stood on his thigh, most of her weight resting against his shoulder; on his other leg he had the laptop balanced, his hand hovering above the trackpad. He was having a quiet conversation with her while a YouTube video played on the screen.

_There go my ovaries_, she thought to herself. _Well, it's not like you were planning on using them anyway._

"I'm going to make Rosie some scrambled eggs, do you want some?" she asked, rounding the breakfast bar.

"Just toast, thanks," he said absently.

Lazy.

"So, plans for the day?" she asked after pulling down the mixing bowl and putting the bread in the toaster.

"Research," he said simply. And then, as an afterthought, "You?"
"I thought I'd finally tidy the spare room. I usually take Rosie out somewhere, just errands mostly, but I don't want to take her out in this on the off chance she's coming down with something. I might run out to the shops again, though, after I figure out dinner, if you're okay with watching her for an hour."

"Mm, 's fine," he said, already reabsorbed in the video.

While Molly was stirring the eggs in the pan, she had a weird moment outside herself where she realized that this was a snapshot from the life she'd always thought she'd have; the life another Molly Hooper was living in the Berenstein Universe. Rosie wasn't her daughter and Sherlock wasn't her husband (or Rosie's dad), but she was struck with a bittersweet feeling of rightness, like it was just any other quiet, rainy morning in their young family's life.

Reality continued to overlay fantasy as Sherlock came up behind her, peering over her shoulder to check the status of the eggs before getting a plate from the cabinet and collecting his toast, Rosie balanced on a hip. He handed Molly the new jar of marmalade because he couldn't do it one-handed; she popped the lid and set it on the worktop for him.

He got down a plate for the eggs without being asked, spread the marmalade on his toast, jammed the spoon in his mouth before closing up the jar. He let the spoon hang there while he opened the utensil drawer and fished out the pizza cutter, using it to slice off a finger of toast for Rosie. His lips made a wet popping noise when he took the spoon out of his mouth; it clattered against the bottom of the sink a moment later.

He rounded the breakfast bar and set his plate down, pulled out a stool and sat; he balanced Rosie on one thigh and braced her with his left hand (obviously made for the sole purpose of holding babies) while he ate his toast with his right. Rosie waved her piece in the air one-handed, then grabbed it with the second and jammed it into her mouth.

Molly was on autopilot, lost somewhere between realities as she started her own toast and dished some of the eggs onto Rosie's plate, checking to make sure they'd cooled enough before setting it in front of her. She went into the changing bag and pulled out a bib; Sherlock shifted the baby to help Molly get it on her.

"Are you alright? You look a bit pale."

The moment stretched thin, snapped with Sherlock's casual concern.
"Hm? Probably just blood sugar. Happens sometimes in the mornings," she dismissed. She moved another stool around to the end of the breakfast bar and fetched her eggs and toast.

He hummed and finished his own toast, rubbing his fingertips together to get the crumbs off.

Rosie apparently decided that he hadn't eaten enough and that she needed to help feed him; she twisted around and waved the toast in his face. She studied it for a moment, then put it right up to his mouth. He didn't hesitate at all, just took a bite of the mangled, gummed toast, chewed and swallowed.

"Yes, thank you, it's lovely, but it's time for you to eat your breakfast now," he said, pulling her dish of eggs closer before popping a piece in her mouth with his fingers.

Molly must have had a look on her face; Sherlock gave her a sideways glance of what?

"It's hardly the worst thing I've ever put in my mouth," he said with a shrug.

*

"So I've been thinking," John said, loading mash and peas onto his fork, "Rosie's birthday is coming up and I should really have something for it. Just cake for family, nothing big."

Sherlock glanced at Molly for a prompt; apparently birthdays were going to be a thing all around now and he wasn't sure how to not be a cynical arsehole about it. He supposed 'one' was some kind of milestone, if you were living in 1380 and pig pox or vikings or ravenous fairies were a concern.

Molly's lips pursed into don't say whatever you were just thinking; her eyebrows rose into just say it's nice.

"That sounds... nice?" he tried. Molly took a sip of her wine, don't strain yourself in the twist of her lips. Half marks.

"I can bake it, if you want," Molly offered. "Were you thinking of doing just a regular cake, or having one of those separate smash cakes for pictures?"
John made a face at that. Sherlock tuned them out, completely disinterested by the vacuousness of parenting trends.

When the topic at hand came back around to the kind of cake, Sherlock found himself voicing an opinion before he was consciously aware of it.

"Not Victoria Sponge," he said, his fingers drifting to his lip for just a second. Bitten? Broken glass.

Molly's eyes flew wide, fearful, searching his face. *Are you okay?*

Oh, right. Molly hadn't ever said what Mycroft had told her about it; now he knew. Remembered.

John looked between the two of them, paused mid-chew; he knew there was something going on but not what.

Sherlock looked at Molly; *it's okay, it's not something for the dinner table. Later.*

She relaxed, gave him the kind of look that was the equivalent of squeeze to the hand, covered with, "I was thinking chocolate. Everybody loves chocolate."

John finished chewing, still looking between the two of them, a different kind of knowing written all over his face. "Yeah, yeah, I think chocolate will work."

Dinner went on and they chatted about very dull, normal adult things like talking to workmen on the phone and the baby and work and queuing; it should have bored him senseless but he felt content.

And then John took Rosie home and he was alone again with Molly, which seemed like the best end to any good day he could hope for.

"Sherlock, there's about a glass of wine left in the bottle, do you want it?" Molly called from the kitchen.
"No," he called back without looking up from his laptop. A headline caught his eye while scrolling; Thirty Year Old Musgrave Disappearance Solved.

He didn't click on it. Instead, he shut the laptop and set it aside while Molly rounded the back of the sofa with her glass. She scooped up the remote before sitting down next to him and clicked on the telly, settling back against the cushions sipping her wine.

He didn't want to ruin what had been, until then, a good day. There had been no excitement, no cases, no experiments; he'd never have thought that a quiet day with his family (his chosen family) would be something so deeply satisfying. He didn't want Molly to see the article and worry about his survivor's guilt (which was there, oh yes; why did he get to enjoy a family when Victor had never got the chance to have one?), he didn't want her to start thinking about the burden of his past.

If anything, he just wanted to keep wallowing in his bubble of contentment for as long as he could. To that end, he made the impulsive decision to stretch his arm over the back of the sofa cushion behind Molly and kick his feet up on the coffee table.

"Mm, shoes," she more pouted than scolded into her wineglass. She didn't seem to notice the arm.

He heaved a theatrical sigh for her benefit and put his feet down, untied his shoes, and toed them off. He put his feet back on the coffee table as she was leaning over the sofa arm to put her wineglass down on the side table; when she settled back he slid his arm around her shoulders instead of the back of the cushion.

She tensed and he held his breath, his heart thundering in his ears, thinking he'd pushed it too far. That much contact twice in one day might be a bit much, even if they'd both been mostly-asleep for the first time. He certainly hadn't thought about it this morning, she'd just been there, warm and small and in the space he wanted to put his arm.

Molly relaxed and leaned her shoulder into his side, kicking her feet up next to his; he exhaled. She brought the remote up and changed the channel, clicking over to the news. They both read the crawl across the bottom of the screen at the same time; Remains Identified in 1983 Missing Child Case.

"Is that—?" she asked, twisting her head to look up at him.

"Yep," he said, eyes still on the television screen. He pulled her just the littlest bit tighter to his
"Are you—?"

"Right now, yes. Overall, not as much." His answer was honest, if glib.

"Okay," she said, leaning into him more.

He tried to keep his breathing even and steady; it was ridiculous that this teenager-on-a-sweaty-
first-date level of contact had such an effect on him. He was a forty year old man, for chrissakes.
He'd pawed at Janine while she straddled his lap and ground down against him like a Birmingham
stripper and he hadn't felt much of anything except a vague, objective curiosity about the
physicality of it and a bit of oh yes, this is alright, but nothing to write home about. And he was
not going to superimpose Molly into that memory, as that would make things turn uncomfortable
very quickly.

Molly switched the channel again, giving them both something to focus on that wasn't whatever
was unfolding between them or the other thing that neither wanted to deal with at the moment.

She flicked through channels and paused seemingly at random, never staying on anything for
long. She stopped on a documentary about cave diving in blue holes in China and shifted a bit
against him. He bent his elbow and ran his fingertips over her hair. He wished she had let it down,
but she always kept it in a bun when she had Rosie. It was just as soft and silky as it looked.

He traced her hairline, then ran a fingertip over the shell of her ear; she inhaled sharply and oh, she
liked that. She liked that a lot.

"Sherlock," she said slowly, as if working up to something.

"Hm?"

She hesitated and he thought she was going to say something along the nothing—it's fine—
evermind spectrum, but then she surprised him by pushing on.

"This, um, this isn't exactly friends any more, is it?"
He didn't really know how to respond to that.

"No," he said after a moment. "I don't think it is."

She didn't say anything else, but she didn't push him away while saying *when I said I love you I meant from a distance and not like this*, either.

"Is that alright?" he asked when he couldn't take her silence any longer.

"I don't know," she said.

*How can you not know? You love me, you said it, you said it's always been true, so why wouldn't it be okay now?*

Ambiguity was never peace but an affront to the truth; even so, he couldn't push this because he would break it.

*It is what it is. It isn't a no.*

He went back to stroking Molly's hair, avoiding her ear (and he really, really wanted to find more spots like that, uncover all those secrets one by one, but he couldn't really follow that thought to its natural conclusion at the moment). Eventually she slipped her arm around his waist and leaned her head against his chest.

He quietly committed every detail to memory; it was something he never wanted to lose.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Friday, Saturday, and into Sunday.

Chapter Notes

I'm really blown away by the response to this so far. Before this I've only waded through WIP hell once before, many many years ago, and I forgot what a rush it is (and how nerve-wracking it can be) as each new chapter goes up. So once again, thank you all to everyone who's been following and commenting and recing; it makes me feel like a prom queen (no one has any pigs' blood up in the rafters waiting for me, right?). And another million thanks to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

Updates should remain regular for at least the next three weeks; Sundays and Wednesdays.

*

She read the news articles on her phone on the way in to work. Very little detail, they weren't mentioning any suspicion of criminality, no quotes from the parents, the Holmes name was left out of it entirely. For how long, though? With Sherlock, there was always the threat of the press. Even with the state of the world as it was, there were still slow news days and people hungry for a new scandal. He might only be a minor celebrity and his fifteen minutes may have passed, but maybe not. The possibility was always there.

Sherlock seemed fine. Ish. She wondered, not for the first time, if this new thing that was happening between them was just some kind of overcompensation on his part, motivated by guilt and fear and confusion more than attraction.

Was he even attracted to her? Sometimes she thought maybe, even years ago. There were times when his eyes would linger and she'd always brushed it off as him seeing past her, thinking. His looks had been affectionate, though, not really hungry. Sometimes maybe appraising, but she just always assumed he was cataloguing, not window shopping.

You have to stop this. You want it too much and you're letting yourself be fooled. It's a game he doesn't even know he's playing.
No, that wasn't fair. He wasn't that clueless when it came to emotions. He ignored a lot, but he did it for the same reasons she did, the same reasons anyone did. Sherlock could be a bastard, and a cruel one, but it was never intentional.

*That's the problem. He's careless. He'll crush you without a thought, then give you those big dark eyes and you'll just forgive him. He'll abandon you, just like Dad and you'll just forgive it, just like with Dad.*

Enough, she told herself. No use thinking about futures that might not even come to pass. And even if they did, her world wouldn't end completely.

Sherlock wasn't the be-all and end-all of her existence. She had Rosie's first birthday to plan, which would be something special, even if it was just an informal get-together. She had her job, which was always challenging and rewarding. She had her hobbies and her own interests and enough casual friends to tack up the sagging corners in her life.

Her daily self-affirmation over, she started in on her morning paperwork. Because she was who she was, she still sent an email to a friend in the West Sussex Coroner's office to inquire about Victor's remains, framing it as a matter of professional interest.

*"

"Mummy, it's me," he said when she answered.

He hadn't been this nervous about a telephone conversation since year nine, telling her he'd got sent down for bad behaviour and he was sorry. Usually she just spouted agonizing tedium like *are you eating* and *don't forget to wear clean pants*; at least that was comfortable.

"Sherlock? It's not anyone's birthday, is it?"

Sometimes he wasn't sure if she was acting, or she really was that far out to sea herself.

"No, Mummy, I just wanted to... talk."
"I see," she said quietly. "I suppose it had to come sometime."

"I don't want to talk about Eurus. Not right now. I saw the news and I wanted to make sure you and Dad were alright. That no one's contacted you or... bothered you."

"I expect your brother is keeping them away," she dismissed, a hint of bitterness in her tone. She was still angry at Mycroft.

He understood why, of course he did, but he understood Mycroft's reasoning, even if he didn't fully agree with it. Mycroft didn't deserve her ire, though. He felt like he was ten years old again. He didn't want to be in the middle of it. He pressed on.

"What about—" he hesitated, afraid of Mummy's reaction "—Victor's parents?"

They still lived in the village, he'd looked it up. Victor had been their only child.

"Sherlock, we haven't talked to them in thirty-three years," his mother said, her voice taking on a gentle edge.

"I see."

He didn't know what he'd been expecting, what he'd been hoping for. Forgiveness, probably.

"You sound tired, dear boy," she said, making it clear she was finished with the subject. "Is the baby keeping you up all night? They will do that."

"No, Mummy. I'm not staying with John," he hedged.

Part of him was embarrassed about it, twenty-five years too late for blushing and stammering over his first secret girlfriend, but awkward and uncomfortable nonetheless. Another part of him wanted her to know, wanted her to be proud of him for finding such a good woman.

"Oh? You're not back in your flat already, are you? I can't imagine you got it in order so quickly."
"No, I'm staying with another friend. Molly. Molly Hooper." He hoped his voice didn't sound too fond or breathless when he said her name.

"I've heard that name before. Was it... last Christmas? John's wife mentioned her, I believe."

He didn't remember the conversation.

"Mm. She was friends with Mary. They were good friends. She's Rosie's godmother. She's good with her. We had her all day yesterday, Molly always takes her on Thursdays. It was nice."

Christ, he was even picking up Molly's speech patterns.

"I think I should like to meet this girl sometime." It wasn't a request.

"She's hardly a girl, she's thirty-seven." Well, almost. In three weeks. It was a token protest, anyway.

"Did you meet through Mary?"

"No, I knew her before I met John. Only a month or so, but I've known her for years. She'd just finished her residency."

"I see," she said, probably graphing the trajectory of their relationship in her head. Literally. She'd have an equation for it by the conversation's end. "So she's a doctor?"

"Mm," he nodded, even though his mother couldn't see it. "Forensic Pathologist. She's a medical examiner at St. Bart's. We've worked together a lot."

"What about the secretary?"

"What secretary?"
"The one that was in all the papers. 'He made me wear the hat,' that one."

"Oh. My. God. For the last time, she made all of that up so she could make a pile of money and go start some lifestyle... blog... thing in the country. It was for a case, she wasn't actually my fiancée. And she was a P.A., not a secretary."

"They always just called them secretaries in my day," Mummy sniffed.

"Yes, and they also thought candles were cutting edge technology," he muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Mm," voiced her displeasure flatly. "As long as she makes you happy, that's all that matters to me. Though I am glad it's not the dominatrix."

He was going to kill Mycroft.

"I'm ringing off now."

"Do visit us soon, Sherlock." Her voice was soft, holding a note of entreaty universal to all mothers of adult children. *Tick tock.*

"I will," he said, meaning it, before disconnecting the call.

That hadn't been nearly as painful as he was expecting. No shouting, no accusations—he was proud of himself for having grown up.

He set down his phone and picked up his violin, a small reward after finishing one chore on the day's list.

He pulled a few sorrowful notes, thinking of Victor and Victor's parents, scribbled them down on a fresh sheet of paper on the worktop in the kitchen. It was better to compose there than in front of the window in the lounge; he didn't need to be watching for approaching clients at Molly's flat, anyway.

That music was for later, though. He had to focus. He had two days to finish the piece for Eurus.
Hopefully it would be the first piece of many.

He thought about trying to dredge up nice memories from their shared childhood, there had to be some in there somewhere, but he was afraid of getting lost in the Musgrave Hall in his Mind Palace; he had the most irrational fear of getting himself locked away in there just like Eurus. There was nothing about it to examine, it was about as silly as tiptoeing down the hallway to the loo in the middle of the night because otherwise a ghost or a monster might hear you. Childish.

He paced, agitation growing. He played old things he'd written that he'd never liked but never hated enough to delete, played phrases of pop songs that ended up getting stuck on a loop sometimes, played Bach out of spite because he did understand it, even if he was the stupid one.

He wanted a cigarette. Well, he always wanted a cigarette, but especially now.

His phone rang and he was overjoyed at the prospect of distraction. It was just the glaziers; the windows were ready for Tuesday. He texted the appropriate people, arranging a clean-up crew for the next morning. He texted John as well; Molly might be working (he'd need to check), but Mrs. Hudson could take Rosie for a few hours.

Bloody hell, it wasn't even noon yet.

*

She skimmed the email from John; he was thinking Sunday next for the party since it was a good day of the week for everyone. This coming Sunday was too soon and he'd forgotten about Easter entirely, did she think it would matter if they sort of combined holidays? He remembered church on Easter, but he didn't know if it was a thing he should do or if Mary would have wanted it.

It made Molly uncomfortable to be asked about these kinds of decisions. She felt like they didn't belong to her, that she was stealing from Mary. She knew that was silly, but she couldn't help it. She figured she better get used to it, though, since the decisions were only going to get bigger and harder as time went on, and John... John was her friend, but sometimes he just wasn't equipped to handle some things. It wasn't disinterest, exactly, and it wasn't because he was a man; there was just something broken way down deep that had been broken long before Mary, long before the war. He did his best, though.

They really were a family, she realized. It wasn't just a fantasy or playing; just getting on with it is about as real as life gets.
It was a bit scary, really. Okay, terrifying. Being alone, being outside everything was easy, without obligation. She could give of herself freely, without the tally sheet of debts and repayments that came with the ties that bind. It was a two-way street, though; she had to take what was offered sometimes, too. She had to ask for things for herself, and not just simple things like *can we switch the minding rota for the weekend, I'm on-call, or I just need an hour to get some paperwork finished.* She'd have to get comfortable being in a place where she could say *I really need a hug or please just stay away right now because I need time alone.*

She was fine with asserting her needs in casual relationships, even romantic ones. If she was being honest with herself, all of her romantic relationships had been casual. Even Tom, who wanted nothing more than to have a family with her. He had his own baggage; he was so keen on settling down that they both knew after a few months in that they were just settling.

She sighed, took a sip of her now-cold tea. Family.

As a child, her role was always the easy-going one, the confidant (it's just Molly, it doesn't matter if she knows). She was always in the middle, lost in the shuffle, and she used that to hide herself; since she avoided scrutiny she was free to create her own image for them, too. Molly; staid, responsible, reliable, compassionate, unassuming, practical. She's got a good head on her shoulders. Never makes trouble.

Now, though, with her own family—Rosie and John and Sherlock, in whatever capacity—she had to be more. She couldn't hide. She had to step up, grow up, and put on her big girl pants. When it got messy, and it would get messy, she'd take it as it came.

*We did church in my family, too, she typed. *I always hated it. What about Easter lunch instead? Nothing too fancy, but something a little more than casual, something nice for pictures. We can do it at mine, if you like, or whatever. I don't mind cooking.*

*It wasn't the kind of night he needed to be near Molly because he needed a lifeline; he followed her to bed all the same. She didn't kick him out, either.

Would she do that? Maybe. Probably, if she truly didn't want him there. Or was she tolerating it? Best save that for later examination.

She'd kept more or less to herself for the night, installing herself on the sofa with her laptop and a notepad. He'd picked away at music while he watched her working; it was fascinating. She was
the kind of person who planned with colour-coding and outlines and sticky-note quick reference tags like she was getting ready to sit exams. It was so tidy it made his brain itch, but he found there was a pleasing kind of symmetry to the contrast of how they externalized their thoughts.

She lay in bed, one hand resting on her stomach and the arm nearest him bent up above her head, one finger hooked idly around a bar in the headboard. Unconsciously he'd adopted the same position, only with his hand under his head.

"Do you think it would be... presumptuous to buy her an outfit? Not as a present, but a nice one for the party?"

*I have absolutely no opinion on this matter and I fail to see the relevance of it to my life* was about as diplomatic as he could muster; he wasn't actively trying to spend another night on her Spanish Inquisition Revival sofa and he would sleep on the roof before folding himself into the Scavenger's Daughter in the spare room.

At least he was getting to hear her voice. He liked her bedroom voice, it was quieter, breathier, closer. Soothing. Also sexy, but he wasn't going down that road.

"Why would that be presumptuous?"

"I don't know. I mean, something like that is more for a parent. But I don't know if John will think about it. It's not my place, but I still want this to be special."

"She's not going to remember it anyway," he offered, ignoring her self-deprecation. He understood why she felt that way, and he wasn't really the one who could dictate her place with Rosie.

"But we will. I think... When I was a little girl, Gran had these collage photo frames, pictures with all of the grandkids at birthdays and holidays, hanging in the sitting room behind her chair. And sometimes we used to just sit and look through her photo albums and she'd tell me about relatives, or she'd talk about the holidays I was too young to really remember. It was... I dunno. It gave me a sense of... family, I guess. Belonging. Anyway, I remember the outfits. Dresses I had. And then I'd see them on myself and remember them and it just felt... special." She shrugged one shoulder.

He was silent for a moment, considering. "Your childhood was certainly more of a benchmark for normal than mine was," he said offhandedly; *whatever you think is best, dear.*
She turned her head and looked over to him, her eyes sad, making sure he was okay; he never wanted her to stop looking at him, but he wanted her to stop doing that.

He faced her briefly, *it is what it is, I'm here right now.*

Her mouth relaxed, *yes, you are*; she turned back to looking at the ceiling.

"I'm afraid I'm going to push too much of my own childhood onto Rosie," she confessed.

"Fairly universal sentiment, I'm sure," he murmured, knowing this was the part where he was supposed to say something encouraging, reassuring, allay her fears. He had no inclination to offer bland platitudes, though, and past that he had nothing meaningful to say.

She sighed, fretting, probably trying to picture the kind of dress Mary would buy.

"Have Mrs. Hudson get her an outfit. John won't say no, she's the grandmother, and you won't be overstepping anything."

"I knew there was a reason I keep you around," she said. One corner of her mouth pulled into a smile; it was an expression she'd picked up sometime along the way in their friendship. One of his. He rather liked the way it looked on her.

"I can put up shelves, too," he said, suppressing his own smile.

*

*Today felt too normal,* she thought.

Well, normal being relative.

She'd woken up before her alarm, which happened often enough to be unsurprising. She'd taken a few moments to watch Sherlock sleep like it was something she did every morning, struck by how easy it had been to fall asleep next to him the night before. No sweaty palms or nervous giggles or *oh god I hope I don't fart in my sleep* moments of sphincter-clenching panic, just a mumbled
goodnight before she finally turned over, returned in kind.

She’d spent a few hours in the lab with odds and ends; strictly speaking she didn't even have to be there, but she always liked to wrap up a work week before the next began. She'd gone to the butchers to put in an order for the ham (she didn't like lamb, Sherlock was ambivalent, John would eat anything), then she’d shopped for things to make invitations and decorations as nothing off the shelf would do; gendered everything was absurd anyway.

She came home to an empty flat; Sherlock was at Baker Street supervising the clean-up.

She typed out and deleted four different texts before settling on Will you be back for dinner? Haven't started anything yet.

The response was immediate.

Won't be in until late, taking Mrs Hudson out to avoid eviction. SH

Will mention outfit for party. SH

She smiled at that; she was happy he thought it important enough to remember and to actually do something about. Really though, she shouldn't be surprised at all. He was sweet. It was something she’d always seen in him that other people tended to overlook.

She went back out, picked up some of the things she would need for the cake. She had a sandwich and crisps for dinner, did a bit of tidying, did laundry.

Really, it was a normal Saturday. Nothing had changed at all, even after everything had changed. She tried not to be afraid that this was just the calm before the storm, that the relative peace meant something new and even worse was coming.

Maybe Sherlock really was okay. Or rather, not in danger of relapse or complete mental breakdown. He was dealing with it in little, manageable pieces and distracting himself the rest of the time, which seemed like pretty healthy, normal behaviour.

Tomorrow, she thought, would probably decide the future. She hated the thought of him going back to that place, alone. His sister was psychopath and a genius; there was nothing to say she
wasn't faking catatonia because she wanted to lure him back.

And he was just going to walk in like a noble idiot, trying on the role of big brother thirty years too late for either of them.

No, that wasn't nice. And she was no one to talk as far as being a sister went.

Even so, she wished she'd never made the offer now to help, both to Sherlock and his brother. Everything in her was screaming that there was just too much potential for harm, too many ways something could go spectacularly wrong.

She got tired of spinning her wheels and decided to take a good hot soak and turn in early.

She was still awake when he came into the bedroom, his footsteps deliberately soft so as not to disturb her. It was just after eleven, according to the clock.

He moved about the room quietly as he emptied his pockets onto the dresser and took off his watch, plugged his phone into the charger, hung up his jacket.

"I washed your pyjamas," she said, not bothering to roll over. He'd probably already seen them at the end of the bed.

"Mm. Thank you."

The bed dipped as he sat to take off his socks and then his weight was gone; she heard him pulling his shirt from his trousers before unbuttoning it. Something about it felt so unbearably intimate, the way he was just casually undressing before bed in front of her. It was the act itself, she thought; before this she'd seen him nearly naked dozens of times. He'd never had much of a sense of modesty anyway, she thought.

"What time are you leaving tomorrow morning?" she asked.

She wasn't trying to start a fight. She wasn't.
"Seven-twenty, I should think, though traffic shouldn't be too bad at that time of the morning."

She heard him unzip his trousers, the rustle of fabric as he took them off.

"What time will you be back, do you think?"

He moved the pile of pyjamas at the end of the bed, stepped into the bottoms.

"The flight's about an hour. I have no idea how much time I'll have once I'm inside. They might give me fifteen minutes or I might have hours. Probably not before noon."

He came into her field of view as he walked past the bed to the bathroom, tugging his shirt down over his chest as he passed. He left the door open as he ran water from the tap.

She sighed, turned onto her back. Listened as he flossed his teeth. Brushed. Washed his face. One of the floor tiles squeaked as his weight shifted and she knew the exact spot the ball of his foot rested on.

Berenstein Universe, she thought. Except over there, he was just going to see his sister in a locked psych ward, not some prison fortress somewhere in the ocean, and the worst things they had to worry about were taxes and obnoxious neighbours.

"Will you text me as soon as you get back to London?" she asked as he slid into bed.

"If that's going to make you feel better, yes."

Well, no, I'd rather you not go, she thought.

"Thank you," she said, more clipped than she meant for it to come out.

Sherlock made a frustrated noise and rolled over to face her. "Why don't you trust me?"

Because you have the self-preservation instinct of a lemming, sometimes.
"It's not you I don't trust."

"You didn't see her, Molly. And she's my sister."

She hesitated, then gave in and just said what the hell she wanted to say. "Did you ever think maybe you're too trusting?"

"Me?" he said, incredulous.

"Yes you. You might not admit it, but you look for the good in people and when you see it, you latch onto it and it blinds you to everything else. I don't want to see you get hurt."

He looked like he was about to make some kind of cutting remark, but then he thought better of it.

"Molly," he started slowly, his tone too gentle, forced. "It's going to be fine. I'm not going to get hurt. Mycroft wouldn't have arranged it if he thought it would put me in danger and, loathe as I am to admit it, I do trust my brother. Mostly."

She closed her eyes, squeezed her fingers together where they were interlaced over her stomach. "I don't just mean your physical safety. I worry about you."

He already knew that, of course he did, but it still pained her a bit to admit it. It was about as close to I love you as she would let herself get again.

"I know you do," he said, his voice soft. She wanted to wrap it around herself like a blanket and pretend they weren't even having this conversation.

"I just want you to trust me. Please."

Famous last words, she thought.

She sighed, a concession. "I still don't like it," she added.
"Thank you." He leaned over and kissed her temple, letting his lips linger for a moment, then rolled over onto his back.

They lay in silence, no ground really taken or lost for either of them, but the resolution was just enough to let them sleep.

"Goodnight, Molly."

"Night, Sherlock."

*

She was trying not to stare at him, trying not to say anything, hunched up in on herself at the breakfast bar nibbling her thumbnail. It was a very, very old habit, something she'd broken herself of years ago, med school. He'd only see her do it once before, placing calls to every mortuary in the greater London area for the body of a Joe Bloggs, caucasian, 183 cm tall, 78kg, dark hair.

He wished she wasn't so worried. He was the one who should be nervous. He wasn't, though; just the opposite, in fact. He was calm, confident, ready.

He wondered if it would be alright to offer her some kind of physical reassurance, since words hadn't worked the night before.

He moved from his open bag on the sofa, rounding the worktop to stand in front of her.

She looked up, her eyes wide and dark, pleading without consciously knowing it. He felt the faintest flutter of nerves as he reached out and eased her hand down from her mouth, holding it. He used his free hand to brush a strand of fringe from where it fell into her eyes.

It was a fragile moment.

*It's going to be fine*, he said with his eyes, running his fingertips over her temple.
*She's not going to hurt me. She's not going to hurt you.* He caressed the side of her face.

Fortune favours the bold.

*I'll come back, it's just a few hours,* he promised against her mouth.

She didn't respond to the kiss at first, frozen—eyes closed, face pinched—but then she pressed back, weakly, until she could feel he meant it; all at once she relaxed into it.

*Don't leave me. This is only just beginning.* Her grip was like iron on his hand.

*It won't, I'm not ever letting this end and I'll spend the rest of my life proving it.* He squeezed her hand, parted his lips just the slightest bit.

*You better.* She broke the kiss, looked down, pressed her lips together. The wayward strand of fringe fell back over her eye.

He smiled with his lips pressed to her forehead, cupped the back of her neck. *I love you.*

He stepped back and she let go of his hand; she wouldn't look him in the eyes but at least her gaze lingered on his mouth for a second before she turned to pick up her mug.

He zipped up his bag and checked his watch; time to go.

She followed him to the door, watched as he slipped his coat on.

He straightened his collar, settled his coat. She took a step closer and put a hand on his shoulder; stood on tiptoes to kiss him once more.

*Good luck. I believe in you.*

He hadn't been expecting that.
Her smile was the sun breaking through clouds on an overcast day.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Sunday, Monday.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the love! It's intimidating, sometimes, but also invigorating. So big squishy Stella & Ted cuddles to everyone who's been kudoing and commenting and reccing and liking and reblogging, and to everyone who's listened to me moan while I'm lying on the floor, shouting into the carpet about how hard writing is and why don't words. And, as always, thank you forevers to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

(Also, sorry, I'm really behind on responding to comments. Soon!)

You guys are either really going to like this one or pelt me with rotten vegetables. Maybe both.

*

"John, hi," she answered her mobile. She capped the glue stick one-handed and set it aside.

"Is Sherlock with you? It's just, he's not answering my texts and he's not at Baker Street and I wanted to make sure everything was alright."

"He's not here. He went to Sherrinford this morning."

"Are you—Jesus. Are you serious?"

"Left just before seven-thirty." She pushed a die-cut paper flower around the worktop with her fingertip.

"Did anyone go with him? Mycroft?"

"I don't think so."
"I know he said he was doing this, but I had no idea it would be so soon. He didn't mention a word yesterday." John still sounded shocked, giving way to concern and annoyance.

"For what it's worth, I told him I thought it was a bad idea. You know him, though."

"Yes I do," he commiserated. Then, after a beat, "I suppose, since I have you on the phone, we might as well go over next Sunday. You're sure you don't mind all of it? Having it at yours, doing all the cooking?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I didn't want to. I'm ah, actually making invitations right now. I mean, unless you want to send them out, or just do e-vites or phone everyone..." she trailed off.

"No, that's perfectly fine. This, ah, this part of it isn't really my area."

She smiled at that; he'd probably got that turn of phrase from Sherlock.

They chatted for a bit about details; pinned down a time to put on the invitations, who would fetch Mrs. Hudson, if they should at least colour some eggs.

The conversation wound down; Molly thought John was getting ready to ring off, but then he inhaled in the way that signalled he was going to talk about an uncomfortable thing.

"Molly, I know this is all none of my business, but are you really alright with him being there? I can talk him into coming back to mine until his flat's liveable again."

"No! No, it's okay. It's, ah... It's good, I think. Confusing, but nice. Nice to have someone else around." She cringed, thinking of Mary.

"Good," he said. "Yeah. Good." She imagined he was bobbing his head, his face blanked and eyebrows up to his hairline, backing away from the conversation as quickly as possible while still maintaining casual.

With that bit of awkward over, they rung off; Molly went back to her rubber stamping and glue-sticking and gel-penning. She had to keep her hands busy.
He'd be fine, of course he would, he was Sherlock and he was always fine.

And if she had to stop to press her hands to her burning cheeks every now and then, remembering that kiss, no one was there to see her anyway.

She was pretty sure there was no going back now. The first kiss could be written off as just an impulse, a fit of mania, an expression of intense emotion that had nothing to do with romance. Even the cuddle, and the holding hands in bed... It was a stretch, but she could make room for it under the rug somewhere.

That kiss, though... She couldn't doubt any more that he felt something for her past just the close friendship they'd developed over the years, or that he was in any way unsure of those feelings.

And that? That was fucking terrifying. He'd finally opened up a door, invited her in, and she didn't know how to make her feet move off the welcome mat.

It was like he was no longer safe, untouchable like a doll in a glass case; now he was there to get down and play with and what would happen if she spoiled it? Maybe she only loved Sherlock as ferociously as she did because she wasn't allowed to touch.

All the normal things, the physical things, were easy with other boyfriends. Sex was just as much of a way to put a wall up as it was for recreation. When she was having sex, she could be outside herself, more of a body than a person; she gave what was expected and never really took what was offered.

Not that she'd just been some passive thing, limp as a dishrag on the bed, lying back and thinking of England. She loved sex, but it was always... more play than anything meaningful, even with the men she'd loved. Some couples jogged or did yoga together; she liked to fuck.

She wondered if she could go through with it, when the time came (if it came). She'd thought about it. Tried not to, but oh, how she had. His bed, her bed, his sofa, his tub, her shower, on a picnic blanket, against the teak-panelled wall of a Regency-era drawing room, on a billiards table—and that was just the best-of album. She had rooms full of imported singles and alternate b-sides and more bootlegs than Led Zeppelin in that collection.

He'd probably be slightly mortified if he knew.
Oh God, what if he was into it and wanted her to tell him about it? Or if he was into something weird, like stuffed animals or wee? And, well, the dominatrix. That part might not be so bad, she could do handcuffs and the like, just nothing hardcore.

Oh *God* stop freaking out, Molly. He might not even be into sex at all. And, seeing as he was only a little over a month into recovery from heavy drug use, sex probably wouldn't even be on the table for physiological reasons. So it wasn't something to worry about.

Steady on, girl. Stay the course.

*

**Terra Firma. See you in ~35 minutes.** SH

True to his word, he sent the text as he strode away from the helicopter.

He wasn't sure what he was feeling. Lots of things. He really just wanted to be near Molly to help him sort through them.

**Are you hungry? I can have something ready.**

She must have been sitting on top of her phone.

**No, but thank you.** SH

**See you in a bit. x**

Normally extraneous texts like that would be annoying, but the kiss at the end made it less so. As a rule, text kisses were twee and ridiculous, but Molly was now the single exception. He quite liked the symbolic reminder of it.

At least, assuming kissing was something they'd be doing more of. He hoped so. He enjoyed it
quite a bit before; with Molly it had been a new way of communicating. He couldn't wait to
discover the entire language of touch they would create between them. The prospect was thrilling.
With so many other options available, he wondered why humans bothered to vocalize at all.

"Yes, Mycroft," he answered his phone.

"Was there progress?"

"I wouldn't call it progress. Contact, at least. We're still working out the details, learning each
others' signatures. Different experiences, different connotations. I think it could work. Maybe not
get her to the point where you can exploit her as an asset again, but possibly back to the most
baseline measure of humanity." It was surprisingly refreshing to be honest without any of the
usual hostility he directed at his brother. He couldn't resist just the slightest dig, though; old habits.

"Nothing appears compromised?"

"No, but how would we tell? A week would be more than enough time for her to spin her web."

"Mm. Quite. And you? Have you come back as the Manchurian Candidate?"

"I'm the same as when I went in, though my fingers are stiffer. Is her room always that cold? Do
they do it to keep her lethargic?"

"At one time, she said she preferred it. It slowed down her metabolism so she could repair her
telomeres at a more leisurely pace, in her words."

"Ooooohkay."

"Yes, well, I suppose we'll see if that bears fruit in the next thirty years or so. I take it you'd like to
make this a regular arrangement?"

"Yes."

"I'll work out a timetable for you. I doubt weekly is in the cards, but biweekly could be doable."
Was one hour sufficient?"

"Two would be better."

"Two would mean a favour."

"Ninety minutes."

"Three separate instances of legwork and one no-questions errand."

"Mm... Steep, but deal. Legwork only extends within a six hour ground-travel radius."

"That business concluded, do give the future Mrs. Holmes my regrets that I cannot attend Sunday lunch or cake afterwards. Too many plates in the air already, as it were."

"Molly will be inconsolable," he said flatly.

"I'm sure you'll find a way, though I do suggest you read a manual or two before that endeavour or I fear Mummy will never get those so longed-for grandchildren."

"Piss off, Mycroft." It was his own fault, he'd set himself up for that one.

"I'll be in touch." It was a threat.

*

She was upstairs digging for ribbon that she knew she had in a box somewhere in the spare room when she heard Sherlock let himself in. She vaulted over the single bed (which truly served no purpose whatsoever, but Rosie would probably sleep there in years to come, so getting rid of it now made little sense) and out into the hall, trying not to gallop down the stairs to see him. She wasn't five, for fuck's sake.

One look told her everything; it wasn't good, it wasn't bad, it was both and nothing at all. She
relaxed; at least he had all his fingers and eyes and teeth.

He gave her a genuine smile while he hung up his coat, then bent down to kiss her a fond hello (and yep, that was a thing they were doing now).

She wasn’t sure what to say, really, so she started with small talk, which she knew he hated.

"How was the flight?"

"A little choppy in some spots. Could have been worse." He veered into the lounge and she went to make him tea.

"Do you want anything besides tea?" she asked, gathering up the envelopes, ink now dry, and pushing them to the side.

"No thank you," he said absently, beginning to unpack his things from the bag.

After the kettle was filled and on and the mugs ready, she realized the music was still playing from her laptop; she’d turned it down but not paused it when she’d gone upstairs. She really didn't want Sherlock to see her 'All Pulp, All the Time' YouTube playlist and realize that she really did have a type and it was a lot more 'Jarvis Cocker circa 1995' than 'sociopath.'

"It's fine," he said, coming to stand opposite her at the breakfast bar, but she’d already closed the tab. He looked over the invitations.

"Hand deliver or post?" he asked. He was avoiding something. Or building up to it.

(Oh, by the way, I accidentally left her cage open on the way out, she's loose in London, but it's okay, I'll have my private army of junkies and ne'er-do-wells escort you everywhere.)

"Post. It's always more special. Like getting a present."

True enough, he said with his eyebrows.
He shuffled through the envelopes, set them aside.

"I'm sorry for what she made me do to you," he started without preamble. "If there had been any other w—"

Molly was hamstrung; that sure as hell wasn't what she'd been expecting and she didn't want to hear it. She'd rather be given a gynaecological examination on live TV with Graham Norton presenting than relive that conversation, with him, right there, right then.

"It's fine, Sherlock," she cut him off, harsher than she intended. Softer, she continued, "It was the only thing you could do to save my life, which I ah, I do appreciate."

"It was a violation. She took something from both of us that wasn't hers to take."

She sighed, looked down at the worktop. This was where she'd been standing. It was about two hours too early in the day to be a week exactly, but close enough. She wasn't wearing the same thing, either, thank goodness.

"Can we please just not talk about it?" she asked.

"Why?"

She looked at him, disbelief writ clear on her face. He wasn't that dense. He was just too goddamn pig-headed to understand that people had different limits and his needs didn't always come first.

"Nothing's going to blow up again, is it? No snipers or poison gas or Ebola scorpions crawling through the air vents?" She threw her arms out, gesturing to the room.

He looked a bit hurt at that; good.

"No?" She let her arms fall to her sides. "Good. Then we don't have to talk about it. So let's just... not."

"I'm sorry you were ever in danger because of me."
"I don't want the apologies, Sherlock. *I don't want to talk about it.*" She enunciated each word clearly, loudly.

"Why not? The worst of it's already out in the open, it's not as though—"

"The worst of it?" she said incredulously. She shifted her posture from slightly-hunched and self-protective to *if you push me I'll knock you flat on your arse*; he'd done it now. "You don't even know the worst of it. You don't even know—"

She stopped herself, shook her head, closed her eyes.

Nope. She wasn't doing this. Not having this fight. He wasn't going to pull all those years of tenderness shot-through with self-loathing out of her like this.

She started for the lounge, intent on getting herself out of the corner; Sherlock blocked her with his body.

"Tell me, then," he said, looking down at her, his face young and open.

She moved to duck around him but he wasn't going to let it go; he stepped to the side and actually dared to put his hand on her arm this time.

*He must be suicidal,* she thought. The size of him, the closeness, was kicking her fight-or-flight instinct into overdrive and he was actively trying to take away the safer option. She might not be able to do much damage physically, but she could tear down a relationship faster than a truck full of dynamite when pushed. Ask Tom. Or about six other past boyfriends.

"Sherlock," she said, closing her eyes and gritting her teeth.

"Tell me what was worse," he said, and there was something there that she couldn't name; not urgency, not fear, not fatalistic defeat, but something like all of them.

*Fuck you,* she thought, looking him in the eye.
"The hope, Sherlock."

He flinched.

"Six years, Sherlock. Six years and you never once just said, 'I'm flattered, but I'm not interested in you like that.'"

His face was intentionally blank, but she could see past that; he looked like he was getting a dressing down from his primary school teacher and he was taking it because he knew just how naughty he'd been.

She wasn't finished, either. Not by a long shot.

"Six years of phoning me in the middle of the night with whatever question Google couldn't give you the answer to. Six years of listening to whatever was on your mind because you trusted me with it. Six years of always feeling like that next step closer might finally be the one that didn't send me back two."

He was studying a spot somewhere near her mouth, eye contact long-broken.

"You gave me a key to your flat two weeks after you moved in, barely a month after I met you. I gave you a key to mine after you picked the lock when I wasn't home, the fifth time you showed up unannounced in two weeks' time. You cancelled more of my dates than I can even remember because you needed to use my lab, even though you had free run of the place whenever you wanted it. You always said you needed my help. And that's just the tip of that iceberg."

She shifted back on her heels, away from him; he still held her arm loosely.

"So, I mean, that conversation? That was just another nail in the coffin—"

He grabbed her arms roughly. "Don't say that."

He looked like he was frantic, but in a far away place.
She froze; she could almost hear the ticking of the land mine she'd stepped on.

His hands relaxed on her arms, but he didn't let go.

"Eurus's test... She..." He closed his eyes, struggling to order his thoughts. "When we walked into the room, there was a coffin. My task was to deduce the occupant. I had all the facts, it seemed simple enough. Then Mycroft turned the lid around to show me the name plate and I knew it was you. It wasn't your name, it just said 'I love you,' but I knew it was you she was going to kill."

He spoke quickly, matter-of-fact.

"She doesn't play fair, Molly. I knew you were going to die. I can't even describe what the thought of that felt like. And then she told me what I had to do to save you and I had hope, because it was so easy. Just three words, repeated in a specific order. I. Love. You."

It was her turn to flinch.

"I knew it was going to hurt you, but the alternative was unthinkable. Having you alive and never speaking to me again was a price well worth paying. It should have been so easy, I would have phoned you after and explained and I don't know, brought you a Twix at the lab as an obvious bribe and everything would have gone back to normal."

Molly opened her mouth to speak without really knowing what she was going to say, either an oh, Sherlock, or a it would have taken more than a Twix, you prick, but he kept on.

"I resent her for knowing you better than I do. She's probably never met you and yet she anticipated your reaction when I've known you for six years and I never questioned that you'd simply go along with it."

"Ah, probably never met me?" she interjected this time.

"It's possible she chatted with you on a bus or in a queue or hell, anywhere. We'll figure that out later." He took one hand off of her arm and fluttered his fingers before resting it back on her shoulder in a gesture that was warmer, more intimate.
"The point is that she knew you wouldn't say it. She understood what it meant to you when I didn't. I knew for years that there was something, but I didn't think... especially after him... that it was..." He sighed, agitated.

"Then, I thought a door had closed and I wasn't happy about it but I thought it for the best since your feelings had changed. As long as you were still with me, it was fine. I haven't had many friends in my life, and even fewer still I can rely on so fully without fear of obligations or reprisals. You're the only person I've ever known that's never once asked anything of me, and whose friendship didn't start with what I could do for you.

"I'm losing my point again, but there's so much to make you understand, Molly, and this is... I'm out of my depth."

There was a plea in his voice and she was afraid to actually look at his eyes. Her anger had already ebbed away while he'd been talking, replaced with a hundred different emotions. He was the most exhausting man in existence.

"Finish the story about the phone call," she said. Part of her didn't want to hear it, but the other part did.

"There was a countdown timer. I tried to push you into it and you made me say it first," he said simply.

"Darers go first," she said, giving him the slightest hint of a smile, trying for light.

Glancing up had been a mistake; Sherlock had her fixed with a look so intense it could blister paint off the side of a car. Her heart rate sped up like she was about to be chased by a wild animal.

"I'm still sorry that that's how you had to hear it. If it's any consolation, the second one, the real one, was a surprise to me, too."

Heat flooded her face; the real one. It felt too good to be true, it was too good to be true.

"How, um, how long was left on the timer?" Even she wasn't sure why she was asking.

"Two seconds."
Her muscles went a little weak, then, realizing just how close she’d come to actually dying. There wouldn’t have even been enough left of her for a coffin.

Sherlock’s hands moved; one arm settled around her shoulders and the other the middle of her back, pulling her closer.

"There were three cameras in the room. I would have seen it."

"Oh god, Sherlock," she said, giving in to herself and sliding her arms around his waist, resting her cheek against his chest.

This whole week she hadn’t once thought about what she actually meant to him. What losing her would have done to him. What it would have been like if he’d have had to see it and know he’d been the cause.

"I never realized," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I wasn't planning on telling you about it. I knew it would upset you."

"You don't have to carry something like that on your own, Sherlock, you know that. Never with me." She shifted and craned her neck to try to see his face.

"I had to because it's you," he said, holding her tighter.

_He loves me_, she thought. _He really, honestly loves me._

She swallowed thickly, willing the tears away.

They stood like that for another minute, simply absorbing each other's presence, both drawing and providing comfort simultaneously.

Sherlock spoke first. "Molly, I don't want you to think I'm propositioning you, but I'd like to go
and lie down for a bit and I'd like if you were to lie with me. Would that be—"

"Yes," she said simply, disentangling herself and taking his hand to lead him through the lounge, up the stairs; she just couldn't bear to break contact.

*

"I think it went well today," he said eventually.

Molly tightened her arm around his back. "Good," she murmured into his neck.

If he weren't so wrung out, her breath on his skin would probably be enough to land him in an uncomfortable situation (though he wasn't sure if Molly would exactly object; she did quite like sex, by her own admission, numerous times). As it was, it just felt like perfection to have her in his arms, one of his legs slotted between hers, bodies pressed together from shoulders to stomachs. Even their breathing was synced.

To think, he'd been missing out on this feeling of closeness, completeness, for so many years. It had to be her, though. No one else could ever feel this right.

"I was right about the violin. It's the only way she can communicate now. She's like a child. She's regressed back to six years old, emotionally."

"And you can hear that in how she plays?"

"Mm."

"That's amazing. I mean, I understand music and emotion, a bit, but not enough to pick out nuances like that. It's just... amazing."

"It's just like any other language," he said, twisting his fingers through the end of her ponytail.

"I only took Latin in school. Seemed the most useful."
"Amo, amas, amat," he mused quietly; love in its proper context.

She shifted in his arms, pulled back, tipped her head up to kiss his chin.

There was a kind of submission in the gesture that ignited instincts he hadn't even known he had; he caught her mouth and kissed her in a way that told her *you're mine*. There was no urgency to it; it was an affirmation.

They kissed and kissed until he was dizzy with it, his mind filling up with all her responses, the things she asserted.

They only broke when his stomach rumbled; he'd skipped both breakfast and lunch. Molly laughed softly, pulled away.

"C'mon," she said. "I'll make you something."

*

It was like a dam had broken, she thought. He couldn't go five minutes without touching her. Little touches, nothing like pressing her up against the nearest available surface and ravishing her or anything; touches to the back of her hand, her arm, her waist, brushing shoulders, that kind of thing. It was overwhelming, but not really in a bad way.

The rest of the day passed like a dream; there was lunch, there was dinner, Sherlock helped her by making the paper bunting for the party while she did place cards. They went to bed together, kissed without the need for it to lead anywhere; she fell asleep with her head on his chest and her arm around his waist.

She woke up with Sherlock's hand warm on the skin of her stomach, one ankle hooked over hers. It was the first day of Spring and it was pissing down rain outside and everything was right with the world.

She spent most of the day fully expecting a catastrophe. The worst thing that happened was one of the students spilling a bottle of enzyme down his front and having to fill out paperwork for both Health and Safety and the headache of forms to get a new bottle.
Then she got the email back from the West Sussex Coroner's office. They couldn't tell her anything because of the Official Secrets Act, but they weren't going forward with an investigation and the remains were being released to the family on Wednesday. Off the record, it seemed a little bit suspicious; the property belonged to the family of the Sherlock Holmes, that one who was just in the news again for exposing Culverton Smith as a serial killer. Maybe there were more skeletons in that closet than was being let on.

She almost wanted to laugh at that; if only they knew.

She put herself into professionals-that-don't-gossip-except-when-they-do mode and sent back an email—Official Secrets, above my pay grade hahaha, what about the family? Just awful, are they having a funeral?—hoping to get more information, anything at all.

Apparently it was a slow day in West Sussex; ten minutes later she had another email with the name of the funeral director and a few lines about how sad the whole thing was. Cases with kids were never easy, but it was nice at least for the parents to finally get some closure.

That she could agree with, at least.

She sent back a bland Oh I know, but that's the job, blah blah and checked the clock before picking up the phone. She was going to have to lie, but it wouldn't be the first time she'd done it for Sherlock.

*

Molly was already home when he got back; he'd had four clients and three workmen at the flat, plus a visit from Dimmock and he'd seen Anderson skulking about in the street and at the cafe, probably trying to figure out the exact spot of the explosion. The fansite was mostly harmless, though he would have to have a word about Molly's appearance on it from now on. Anderson had been eerily perceptive in his speculation, almost to the point of garnering his respect.

She was in the kitchen when he came in, following the timetable she'd laid out for party preparations to the letter. Her sleeves were pushed past her elbows, a massive lump of dough in front of her on the worktop, music he vaguely recognized from two decades ago playing on the stereo in the lounge.

He leaned in to kiss her and it was the most natural thing in the world; it went on and on until she flailed her dough-crusted hands and made a little noise. He pulled back and smiled at her, taking in the colour in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes before twisting away to get a glass from the
cabinet and fill it from the tap.

"Dinner won't be ready for another hour," she said.

"I fear I'll waste away in the meantime."

He saw her smile in profile; it warmed him in a way he'd never imagined.

He kissed her again on the jaw because he could, took up the laptop from the coffee table and flopped onto the sofa.

"Don't lose my tabs," she called.

He waved her away; it wasn't as though he couldn't get them back from the history. He ran through emails, checked a few forums, scanned the news, boring boring boring, skimmed an article about unexploded ordnance found in Kent.

"Sherlock," Molly began tentatively from the kitchen.

He'd come to hate that tone of voice, like she was the one approaching the bomb.

"I emailed a friend the other day, and um, Friday... Victor Trevor's remains are being interred in the Barns Green Parish Church Cemetery at ten. They aren't having a service or anything and they're keeping the press away. I just, ah, I thought you should know."

*Oh*, he thought.

Molly's lips were pressed tight together; she concentrated too hard on shaping the ball of dough in her hands.

He wondered what he was supposed to be feeling, if anything.

"Oh," he said, realizing some kind of verbal response was expected.
"I was thinking if you wanted to go, I could have Rosie for the day if you wanted John to go with you, since it's a holiday and everything and the surgery's closed."

Did he want to go? He didn't do funerals; other people's grief made him uncomfortable. It wasn't actually a funeral, though. Private, but that never stopped him before.

He wondered if seeing the bones put in the ground would mean something; he was as unsentimental about death as Molly, probably more so, but there was also an undeniable power to symbolism and ritual.

He wasn't sure if it would do him any good. He hadn't carried the grief for decades like Victor's family; he'd only remembered Victor for a week and the recovered memories were only fleeting scenes and impressions.

What might come to the surface if he were to go?

"Sherlock?" Molly was watching him, her hands momentarily paused in their work.

"Will you go with me instead?" he asked, a bit surprised by the finality of his own decision.

She nodded. "If that's what you want. Of course." She gave him one of her softer smiles, it's okay; though he was unsure whether she was trying to communicate that to him or to herself.

He wasn't sure if it really was what he wanted, though obviously some part of him did. And Molly thought it a good idea since she'd suggested it, so it probably was.

Molly relaxed and went back to shaping her dinner rolls; he relaxed and turned on the telly, muted it.

He scanned through the channels; nothing on. He got off the sofa, wandered over to the breakfast bar, watched Molly instead.

Sometimes he used to watch her work in the lab. When she forgot to be self-conscious, she was a graceful creature, elegant in her own way. She was the same in the kitchen. He supposed there
was some overlap, cooking was just applied chemistry, after all.

There was more to it, though, something else entirely. In any culture, any place, any time, the hearth was central to the home, the family. Food was the most basic expression of love, a daily renewal of the most primal bond of humanity.

He wondered if she cooked like this for the fiancé-who-shall-no-longer-be-named. If they had dinner parties with their mutual friends, none of whom he'd even known existed. If she'd prepared a meal for his family.

He hated the jealous turn his thoughts had taken; he hated even more that someone else had almost robbed him of this with her and that he'd been stupid enough to oh-so-graciously step aside and wish her well because he'd truly wanted her to be happy.

"What's that look for? Do you, ah, not want breadsticks with dinner?"

"Marry me."

It seemed his brain had a lot of catching up to do with itself today.

Her lips formed a question and she blinked deliberately, her face flushing. "W-what?" she finally managed.

He'd already said it, he couldn't go back on it even if he wanted to, which he emphatically did not. He drew himself up taller, looked her in the eye. "Marry me. It doesn't have to be right away. I'll get you a ring."

"You're seriously asking?" she said slowly, putting down the dough in her hands and groping for the kitchen towel on the worktop without breaking eye contact.

He reached for it, handed it to her. "Yes," he said simply, beginning to feel uneasy.

In a normal timeline of events, eight days (or four days, or one day, depending on the marker used for timekeeping) did seem a bit rushed. Six years, on the other hand...
Her mouth opened, no sound came out.

"You could just nod or shake your head," he said, retreating behind droll to cover the fact that he thought he might have just royally fucked everything up.

She laughed, then, and he saw the yes in her eyes before she ever said it.

"C'mere," she said, reaching for him, laying a hand on his jaw, the other on his neck.

He met her halfway, slid his arms around her waist, kissed her like there was no tomorrow.

Never had he so looked forward to the prospect of tomorrow, and the day after, and after.

"Yes," she said against his mouth, finally.

He smiled, changed the angle of the kiss. Her cheek was wet.

"Are you crying?" His own eyes felt a bit (ugh) dewy.

"I'm happy, you muppet," she laughed against his mouth.

So am I, he thought. And what an odd thing.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Monday night, Tuesday.

Chapter Notes

I'm not a gushy person, but thank you so much to everyone for reading, reccing, reblogging, leaving kudos and comments and just being generally wonderful. :D And thank you once again to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

This is the chapter that finally earns the rating. Took me long enough.

*

*Oh my God. Molly, what are you doing? What the actual fuck are you actually doing?*

She pressed her hands to her face before rinsing the shampoo out of her hair.

She'd just been making bread of an evening, as you do, and suddenly she was engaged to Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock Holmes, the love of her life, the one she'd always been waiting for.

Sherlock Holmes, who was in her bed, right now, waiting for her.

Well, possibly not waiting for her. He'd been reading one of her books when she finally came upstairs. He'd waited up, though; it was already gone midnight.

Since she was losing Friday, she'd had to shift her timetable to compensate, staying up later to get what she could do this early finished, despite *life-altering personal events* like *Sherlock bloody Holmes* asking her to *bloody marry him.*
She should be shaving her legs. And trimming the hedges. At least her armpits were good.

Oh dear God.

They'd only kissed so far. And slept in the same bed, but not even a grope or a fumble.

So he wouldn't expect her to jump right into sex, right? It's not that she didn't want to, Jesus Christ did she want to, but faced with the actual prospect of it actually happening, and happening a lot *til death do us part*...

Oh God.

*It's just Sherlock*, part of her mind argued. It sounded a lot like Mary.

Hahahaha, *just Sherlock*.

Yes, *just Sherlock*. He makes bad jokes and weird faces and he snores. He's socially awkward and annoying and sometimes you just want to wrap your hands around his neck and squeeze. He's already seen you cry, he's already seen you angry, and he loves you. He loves you, Molly Hooper.

That was the terrifying part. What if it was bad? Not just mediocre, but down-in-flames failsex?

*Then it is. You do it again. You keep doing it until you get it right. Do you really think he's that fickle?*

He'd never really talked about girlfriends, she didn't think he'd ever had many anyway, only the two in the time she'd known him (and they might not have even been real girlfriends, but she wasn't going to think about them at all because she'd start comparing herself and she'd been down that road before too many times), so he probably wasn't very sexually motivated to begin with.

She still had the niggling fear that this was all a whim, a lark, he'd had a scare and he was overcompensating; she pushed it away. He was here right now, with her, and it was only a collision course with disaster if she let go of the wheel.
She stepped out of the bathroom in a cloud of coconut-lime steam, hair wet, legs unshaven. Sherlock marked his place with a folded scrap of paper that might have been her original bookmark (*see? annoying*) and set the book aside as she checked her alarm and turned off the lamp.

"Wait, turn that back on," he said. He picked up his phone from the bedside table.

She turned the lamp on again, wondering what he was doing.

"Lie down and fan your hair across the pillow," he said, eyes on his phone.

She gave him a questioning look; he glanced up, *just do it, quickly as you please, it's for science.*

*Whatever,* she thought, giving in. Since her hair was wet, it was more seaweed than L'Oreal, but he didn't seem to care. He moved the phone to his left hand, then rearranged a few pieces and laid his empty hand on her hair palm up. He looked at the whole thing through his phone, and *oh, he was going to take a picture.*

And people thought she was the weird one.

"Now hold my hand. No, other one," he added when she reached across her body with her right hand.

He twisted his hand so his palm was flat against hers; she finally got what he was going for. If he were on top of her, caging her with his arms, holding her hands during sex, that's what it would look like. He snapped two pictures, one with the flash on and the other with it off.

She wondered if that was the kind of thing he liked. Must be, if he wanted pictures of it. She hoped. Because if it were for something else, like a case, that would be a thing they'd have to talk about.

"What, ah, exactly is this for?"

He looked away, guilty.
She waited him out.

"Irene Adler," he began.

Well, there was a bucket of ice water.

"Your ex-girlfriend."

"No," he denied. "She was never my girlfriend."

That clarified exactly nothing.

"Still an ex, though," she said, slipping her hand from his so she could sit up.

He tilted his head and squinted one eye, fully aware he needed to tread carefully. "Not exactly."

"Present tense, Sherlock." She didn't like where this was going; old, old insecurities were threatening to resurface. They'd have to do the sexual history thing at some point, but she was really hoping she'd at least make it on the list before then.

He looked away. "We text sometimes."

"Oh," she said, feeling cold.

"The picture is how I want to end it. In my defence, I hadn't thought of it at all until you were in the shower or I would have done it sooner."

It should make her feel better, she thought. It didn't. Something nasty and possessive coiled in her, reminded of years of pettiness directed at a woman she'd never met because she'd just waltzed in and snatched up what Molly had coveted; she'd be ashamed of her jealousy later.
"Not that picture," she said. "Give me your phone and lie down."

Sherlock looked at her curiously but did as he was told.

If she stopped to think about it, she'd lose her nerve. She moved closer, swung a leg over him, straddled his stomach.

He looked up at her, surprised, intrigued. His shoulders were hunched and his hands lay awkwardly on his chest.

"The last time I was in this position I had my airway cut off with a length of rebar," he said, trying for casual wit. He was nervous. Good.

She took his right wrist, not roughly, but not gently, either, and moved his hand until it was in the same position hers had been. She held it in place while she thumbed on the phone, then shifted her weight until she got the angle she wanted.

His free hand moved onto the top of her thigh, heavy and hot through the thin cotton of her pyjamas. She tried not to let it distract her.

She gripped his wrist, locked her elbow, and leaned her weight down hard enough to visibly press his hand into the mattress, to make his fingers curl. She let a few strands of hair fall over her forearm, the ends just brushing against his skin.

She took the first picture, then shifted an inch to the side and took a second.

Yes, that was it.

She flipped the phone around for him to see. "That's your picture," she smiled.

She couldn't believe she'd just done that.

Neither, it seemed, could Sherlock. He looked stunned; his eyes were wide, lips slightly parted, a hint of colour in his cheeks. He swallowed, glanced at the screen, looked back at her.
She relaxed her grip on his wrist, shifting her weight off of it. She really couldn't believe she'd done that.

"That, ah, I didn't just... That didn't hurt, did it?" she floundered.

"No, no, it didn't hurt," he replied a little too quickly.

"I just thought, ah, she's a dominatrix, right? I mean, that should send the message pretty loud and clear," she said, very aware that she was still sitting on him, and that there was really no graceful exit from that situation.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, I think it should suffice. Would you like to do the honours or shall I?"

"Oh," she said, not realizing he intended to send the picture right away. She let go of his wrist and handed him the phone.

He sent the text one-handed, his left still on her thigh.

Probably should be getting off of him now, she thought.

She interlaced her fingers in front of her, her knuckles brushing his stomach; she tried to keep more of her weight on her knees.

In a minute, she thought.

He twisted and set the phone on the bedside table; his right hand came to rest on her other thigh.

He looks like he doesn't know what to do, she thought.

I don't know what to do.
She disentangled her fingers and let her fingertips brush under his ribs, then higher.

Sherlock’s breath caught; his hands reflexively tightened on her thighs.

She slid her hands up his chest, leaned down. She could feel his heart thundering under her hands and she knew something was different; she let the moment stretch before she slid her hand up to his shoulder, higher to cup his jaw.

She leaned in to kiss him, and yes, this was a new kind of kiss from him; hotter, open-mouthed, seeking. She felt it from her scalp to the tips of her toes.

His hands slid from her thighs up to her hips. One slipped under her shirt and splayed over her lower back. His fingertips began to circle patterns over the skin; it was her turn to gasp, to shift her hips back, down to settle over his. She could feel his cock hard against his hip and she realized he wasn’t wearing pants under his pyjama bottoms. The spike of arousal was sudden, sharp, a depth charge in her gut.

She sucked his bottom lip into her mouth, bit down gently. He kissed her back harder, slid his hand from her hip under the waistband of her pyjamas and grabbed a handful of her arse through her pants. She let go of his lip with a tiny moan; his tongue darted along her bottom lip before he nipped it.

"Sit up," he breathed into her mouth.

She didn’t want to break contact but did it anyway. He followed her up and she grabbed handfuls of his shirt; he got the idea and pulled it over his head, cast it aside. He surged up, kissed her while sliding his hands under her shirt, asking silently for her to reciprocate. She had a moment of nervousness, afraid he’d find her wanting compared to other women; she pushed it away. If his breathing and the insistent press of his cock against her inner thigh were anything to go by, he wasn’t going to have a problem with how small her breasts were.

She drew her shirt up and his lips were on her chest before she even had it over her head. She threw the shirt somewhere at the bottom of the bed and buried her hands in his hair, grinding her hips against him while she drew her nipple into his mouth. He played with her breast with one hand while he slipped the other under the waistband of her pants, his long fingers skating over the top of the cleft of her arse, teasing the spot over her tailbone that made her arch and shiver.
She pressed kisses to the top of his head, inhaled the scent of him, scratched her nails over his shoulders. He kissed up her chest, over her collarbones, her neck; she grabbed his face and crashed her mouth down against his.

"I need you," she panted, so far gone she didn't care how she sounded. "I need you inside me, I need you to fuck me."

He choked off a noise and kissed her, completely gone. He withdrew his hand from her pants, rolled them over so she was on her back and he was pressing her into the mattress, grinding against her while he kissed her like he was lost in the desert and she was the only oasis for days.

She pushed him back, hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her pants, wiggled them and her pyjamas down over her arse, worked one of her legs free, then the other; Sherlock seemed disinclined to do much but kiss her neck and suck on her earlobe. Apparently it was all up to her, so she worked her hands between them and skated her fingertips over his stomach, just as she'd always imagined doing, then undid the drawstring of his pyjama bottoms. She eased them over his cock, down his hips until finally he got the message and got them the rest of the way off himself.

She went back to caressing his stomach, loving how the muscles jumped under her fingers, how his cock twitched and left a wet trail against her hip.

"Condoms?" he asked, mouthing over her collarbone.

"IUD," she said, hoping that was good enough. She'd left all the condoms at Tom's years ago, since they'd stopped having sex in her bed once Sherlock had started using it and there'd been no one since. If it were anyone else, she'd insist they use one, but she'd run Sherlock's bloodwork herself, multiple times. She probably knew the state of his body better than he did.

"IUD," he repeated, like she'd answered a question he should have known the answer to.

Then, "Molly, you should know I've never—" he paused, swallowed, "I've never done this before. So if it's not good—"

Wait, what?

"You—? Never—?"
"No."

"Not even with—?"

"Not anyone. Ever. Just you."

She didn't know if she was more freaked out or turned on by the admission; add *virginity kink* to the list of things she didn't know she was actually into. She'd unpack that later.

She ran her nails lightly over his stomach, down to the line of his pubic hair; she swirled her fingertips up over his cock before fisting it lightly, shifting her hips and squeezing his sides with her knees to guide him. She rubbed the tip between her labia, positioned him, rolled her hips just enough to encourage him to push forward.

He found her mouth as he breached her, slow and unsure, and Jesus was that hotter than she expected. He pushed until he met resistance; she moved her hips, pulled back, let him push forward again.

"Mm, like that," she whispered.

They worked out a rhythm, slower, unsteady, building as he relaxed into the feel of it. She kissed his face, his jaw, his mouth; encouraged him with breathy moans and *yes* and *deeper* and *God you feel so good*. She slipped her hand into his where it was flat on the bed next to her head. He buried his face in her neck, kissed the skin under his mouth.

"I love you," he said, his voice raw and deep with passion.

She moaned; it was fucking perfection. He was perfect.

"I love you," she answered, her lips against his temple. "Always, always."

He exhaled harshly, snapped his hips against her.
She was close already, months of going without and the overwhelming physicality of him more than enough but she wasn't quite there, the angle wasn't right for her to get off hands-free. She rectified that, slipping her hand between them, feeling where his cock was driving into her before brushing her fingers over her clitoris, rubbing herself to the most intense orgasm she'd had in years, maybe ever.

She was still going when Sherlock's hips stuttered and he fucked harder, without any semblance of rhythm; she felt his cock jump inside her as he came, setting off a fresh wave of pleasure that could have been a weak orgasm or a strong aftershock. Sex after thirty was awesome like that.

He breathed raggedly against her neck and she twisted her face to kiss him, words completely unnecessary and inadequate to communicate just how profound the entire thing was.

Eventually he pulled out, rolled off of her just enough to pull her along with him to lay on their sides. He ran his fingertips over the side of her face, kissed her sweetly.

"Is it always like that?" he asked, a genuine question.

She couldn't help herself, she laughed. "First time out of the gate is never like that. Trust you to be a fucking sex prodigy," she said, kissing him.

"Isn't 'a fucking sex prodigy' a bit redundant?" he joked, obviously well-pleased with himself.

"Smartarse," she grinned.

He giggled and she kissed him again and again until the kisses tapered off and they settled comfortably in each other's arms.

"I'm going to be dead on my feet tomorrow," she mumbled sleepily; it had to be close to one and she had to be up at 6:30. She'd have to skip packing lunch in favour of a quick shower, too.

"Really, mortuary humour, even in bed?" he teased, smiling against her forehead.

"That one wasn't intentional. Now go to sleep."
He hummed and kissed her again. She fell asleep with his breath tickling her face and his heartbeat strong under her hands.

*

"I need a favour. A very small one."

Mycroft shuffled papers on the other end of the line; there was a shift of fabric and the click of Andrea's heels as she left the room. Busy; unfortunate.

"Continue."

"I need my address changed."

"Do it online like a normal person." Annoyance; he'd find out about it later on the news.

"Not Sherlock. William."

He'd always thought it an unnecessary layer of subterfuge, only put in place to protect their parents. When he'd started to make a name for himself, really make a name, everything from birth to early adulthood was sealed. All his records—school, medical, criminal—were under William S. S. Holmes; Mycroft had handled the paperwork making Sherlock (no middle name) Holmes a legitimate person. Sherlock Holmes lived at Montague Street and later Baker Street; W.S.S. Holmes' last known address was in Chelsea with his brother. Taxes were automatically deducted from a sizeable trust fund left to him by Uncle Rudy that remained otherwise untouched, passport renewals and the like were kept up to date; in all other aspects it was a name that belonged to a ghost.

Using that name, his actual birth name, would afford Molly a degree of protection and keep her from any scrutiny she would come under if she were to marry Sherlock Holmes. It wouldn't necessarily be a secret, but it wouldn't be in the public record for all and sundry to find, either. And if children happened, they would have that protection as well.

There was more to it; by marrying under that name, he was giving her all of himself. His past, his secrets, the thread of his innermost self that had remained unchanged despite all his efforts to remake himself into who he wanted to be. Not Sherlock Holmes, the detective, the legend, but the deeply flawed man of flesh and blood she'd always seen.
"I see. Have you set a date?"

"No. And you're not to tell Mummy and Dad, either."

"I suppose another family dinner is in the immediate future."

He groaned. It was an inevitability, but he really didn't want to put Molly through that. He supposed he'd have to meet her family sometime as well, all nine hundred of them if all the step- and half-siblings were involved.

"Quite," Mycroft commiserated. "I'll arrange the changes so you can go and fill out the necessary paperwork by week's end. And Sherlock, do stay away from any transportation hubs for the next few days. Consider it payment for the favour."

The line went dead; something big must have slipped by Mycroft to have him that concerned.

Funny. A month ago, Mycroft would have been the last person he would have told about anything to do with his personal life, let alone something that personal. Now he was the first.

Was it strictly necessity? No, not strictly. He could have texted John by now, could have mentioned it to Mrs. Hudson. It wasn't that he didn't want them to know, but he hadn't discussed it with Molly, and that seemed like the kind of thing one should discuss with one's significant other. Making decisions by committee was something he was going to have to get used to, he supposed.

The realization hit him then; the full scope of his future and the enormity of it had him outside of himself for a moment.

Molly Hooper.

He was going to marry Molly Hooper. He was now half of a whole. One side of a balanced equation. Fifty percent of an us, a we, an ours.

He wasn't alone.
Not anymore, and for good this time. Not being left behind, not pulling away to protect himself.

He was loved. Not just as a friend or a brother or a son, but as a man. As a partner. She knew him, body and soul.

The sheer scale of it stole his breath; he was glad he'd shut himself up in his bedroom to make his phone calls while the glaziers did their work.

He lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling. It had only been a week and his bed barely felt like it belonged to him. His flat felt less like home and more like a place he used to live, which was absurd. All his things were still there (well, what hadn't got damaged in the explosion and subsequently binned) save for some clothing and his violin.

He'd already made the decision, though, that morning when Molly had staggered her way to the bathroom half-asleep and naked as the day she was born; he wasn't going to ask her to move in to his flat. It was too dangerous, too public. There'd never been a distinction between his work and his private life before; there'd never been a need for it. Now there was, and he'd adjust accordingly.

Everything felt too simple, too right, the way ahead too clear. He supposed it had been hard-won, though, considering.

Even he knew when not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

He let himself luxuriate in the high of being utterly, ridiculously, hopelessly in love like a teenage girl for another two minutes before calling the family solicitor and making all the dull, boring, necessary changes. Lasting power of attorney, should such and such etcetera, Molly gets it all if his ticket gets punched (except for the bit that was already set aside for Rosie for things like school fees and a gap year and whatever else she'd need to turn her into a productive member of society), no prenup because if they ever got divorced it would be his fault and he'd deserve to lose everything anyway.

Then he texted Molly because he really was a fifteen year old girl and he missed her. It wasn’t as though it were the first time he’d done that, either.

I told Mycroft because I needed him to do legal things. Also, stay away from tube stations and get a cab home. SH
His phone buzzed almost immediately; apparently she wasn't elbows-deep in a cadaver.

*Still can't believe it took you six years to see it*, Mary said inside his head.

*It's like a Magic Eye picture. At least once you've seen it, it can't be unseen,* he defended.

**We're not already legally married now, are we?**

He smiled at that; she had no idea. Mm, no, actually she did, she'd heard enough over the years, even if she'd never experienced the full force of Mycroft Holmes. John got threats in a warehouse, Molly got posh cake and family secrets. Truly a singular woman.

**Old-fashioned way for us, I'm afraid. SH**

**Suits me.**

He grinned like an idiot.

**Btw, takeaway for dinner. We're moving furniture tonight (and not in the fun way).**

He got a little breathless at that, remembering the night before. He'd done well to keep it in check all morning. Tried not to think about it at all because it was still overwhelming. He'd always known the act itself was powerful, but he'd severely underestimated the upper limit of that power.

**Well, maybe after.**

She would be the death of him. And what a way to go.
"We need new furniture in the bedroom," Sherlock said, wiping his fingertips on the paper napkin next to his plate before unlocking his phone.

She felt her eyebrows creep up to her hairline, fork paused halfway to her mouth.

"Mine won't fit next to yours, dimensionally and aesthetically. I was thinking something vaguely from the 1920s, deco, nouveau, clean lines, that kind of thing, a happy medium between both our tastes," he said, swiping on his phone before holding it out for her to see. "I'm partial to this walnut set, the Waterfall style goes with my bed from Baker Street and I think that it's a bit sturdier than yours, though your headboard has its own appeal for entirely different reasons; at any rate, I'm not opposed to mixing and matching. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm not looking at you like anything," she said, still trying to catch up with the fact that Sherlock had opinions about furniture. It shouldn't surprise her, he had opinions about everything, but jointly owned furniture...

She saw him pull back and close off like he sometimes did when he realized he'd fully misread a situation.

"It's just... I hadn't thought about things like furniture," she floundered, trying to reassure him somehow.

"You were engaged before. Isn't that a thing people do?" Defensive. Bollocks.

"It wasn't something we ever discussed." Because every time the subject of her selling her flat came up, it ended in her going back to said flat for the evening, no matter what the time. Funny, she'd never considered Tom moving into hers at all.

Apparently, though, Sherlock had decided that's exactly what he was doing. In a permanent sense, by the sound of it. Which was... really okay. Good, actually, because she liked his flat, but she wouldn't want to live there. And finding a completely new place together held zero appeal. She liked her home, and she liked how Sherlock fit in it.

Well, that was easy. Eheheheh, she tittered inside her own head.

Sherlock was looking at her, trying to puzzle something out. "You met his parents and had a dog together," he said, like those were things that came later in whatever order he thought a relationship should take.
"Tom had a dog. I just... interacted with her. And took her to the groomers."

By the way his eyes moved, she could tell he was rifling through files in his Mind Palace.

"Poodle mix?"

"Bichon Frise."

"That's not a dog, that's a stuffed animal."

She gestured at him with her hand and gave him a look that said see? exactly, you know what I'm talking about, like he'd settled an argument she'd never actually even had with Tom. "If you're going to have a dog, have a dog. Like, I don't know, a Retriever. Or an Irish Wolfhound."

He raised an eyebrow at that.

"I like big dogs. We had a Great Dane when I was growing up. And a German Shepherd, but she died when I was five so I don't really remember her. And a Boxer, but I was only around her for a few years before I left for Uni."

"I was always partial to Irish Setters. Don't think I'd want one now, though." She knew exactly what that faraway look meant.

"Because of...?" She hoped the conversation wasn't going to take a turn that would end up making it a bad night.

He nodded, but didn't look like he was about to have a moment. "I think I'd want something more along the lines of an Australian Shepherd or a Border Collie. Maybe a Bloodhound. Toby's a nice dog, docile."

She'd heard that story, from both Mary and Sherlock. Mary's version was funnier.
"Just so we're clear, you're not just bringing home a dog one day. Even if it's for a case."

His eyebrows drew together and he looked ready to protest; his face morphed into a grudging yes, *I suppose you're right, slow is tedious but cart before the horse*; He down-shifted and tapped the phone screen again. "This one only has one bedside table from the original set, but it's got a vanity table; I've always liked the aesthetic of a vanity table despite the impracticality, though you could probably make use of it since you do hair... things and the mirror is bigger than the one in the bathroom..."

*Welcome to the Sherlock Holmes Experience*, she thought to herself. *Postcards in the gift shop, complimentary straight jacket at the end of the tour.*
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Tuesday night, Wednesday.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for reading, reccing, kudosing, reblogging, liking, commenting and messaging and just being awesome :D And thank you once again to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

Only a few more chapters to go after this. I'm planning on ending it with 14, which is being written right now. So there may be a delay in posting in the next week or so; I'll announce any schedule change ahead of time.

I'm really behind on my comments again, I'm sorry. I'll get to all of them. They mean the world to me <3

* 

They never got around to 'the fun way' of moving furniture. Probably for the best, since he was exhausted by the end of the evening and he most likely would have ended up embarrassing himself. Molly fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow; he wasn't quite as lucky despite his body being tired.

He was no stranger to insomnia. It was worse when he was forced to keep to a 'normal' schedule; he suspected he would have a diagnosis of non-24-hour sleep-wake disorder if he ever cared to pursue it, which he didn't. His circadian rhythm could range anywhere from twenty to thirty-eight hours, varying with circumstance and season. Twenty-six hours was typical.

He wondered if it would affect his relationship with Molly. It seemed an inevitability. Most previous flatmates hadn't lasted long enough past his other habits to be bothered by it; it only bothered John when it disturbed his own rest. He didn't share a bed with John, or even the same floor, though.

He'd only had just the one nightmare since last Sunday; if his sleep became too erratic he'd probably have them more often, if not worse.
He sighed, turned over, watched the rise and fall of Molly's chest while she slept.

Sometimes he wished he'd been born closer to average. Not a dullard, but slow enough to function as other people did. If trading the speed and capacity of his brain would take away all the rest, the mania and the depression and the hypersensitivity and the OCD and the neurosis and and and, would it be worth it? If only.

Mycroft never seemed to suffer from it. Maybe he'd just got lucky and only got the useful parts, had more of Dad's inner stillness.

Dad had always been Mummy's anchor. She might have given up her career, her passion, but it had never loosened its hold on her. Sherlock was well into his twenties before he recognized that some of the things he did while being held hostage by his brain were things his mother did; certain postures, certain facial expressions, repetitive movements, sudden shifts in mood. He never talked about it with her, though. The distance was too wide and too old by then.

If it was this bad for him, what must it be like for Eurus? Sherlock himself had always been able to find some flotsam to cling to, some thread of human connection however thin. It was how his homeless network got started, way back when; buy someone a sandwich and they were your friend for ten minutes, long enough to take a breath before going back under. Eurus, though... She'd only been surrounded by guards instructed to ignore her. She must have had tutors at some point, doctors; no one else, though.

Did she ever have dreams, hopes, aspirations? She must have, at some point, though probably they centred around escape and revenge.

It was so hard not be angry at everyone on her behalf. There had to have been something someone missed; Uncle Rudy was the last person her care should have been entrusted to, murderer or not. All his unique proclivities aside, he hadn't been a very good person. More cold-blooded than Mycroft, to be sure.

He sighed, rolled back onto his back. He froze with Molly's sharp inhale; he'd woken her.

She rolled onto her stomach, stretched, turned her head to face him. She struggled to crack open her eyes. If he didn't feel so guilty, it would be ridiculously endearing.

"Are you alright?" she asked.
"Mm," he nodded. "Sorry for waking you. Go back to sleep." He leaned over, kissed her temple, smoothed her hair.

*Don't go back to sleep. Stay awake and talk to me because you're not close enough even when you're right next to me.*

She reached out her arm, laid her hand on his chest. "I love you," she said, no more than a sleepy mumble, and it was as though she'd stopped his heart with the gentle pressure of her fingers, the way she'd read his mind.

It was only the second time she'd said the words (he would never count that first time, since it wasn't actually for him and he had no conscious memory of the way it sounded anyway, too intent on keeping every molecular bond in his body from dissolving from the sheer relief of it); he felt like he couldn't breathe from the enormity of it, the crushing press of all his feelings.

"Mm, you too. Just going to pop downstairs for a bit so you can get back to sleep," he said, snapping himself into autopilot.

"M'kay," she hummed, rubbed his chest, withdrew her hand.

He slipped out of bed, closed the door softly behind himself, leaned against the wall and tipped his head back, inhaled, exhaled.

This was why he'd shut himself off for so many years, wrapped his heart in chains, barbed wire, iron bands. It was just so much, and it didn't stop. He wanted to cry, he wanted to scream, he wanted to curl into a ball. He wanted the white noise of a fix.

If Molly had any inkling just how fucked up he really was, she would leave him.

*Sherlock.*

Mary's voice, in his head.

*You've got to stop this. Really. It might be who you used to be, but this isn't the man you are. This isn't the man you want to be. For her or for yourself.*
It's going too fast. I can't think.

And it's never going to slow down. It just gets faster and faster until it stops, and it's never enough. How do you take control of a skid?

He was in his Mind Palace; behind the wheel of a car, night, headlights hitting a curve in the road. Mary, placid in the passenger seat.

What if I can't react fast enough?

How do you take control of a skid, Sherlock?

Feet off the pedals, steer into it.

Exactly. Steer into it.

He did as he was told, pulled the car even just as a lorry roared past, horn blaring, moving fast enough for the drag it created to rock the car on its springs.

Mary, I don't—I don't understand.

You will. Just keep your hands on the wheel.

She vanished; he struggled himself out of his Mind Palace and down the stairs.

He picked up his violin, began to play bits and pieces of Szymanowski, Corelli. He should play Brahms, Mendelssohn, something soft and sweet to filter up the stairs and under the crack of the bedroom door, but there was too much else right then and he needed to get it out.

He twisted around the new (temporary) layout of the lounge, his head filled with furniture and dogs and birthday cakes and a ring, she needs a ring and forever, forever won't be enough and so many never agains he could choke on them.
The music helped, it put things in the right places, carried them to their shelves, drawers, rooms on invisible currents until his mind was clear; soft yellow lighting fading jagged shadows into nothing.

*

She crept down a few stairs, sat, watched him through the banister.

She remembered being eight years old and taking up a similar position, watching her parents' shadows move across the rug in the lounge as they hissed at each other in the kitchen, tearing down their marriage when they thought she and Ellie were sleeping.

She wondered if it would always be like this, if sometimes he would go places she simply couldn't reach.

At least there were fewer of those places now than there had been before.

He was trying. He was really and truly trying.

He always did try, though, right from the start. It's why she stuck around so long. Why she couldn't walk away. He never deliberately hurt her, always tried to make it right when he realized what he'd done.

She held back a sigh; she'd never been caught as a child, she wouldn't get caught now.

Were they making a mistake? Too far, too fast?

She was supposed to be the practical one, the sensible one. She was a romantic, but not the type to let herself get swept away.

Who was she kidding? She'd got pulled out with that tide years ago.

It was so much easier when her feelings were unrequited. She could choose to ignore the smallest
things, she could choose distance and breathing room, she could choose what she hid because she belonged only to herself.

It was never like this with anyone else. She'd never felt so lost in a person, so close to drowning. She'd only been kicking puddles her whole life and thinking it was love; Sherlock was the ocean.

It was the music, she thought. It was pulling things out of her, thoughts and emotions and memories that she wanted to keep folded away.

Really, she shouldn't be eavesdropping on him like this. He needed his private time, just like she needed hers. She couldn't keep worrying that if he needed to be away from her it was because he wanted to suffer in silence somewhere. And even if he did want to, he was entitled to it. She sometimes needed her own heartaches to remind her how sweet life could be.

And, all things considered, life was sweet. Incredibly so. Things were moving fast, but it was working. They were working.

He was okay. He wasn't going to go careening over the edge. She could hear that in the music as it softened, became less frantic.

She got up, went back to bed. She left the bedroom door partway open because he'd know anyway, he always knew that kind of thing.

He'd come back to her when he could. Always had done.

*

"Did she say what she was wearing?" Mrs. Hudson asked. She held out the skirt of the dress; she liked the colour, but the cut and the line were too mature. Babies should look like babies, round and soft, not svelte.

"That is why we're here," he said, fidgeting. He was twitchy this morning, looked tired. She wondered if he and Molly had already had a row.

"Molly, dear." Really, he wondered if he was being obtuse on purpose. Then again, Molly didn't strike her as the sort to look for a man's approval of what she wore. Probably never mentioned it.
She moved on to the next rack. Grey lace; honestly, who puts a baby in grey lace? Or brown with leopard accents. She tutted.

His face went slack and he had that look in his eye; he was going to say something dry, deadpan, a little mean-spirited.

Then, wonders never cease, his brain actually worked before his mouth. "We aren't in the habit of discussing her wardrobe choices," he said, only a hint of snark.

Honestly, she thought Molly always looked put together when it was an occasion. It wasn't as though she had to dress to impress for her job. She liked Molly's blouses, they reminded her of back when.

"Don't they do smocking anymore? I always loved smocking on a little girl," she thought out loud, fingering a purple ombre tulle cloud that would be murder to clean. Then, to Sherlock, "Why don't you phone her for me and ask her?"

"Why? Isn't that something you can cluck about later?"

"For pictures, Sherlock. They should coordinate."

"Women and pictures," he muttered to himself, exasperation in his tone. He had his mobile out already, though, thumbs flying over the screen.

The way his eyes softened just the slightest bit made her heart warm; he hadn't said anything, but these last few days something had changed in him. Not on the surface, but something deep had finally clicked into place.

She'd thought for the longest time it would be John. Really, she never understood why he was so hung up on labels. Young people were so uptight about things. It didn't surprise her that it was Molly, not really. That Christmas all those years ago, when he'd been so horrible to her, but he'd tried to make it right; it had been the sweetest thing to watch, like a little boy growing up. If not for that rude noise and the rude woman who made it, who knows how things would have ended up after that night?

She hoped he had the sense to sever ties there, finally. She'd heard that text alert more than once
over the years and his back would go ramrod straight, shamefaced like she'd caught his hand in the cookie jar.

Sex shouldn't ever be a weapon. She supposed it was a sign of how much times had changed. There was nothing wrong with a woman having a bit of power in the bedroom, but sex should be about both people. Or, well, all parties involved, but having a bit of fun with a few others wasn't the same as sex-sex.

And poor Sherlock, so naive to be taken in by that. He really was so very young and fragile sometimes.

She moved around the rack, taking down a bright pillowcase dress in a cherry print with contrasting red ruffles; someone had just abandoned it there in the special occasion dresses. Lazy. She checked the size; 12m, a happy coincidence. She folded it over arm; it would make a nice dress for the summer. That was one present sorted.

And if it was a subtle hint to Sherlock that maybe a tiny version of Molly toddling around the flat in the future wouldn't be unwelcome, then who could blame her? The more the merrier. Rosie should have a sister. Or, well, close enough.

"She says, 'It's a bit fifties, straps wider at the shoulders and Queen Anne neckline, brackets, "modest," knee-length, full skirt, light blue on top and bottom looks like a flower garden. Cream cardi.' Honestly, it's three more letters, Molly, the text already continued to a second one. Cardigan."

"Oh, that sounds nice. She isn't afraid of colour."

"No she is not," he agreed, enunciating and clicking the t, his eyes wide and eyebrows high. It was mostly a show for her benefit; she knew he liked it.

She'd seen the way he'd looked at Molly when she'd shown up at Baker Street when they'd gone to see John and Mary after they'd got the baby settled, and again before Rosie's christening, and about ten other times she'd popped round when she wasn't buried under layers of coats and jumpers. Not a leer, but enough to keep his eyes from his phone for an extra two seconds. A bit dumbstruck, maybe.

He was texting again; he probably had no idea he was smiling.
Two shops later, she finally found the dress, plus shoes and a cardigan and a headband that matched the coral and red floral embroidery. And little lace eyelet socks, because tights were a nightmare with nappies, no matter how cute they looked.

"She says it's darling," he said, not looking up from his phone. He'd sent her pictures of the entire outfit without prompting.

"Are you finished now, or do we need to comb through yet another shop for the perfect—" he wiggled the fingers of one hand, the other still flying over the phone "—child... thing..." He abandoned the thought entirely, smiling down at his phone.

She wondered what Molly was writing. Either something about a dead body or what they'd get up to later, if how happy he was was any indicator.

"I still need a card, and I should get some nice wrapping paper. What about you? Have you got her something already?"

"Molly got her books and clothes. She had me sign the card."

"She's not your personal shopper, you know," she reminded. Molly wouldn't let him take advantage too much, but a word here and there to set him straight wouldn't hurt, either.

"Nor my maid, nor my personal chef, nor my mother, etcetera etcetera, yes, I'm aware. I didn't make her do it, she suggested it be a joint present, who was I to argue."

That was nice, she thought. She remembered the first time she'd put her name next to Frank's. That had been on an offshore account in the Bahamas, but swings and roundabouts. It was nice they were that kind of couple.

*

"Ugh, no, not this one," Sherlock said, dipping the cotton bud in the green dye before making another series of dots on his egg.

"I like this one. It was in Dirty Dancing."
"And that's exactly why not. Next."

"You've seen that?"

"I'm sure you'll be amazed to know, I have—in fact—seen a film. Astoundingly, more than a full dozen." His sarcasm was light, playful.

Surreal. Berenstein Universe. Had to be.

How else could she explain him sitting at her breakfast bar, colouring eggs while bickering over a playlist for background music for Sunday?

"Dirty Dancing, though?"

"Janine made me watch it."

"Well, that's that one ruined," she muttered, clicking over to the next song.

"You're jealous," he said. It was a half-question.

"No I'm not." She was. Irrationally so.

"It was fake, unlike your previous engagement. I wasn't actually going to marry her," he said slowly, like he was looking for confirmation that she understood that. Not quite like she was a dimwitted child, but not far off. There was a bit of an accusation in there, too.

"Not sure that that makes it any better," she said, bristling a bit. She didn't like thinking about how he could be so terrible sometimes, how he used people. It brushed up against the thin thread of very old, very deep paranoia she kept buried, that maybe this wasn't actually... No, she wasn't going there.

He rolled his eyes like he was giving in to something.
"It wasn't totally fake. Everyone else was in a relationship, she was nice enough, and I was... curious, so it wasn't only a means to an end. Though, mostly a means to an end. It's not like I was the only one using her to get to Ma—" He cut himself off short, looked guilty.

"I apologized, and she got rich off of it, so we're more or less even," he covered quickly.

There was obviously something he didn't want her to know, but why? Something was very off about that. "Who else was using her?"

"I'd rather not say." He wouldn't look at her.

"Why?"

"Because I'd rather you went the rest of your life not knowing."

And that... that was weird. She didn't have enough to even speculate, but he was protecting someone. Well, her, evidently, because he thought she'd be safer not knowing. So who did he have to protect her from? Not Magnussen, for very obvious reasons. Someone else powerful or dangerous? No, he wouldn't have enough emotional investment to keep that a secret.

Her, Molly. He was protecting her from herself because it was someone she knew.

Someone she knew that knew Janine.

There were only two names in the overlapping section of that Venn diagram, and she was pretty certain as to which one it was.

He saw the moment the penny dropped and he turned his face down and away.

"Why?" she repeated.

"Molly, once someone tells you a secret, they can't unsay it. I can promise you, you'll gain nothing by knowing."
"You said you would never lie to me, Sherlock. Not even to protect me."

She never claimed to be a person who fought fair.

His jaw clenched; he finally set the egg aside and peeled his gloves off before sitting back in his stool, putting as much physical distance between them as he could without standing. He rested his forearms on the worktop, interlaced his fingers.

"Magnussen knew who she was. He knew everything about her past. I'm sure you have your suspicions about the exact nature of Mary's life before she met John, you're not an idiot."

"Thanks," she bit, keeping most of the anger that was welling up inside her in check. For now.

The muscle in his jaw jumped again and he looked off to the side, annoyed. "She intended to terminate the threat to her life, her family, so she befriended Janine."

Something awful occurred to her, then.

"Sherlock," she said slowly, and oh, he knew what she was going to ask, she could see it in his face and there was her answer—

"Who shot you?"

He looked her in the eye, then, a challenge and an I told you so.

"Jesus Christ." She felt like the floor had just fallen out from under her.

"In her defence, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and she wasn't actually trying to kill me. You're a doctor, you know the physiology—"

"Shut up," she said; colder, more vicious than she'd ever been to him.
To his credit, he did.

She didn't know what made her feel sicker; the fact that he was trying to justify it or the fact that her best ever female friend had fucking shot—

She peeled her gloves off, dropped them on the worktop. Hopped down from her stool.

She started to cross the lounge, go for her coat, get herself some space and some air; she stopped before she got to the door, spun around to face him.

"Eighteen months. A year and a half, Sherlock. All that time and you never..." She shook her head, looked away. "But I guess I didn't need to know, right?"

"No, you didn't," he said evenly, getting out of his chair. "And it's not because you didn't matter, I'm well-acquainted with your frankly moronic tendency for self-depreciation. Mary Watson was your friend, and you were hers. In the four months John was living in my flat, how much time did you spend with her?"

She remained silent, glared daggers because fuck him for the point he was making, fuck him for not letting her have the choice of forgiveness back when it still would have mattered.

He pushed on though, because that's what he always did. "If you hadn't have been there, how much harder would it have been for her? How many friends did she have, who else could she have relied on? Who else would have supported her through her pregnancy with the very real prospect of single motherhood looming? And what about you? Who would have been there for you after your engagement ended? Or while you worried yourself sick over me when I was in hospital—"

"She put you in fucking hospital!" she yelled.

"And she could have just as easily put me in a pine box six feet under," he snapped, his temper finally flaring.

She closed her eyes, clenched her fists, bit back on something truly horrible before it came out in the worst way possible.
She turned again, intent on her original destination.

She heard him coming up behind her. "So help me God, Sherlock, if you follow me..." She let the threat hang; she didn't have a follow-through, but she didn't need one. He stopped.

She grabbed her coat off the peg and slammed the door behind her, glad she'd kept her shoes on from earlier in the evening when she'd taken the rubbish out. She was halfway down the street before she even registered the wet early-spring chill in the air; she put her coat on.

Mary Watson, Mary fucking Watson, had shot Sherlock. More things made so much sense now, like why she and John had split for those months. She'd never wanted to get into it and Molly didn't want to push her, so she just did what she could.

And Sherlock. Acting like she'd done him a fucking favour by shooting him in the fucking liver.

And they'd all kept it from her. Naive little Molly, still not part of their club.

It added another dimension to everything; Sherlock became a murderer because of Mary. And John. And Rosie.

Angry tears spilled hot over her cheeks. She didn't bother wiping them away. This wasn't the same kind of heartsick, helpless, gutted anger she'd felt toward Sherlock when he'd started using again, and then again; this was white-hot rage burning through her. Part of her hated him. Hated Mary, hated John.

She walked and walked and walked; she'd left her phone (and wallet, and keys) behind, so she had no idea how long she'd actually been outside. She only had a used tissue and a little over £2 in loose change in her pocket.

She felt awful. She hated Sherlock for being right, too; she wished she didn't know. The truth was always best, except when it really, really wasn't.

She remembered every terrible moment of the night he'd been shot; Mrs. Hudson had phoned her and she'd waited and waited at Baker Street, praying to every power in the universe she didn't believe in to just let him live, she'll never ask for another thing. John phoned and she almost cried with relief; she went right to the hospital because she had to. Some of it was the guilt that her last
interaction with him had been harsh words and physical abuse, but most of it was just needing to see him, needing to know he was still breathing.

His first word upon waking was 'Mary.' She and John had both been in the room at the time. She'd never given it a second thought; people said all kinds of things when coming out from anaesthesia. And then John had gone off to phone people and Molly had tried so, so hard to keep herself together. Sherlock had groped for her hand, held it while watching her through glassy, barely-open eyes, even spared her a small smile to thank her for being there.

And she'd been stupid enough to let him alone with Mary. John had been out making more phone calls and she'd desperately needed a wee and a drink by that time; she'd only popped off for a few minutes. It would have been more than long enough, and there were any number of ways Mary could have made it look like a complication from the injury or the surgery, if she knew what she was doing. And of course she did, because she was... Whatever she was, Molly still didn't know.

Why hadn't Mary ever just outright told her what she was before she met John? It wasn't as though Molly had anyone to tell. It wasn't as though she couldn't keep a life or death secret. It wasn't as though she hadn't broken laws and violated professional and personal ethics countless times (well, not countless for the laws, but more than once and she didn't like to think about it), it wasn't as though she was some innocent, oblivious to the way the world worked. Maybe she could have even found a way to help, distasteful as the idea was.

Unless Mary wanted to keep her as far away from it as she could because she didn't want Molly to be involved in any of the sticky bits. That would be like her. Or, well, so Molly had thought; Mary hadn't ever been the kind to heft her baggage onto someone else, even if they were willing to lighten the load. That had been refreshing, since Molly was always the agony aunt with everybody else, but Mary had never expected it from her.

Christ.

She kept walking, the same thoughts circling round and round in her head, the weight of betrayal a thick knot in her throat she just couldn't swallow. At least most of the anger faded away to numbness.

A car pulled up alongside her, slowed. She didn't look over. Great, street harassment, just what she needed. Or else Sherlock had sent someone to fetch her, like she couldn't find her own way home in her own bloody neighbourhood, where she'd lived for six bloody years.

"Molly," John called, and of course Sherlock would phone him.
She halted, looked over. He eased into a full stop, pulling even with her position.

"Look, I know it's a lot, but will you at least get in the car? He's beside himself and he's got Rosie and I'm not entirely comfortable with that situation, even if he is my best friend. I think we've all got a lot to talk about."

"Ya think?" she said, quiet and bitter. She'd never had cause to shout at John like she had Sherlock, but there was a first time for everything, which he might soon find out.

"Molly, please. I'll take him back to mine, just come back with me instead of being out here."

She fisted her hands at her sides; she wanted to be stubborn, to tell him to fuck off, but she was a goddamn adult and she was cold and tired and it was her bloody flat anyway.

Her shoulders sagged and she shook her head, then rounded the bonnet and got in the car.

John was silent as they drove, save for an unnecessary "I brought your bag," as it had been sitting on the passenger seat when she got in.

The door to her flat was unlocked; she was met with the sound of Rosie wailing. Instinct had her off to the lounge in a heartbeat.

Sherlock was pacing with her, a little too fast to be soothing, gently patting her back with a litany of quiet, "Rosie, please, shh shh shh," as she kicked and clawed.

He didn't even look at her, the arse. Rosie screamed harder when she saw Molly, trying to twist herself away from Sherlock while reaching for her.

Molly dropped her bag, shucked her coat and tossed it on the dining table. She put her arms out for the baby without looking at Sherlock's face at all; they made the bare minimum of contact while Rosie was handed off. Sherlock retreated to a spot closer to the fireplace.

"Hey, sweetie. Shh, it's okay. Everything's okay, I know it's late and I know you just want to go back to bed, I know, I know, I know," she soothed, holding her close and swaying in a familiar motion. She had to get herself calm if she wanted Rosie calm.
Babies always knew, she thought. They were perceptive in ways adults had lost. Sherlock was just too upset to be safe; Molly was always safe because she had more practice putting everything aside for someone else.

Rosie grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked and Sherlock was back across the lounge in a flash, gently disentangling Rosie's hand and sweeping Molly's hair over her opposite shoulder before stepping back again.

He just wanted to do what he could to help, to start making it up to her. It didn't change a thing.

John watched uncertainly from the doorway, licking his lips, pressing them together, trying to figure out what to do next. Take his kid and run to escape the inevitable blast wave? Herd Sherlock into the car and let her stew? Start talking and maybe make it worse? She saw him discard all the options, preferring to demure and let her speak.

She went to the kitchen, put the kettle on one-handed. The worktop had been cleared and the eggs put away, her laptop disappeared to parts unknown. He'd even washed all the cups and bowls that the egg dye had been in.

Still didn't change anything.

Rosie calmed, finally; Molly felt the last vestiges of her anger ebb. If everyone had a baby to hold when they were pissed off, the world would be a much quieter place. Well, not really, but they helped, at any rate.

John eased himself into the lounge, pulled out one of the dining chairs and sat. The sofa was too far away with the new arrangement. Sherlock hovered at the other end of the table, the one closest to the fireplace. His fingers were wrapped around the top rail of one of the chairs, flexing intermittently as he shifted from foot to foot.

She finally risked a glance at his face; he looked stricken, contrite, agitated.

She ignored the way it tugged at her, pushing away the desire to just go to him, smooth it all away with gentle touches.

Three mugs, autopilot. The silence stretched on, unbearable.
Finally, finally, she got her words together.

"I do understand why, I'm not a moron—" Sherlock winced, good "—but I'm just... hurt. And I think I'm allowed to be, considering."

"You are," John said simply. "Just— Maybe I'm only defending her because she's dead, but she was your friend, Molly. That was real. Aside from me, you really were the person closest to her. And she didn't let people in."

She set her mouth in a grim line because she didn't want to say anything she might regret later. She looked to Sherlock; his eyes were fixed on the table in front of him.

"What about you, Sherlock? Anything else you're keeping from me?"

His fingers tightened on the chair, jaw clenching. "No," he said simply.

She really wanted to believe him.

*

"Why the fuck did you tell her?" John started once they were back in his flat.

The entire car ride back had been silence; John had made the decision to leave Rosie with Molly because he obviously intuited something Sherlock himself didn't, that Molly would need to not be alone tonight, or possibly because he didn't want his daughter to be there when he beat the tar out of her godfather. Again. Deservedly.

"I wasn't planning on it, we were talking about Janine and it just happened."

"Christ, Sherlock."

He rubbed his forehead, paced John's lounge. He was so utterly fucked.
"And you, of all people, didn't think maybe, just maybe, this was something you should lie about?"

"I've learned from your example that lies aren't a solid foundation on which to build a relationship," he sneered.

"Don't," John warned.

He didn't. "I promised her I would never lie to her. I did try to warn her that she was better off not knowing."

He was sick to death of impossible choices and no-win situations.

He sighed raggedly and threw himself down on the sofa; he was so fucking tired of all of it. It was like the Doppler effect; six years of the crests and troughs of a normal relationship compressing into something unbearable the closer they got.

John was either deciding his next words carefully or, more likely, having a conversation with Mary inside his head.

"We should have told her from the beginning," he said finally.

"Why? So another relationship could be ruined?"

"So she'd at least had a chance for it not to be," John said, face blank over anger that was now mostly self-directed.

It was like a punch to the gut; he would have preferred it to be physical. John was right, he hated it when they were right.

"Well, I suppose I'd better get comfortable on your sofa, as I'm fairly certain at this point that the engagement's off and I currently have no home to return to for the next few weeks. At least I managed to make this one last an entire forty-eight hours," he said bitterly.
Drama queen, Mary rolled her eyes.

This is your fault anyway.

Really not, she said before disappearing again.

Some of it was. Not enough, though.

"Engagement." It was a question.

Bollocks. So much for the 'talking about and making decisions together' lark.

"Mm."

"Monday."

"Maths skills sharp as ever," he said, staring at the ceiling. He didn't want to see whatever look was on John's face so he didn't have to pretend later that he hadn't.

"There was an actual Q and A component to it, yes? Not like how you just moved into her flat. You did ask her and she did say yes. Unambiguously."

If looks could kill, John would be a greasy smear.

"Yes. And, surprisingly, she seemed rather happy about it at the time. Temporary insanity, I'm sure."


"Likely no longer in order, but ta," he said, pulling his face into a terrible mockery of a smile, eyes back on the ceiling.
"If you really think she's going to walk away that easily, after putting up with your shit for six years, then maybe you shouldn't have asked her in the first place."

He rolled his eyes; he knew what John was doing, but he didn't want to hear it. He didn't need false hope. He risked a glance up anyway; John was smiling, his eyebrows drawn together in that way that made him look confused as to why he was even smiling in the first place.

"You. Getting married." He shook his head.

"You got married. My parents are married. It's a thing people do," he said sounding too defensive for his own liking. "It stays off the blog, by the way."

"Yeah. She's already saddled with you, she doesn't need a target on her back besides." The joke was a little more strained than John intended; it wasn't a pleasant truth but a truth all the same and both of them knew it.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Thursday.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all once again for the overwhelming response. I'm getting closer to the end now, and it's keeping me going :D And to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch, thank you all so much for your hard work. <3

This chapter is a double chapter because there wasn't a good spot to break it, so I'm going to treat it like two chapters and skip updating Wednesday. Sorry! But it's long, so you can just stop reading halfway through and go back to it Wednesday. Only three more to go after this, I think, with a possible epilogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*

Not having to get up for Rosie's arrival, Molly had herself a bit of a lie-in. Rosie let her go until almost eight; Molly finally woke up to happy, loud babbling that sounded a lot like she was trying to say the word 'baby'.

Molly rolled over onto her side with a smile; it was a nice way to wake up. She really loved Rosie. She'd be lying to herself if she denied the tickle of jealousy towards Mary she'd felt sometimes, even if it was only fleeting.

Now, when she thought of her friend, there was a cold, hollow spot in her heart. Not as big as last night, but it was still there.

Mary had shot Sherlock. She'd trained as a nurse (if that were even to be believed); she had to have known that bullets don't reliably do what people think they do inside the body. There had to have been something else she could have done, some other way.

Why the hell hadn't she just shot Magnussen? Sherlock wouldn't have said anything, John certainly wouldn't have—
Unless John hadn't known about her past, which, duh, why else did they split up?

She really needed to hear the rest of the story, she thought.

From John or Sherlock was the real question. Oh hell, did Mrs. Hudson know? Most likely, though she probably wasn't as clear on all the details and didn't care anyway.

She understood why John hadn't told her; before Mary died, they hadn't been that close, and after... He needed someone to care for Rosie. Which she didn't begrudge him; she knew she was more than just a babysitter. She'd have Rosie every single day, if she could.

Actually, frustratingly, she understood why Sherlock hadn't told her, either. First, he'd had absolutely no reason to because she wasn't his girlfriend, she wasn't anything to him but a friend. A good one, she liked to think, even then, but just a friend.

Second, he'd been acting in Mary's best interest as well as Molly's, just as he'd said last night. He cared enough about the both of them to want to see their friendship preserved, even if at that point, he probably cared more about Mary. Though, maybe not. Molly had already started feeling like they'd been becoming closer by that point (close enough that even Tom had taken issue, and he was one of the most affable men she'd ever gone out with).

Whatever.

Third, it was in Sherlock's own best interest to keep her in the dark. If she'd have abandoned Mary, Sherlock's loyalties would have been divided even more than they had been. As it was, they'd each had custody of a Watson and sometimes even traded information like spies. Hell, she'd even passed Sherlock a folded up sonogram picture once across the table in the cafeteria at Bart's when he met her for lunch one day like it was for the KGB.

Which had also been one of those weird things that had started happening around then, just having lunch, as friends do, before following her back up to the lab to do whatever experiment he was going to do.

Yes yes, brain, Sherlock Holmes and Molly Hooper, long time coming, etcetera. We're talking about Mary now.

God, sometimes she even thought with his inflection.
Rosie fussed; Molly realized she was probably both wet and starving. Now that the tooth had come in, she was back to her normal, happy, easy-going self. She might be a ball of energy, but she was a sweetheart, too.

Really, Molly had always thought her disposition had taken after Mary. It hurt to think that, now, considering.

Sherlock was right; she'd have been better off not knowing, probably.

She tried to put it all out of her mind. Rosie wasn't Mary, and Rosie would never know anything unfavourable about Mary if she had any say in it.

*

**Will John be staying for dinner again?**

The text came at ten. It was enough to be going on; if she was asking him rather than John, that meant they were still a single working unit rather than two autonomous ones, and his presence was already simply assumed for said dinner. John had said she probably needed space and time to cool off and, as John had more experience in that area, Sherlock had deferred to his judgement.

Up until that point, he'd tried to distract himself from constantly replaying his mistakes the night before with a book that had survived the blast, then a different one as it was shaping up to be a very slow day, but the decorators had started working on the walls so his flat was full of noise-noise-noise and dust and more noise; after the text he thundered down the stairs and called to Mrs. Hudson to tell all prospective clients to come back later or never and went out. Alone this time—he didn't need her opinion on what he was going to look at.

He returned Molly's text while in the cab, taking a chance; **Thinking of making it a weekly thing? SH**

It surprised him just how much he liked that idea. He hated schedules, routines, planned and prescribed socialization. There was something about it, though, both very new and very very old, that he found appealing. Family dinner had been sacrosanct when he was a child, even when Dad wasn't home; the three (four; five) of them ate together every night. He'd hated it.
Funny how he wished now he hadn't. But then he'd simply been lacking context. He'd already begun to understand some of it before Eurus ever blew back into his life. Now that he had a complete picture and the distance to observe from the proper perspective, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. He understood just how much had been missing from his life and he wanted all of it, now.

Molly's return text took three anxious minutes. He wondered what she was doing.

**It could be.**

A picture, also sent to John, came in immediately after.

It was a selfie of her holding Rosie, taken in the mirror in the lounge; Molly had a smear of light green icing running from the side of her mouth to her jaw, as well as the collar of her jumper. Rosie had it on her hands and the lower half of her face (and yes, upon enlarging it, that was a glob in her hair and along the top of her ear). The text read, *Ms. Gordon Ramsay took issue with the buttercream.*

Once upon a time, he would have groaned and rolled his eyes at the tedium. Well, long ago. Before Rosie. Maybe longer, where Molly was concerned, though he never would have seen her like that before the baby came along and lowered everyone's barriers and inhibitions.

Rosie was a saint. A miracle. Pity she was too young for riding lessons, he'd buy her a pony. If not for her, Sherlock thought, he would have still been at odd angles to John-and-Mary and Molly. She'd made them all a real family.

**You're a singular woman of prepossessing beauty. SH**

Molly would take it as sarcasm, even if it wasn't.

A moment later his phone rang.

"Molly." He hated talking on the telephone, it always felt so weird and unnatural.

"Sorry, I had to stop texting because little hands were too interested in the phone," she greeted, sounding slightly far away and slightly breathless; Rosie babbled in the background. He was on
Honestly, she could probably shave his eyebrows and draw a cock on his forehead at this point and he'd just smile at her and think she was lovely because he'd lost his mind.

"Are you busy? You can phone me back later if you have something on..." She sounded like her old-old self, hesitant and a bit nervous. He wondered if maybe he should be worried that he'd misread something in their brief exchange.

"Nope. In a cab, running an errand, nothing important." Well, the last bit was a lie, the errand was emphatically not unimportant, but that fell within the scope of 'little white lies' so was acceptable.

"Oh, good. Um, anyway, I was thinking it would be good to have John stay for dinner again and, ah, clear the air. I'm sorry I lost my temper with you last night. I'm still, um... I'm not sure what I'm feeling, but I'd like to hear the rest of the story. From you. Tonight, after John takes Rosie home."

"A-Alright," he replied, his mouth gone dry. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to say next. Or even what he wanted to say.

"Okay. So um, I'll see you whenever you get home, then. And don't get too excited about dinner, it's only going to be macaroni cheese and broccoli because I've wanted it for a week now and it's easy to make."

"I shall endeavour to contain my enthusiasm," he defaulted to a deadpan delivery to cover the relief he felt at *whenever you get home*.

"Smartarse." It was affectionate.

Before he could make a comment about her language in front of the baby, Rosie did it for him, very loudly.

"That's me told," Molly laughed.

He was glad he was in a cab so no one could see his ridiculous grin.
John showed Rita and Helen the picture before he took his lunch break. He wasn't really the kind to show off, but they always asked about Rosie and they were the only two in the office that had been there before Mary's maternity leave. And they'd both met Molly, too. They cooed and commented about what a cutie Rosie was, how big she was getting. It was nice to feel that little bubble of fatherly pride.

He was realizing he was going to maybe have to rethink a few things about how much he shared with people; he'd never been particularly private (not like Sherlock, God knows), but discretion was going to have to be the new default. Not to the point of paranoia, but pull it back a bit.

At least he wouldn't have to let Sherlock down gently about moving back to Baker Street. He really had considered it; ultimately it was just too dangerous. He wasn't ever going to wrap Rosie in bubble wrap, kids who grew up like that always ended up the worst off, but considering the flat had been blown up twice and the kind of people that showed up at all hours, sometimes with the express purpose of doing bodily harm to Sherlock, plus the press and the very real possibility of kidnapping... He just couldn't do it.

He was going to have to start looking out for Molly, too. Really looking out for her, not just being nice because she was the single person on the planet he trusted without reservation to look after his daughter. She knew what she was getting into by agreeing to marry (!!!) Sherlock, but she was no Mary. She was about as dangerous as a hamster.

He'd never considered telling her about Mary, and Mary had never brought it up. After he and Mary had patched things up, it was just kind of an unspoken agreement that it didn't really change anything, who they were to each other, who they were to everyone around them. Molly was Mary's friend, even if they were nothing alike. Well, a bit alike. Same sense of humour, same sense of confidence in their professional capabilities, same ability to rein in the worst of Sherlock's... Sherlock-ness.

It was funny; there had been times he'd wondered about that. Sherlock had always had a kind of soft spot for Molly, though he never showed her enough actual kindness to warrant the kind of feelings she had for him. In John's opinion, at least. It always bothered him a bit that Sherlock was like that, but it wasn't any of his business anyway. He never thought it was anything more than Sherlock taking advantage like he did with everyone else.

John saw, but he didn't observe, apparently.

And if Mary knew, she hadn't said a word (and she was staying conspicuously silent today, too, for whatever that was worth).
That was her, though. She kept everything to herself. He should have asked more of her, looked for more, when he had the chance. He was happy enough with it, though; she never tried to dig up any of the things he buried like other women did, she just accepted what was there and it was good enough. She’d been too good to be true, even after she’d stopped being too good to be true.

He pushed that down deep as it would go. He still had a day to finish, and then dinner again, which Molly sort of hinted could be a regular thing, which would probably be good for Rosie. He and Harry usually had tinned beans and toast, or eggs, or whatever was around the flat. On the rare occasions Mum was around to cook and Dad wasn't down the pub, they mostly ate in front of the telly or watched a shouting match across the table.

Rosie needed some kind of stability. Hell, they all did. This whole thing could be good, if it lasted. And yeah, he really wanted it to last. He didn't have a wife and his daughter didn't have a mother, but he still had his Rosie, he had a best friend and a sort-of sister-in-law/whatever-Molly-was, and that was a hell of a lot more than he had for the first thirty-odd years of his life.

He supposed he was going to have to start letting people in, too. Like that thing Sherlock said about him being human after all. For as dense as Sherlock could be when it came to people, when he saw something, his insights were like a scalpel.

First part of it was going to be coming clean about Mary. He hated that Molly knew. Hated it. And he still didn't know exactly how much she knew, since she hadn't said anything much after he'd taken her back to her flat and taken Sherlock away before he could really put his foot in it. They should have talked about it back at the flat, but Sherlock had dropped the flash-bang of "Oh yeah, engaged, full steam ahead," and that had been that.

At least it hadn't been as bad as Sherlock had made it sound. She was pissed off, really pissed off, but it quite obviously wasn't the end of everything. The list of things she wouldn't forgive Sherlock was probably a very, very short one by this point.

He thought she'd even come to forgive Mary after a while, maybe, but the way she felt about her would never be the same, and they'd never have the chance to rebuild like he had, like Sherlock had. And that... That did piss him off, at all three of them that were in on the secret.

Molly was still on the outside, back then. She and Mary had gone and done some wedding shopping things together, since Molly was supposed to be thinking about her own wedding at the time (and really, the minute John had set eyes on her fiancé, he knew that wasn't going to happen), but they weren’t inseparable or anything. Hell, the very day Sherlock had been shot was probably when Mary had really started to like Molly. She hadn't been able to get over that Sherlock had let himself be slapped three times, and then had actually looked a little sorry.
Maybe that had been what started it for Sherlock, too. Posh boy, a woman slapping him around a little... He really didn't want to let that thought get any farther as he was going to have to have dinner with the both of them in a few hours and he didn't need any images.

He wondered if they even had, yet. Must've done. Sherlock didn't seem any different for it. Not that John had really been expecting something like small woodland creatures surrounding him while he broke into a musical number; maybe a bit of smugness. Unless it was bad. Or unless it was that good. The kind you didn't talk about with the lads over a pint. The kind that was like going home, even if you had no touchstone for what home actually was.

Huh.

Good on him. And her.

He just hoped they'd get to keep it.

*

Sherlock was very well-versed in jewellery. He knew all there was to know about cut, carat, and style; what those things said about a person and the person they were attached to. And that's what tripped him up.

In the abstract (and rather idealistically), a ring was a declaration. It was ownership, sometimes more or less so. It was definitely a contract. It was a descriptor. It was a major plot point in a life story. It was a demarcation of a before and after. And, no matter how unassuming or understated, it was never subtle.

It had to be perfect, she was perfect; it was the prevailing sentiment amongst the subset of the populace he currently fell into. In other words, he was just like any other lovestruck fool man trying to secure his future with some symbolic bit of materialism. He couldn't even bring himself to sneer at that.

He already had a good idea of what he didn't want. Namely, anything that resembled the other ring. It hadn't suited her anyway. He knew she wouldn't want something expensive, or rather, ostentatious; he doubted she could visualize a pricetag with just a glance—she wasn't the kind of woman who was interested in jewellery at all. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen her bother with a necklace or earrings, she didn't even wear them for special occasions. Everything she did own was costume, most likely picked up from a clearance bin or a blanket at a
car boot sale and none of it purchased after 2006.

Honestly, he was relieved. No expectation, so no anxiety about fucking *that* up (one box ticked, thirty thousand others left to go). The thought of having to provide obligatory jewellery for birthdays and Christmases and anniversaries was about as appealing as a root canal administered with a hand drill by Jim Moriarty himself.

So what did he want? He'd know it when he saw it, he supposed. Probably something antique; someone else's family heirloom, not one of his, as his parents' marriage was about the only happy one in the entire lineage and, in light of the Eurus revelation, that was actually saying very little.

Simple; nothing ornate. Didn't suit her. No scrollwork or milgrain or pave insets. No brilliant or princess cuts, either; she already shone brighter than the sun, she didn't need some little bit of cheap sparkle to draw away from it. No other gems, either, just diamond. Colour was a distraction.

He found it, rather painlessly, in the second jeweller's he visited. A wedding set; a shade over one carat, D-colour, IF clarity emerald cut with a baguette cut diamond on either side, platinum band, open back rubover setting, geometric openwork gallery, Tiffany & Co. circa 1935. The matching wedding band also had two baguette cut diamonds. The diamond itself was slightly larger than what was appropriate, he was sure, but not obscenely so. They would need to be resized from a K down to a J; it would still take a week even with a rush. Frustrating, but needs must.

He picked out a simple platinum band for himself, paid, and left. If he could foist Rosie off on Mrs. Hudson for a few hours next week, they could pick up the rings and go do the notice thing at Islington Town Hall in one go. That gave them a week to find a venue, which was six days and twenty-three hours longer than they needed because the guest list would be a very short one and neither of them liked a spectacle, so civil ceremony at aforementioned Town Hall was the clear choice. He wouldn't even owe Mycroft a favour to secure the booking as long as he was given license to attend or not as he saw fit.

*See, Mary? Both hands on the wheel, just like you said.*

"He in?" Greg asked, nodding up the stairs; Mrs. Hudson just happened to be by the door, fussing over a vase of flowers.

"Oh no, he's gone out again, dear," she said. "Actually, I think he might have gone home. He didn't say, but he did have another box of his things when he left."
"Home." Funny way of putting it, he thought.

"To Molly," she laughed in that you're so silly, really way of hers.

"Right, right. Thought she'd'a kicked him out by now, t'be honest."

"Oh no, I wouldn't think so." She pursed her lips and scrunched nose like she'd bitten into something that was more sour than she was expecting. He was willing to bet she'd been a real firecracker back in her heyday.

"Yeah? I'd think even her patience would be wearing a little a thin after a week," he led.

It wasn't that he was nosy, so much as... Well, yeah, alright, he was nosy. There was definitely something going on there, and he'd always wondered if it was totally one-sided.

Kind of hoped it was, just a little, truth be told. Molly was a bit on the young side for him, but she was a sweetheart and nice to look at. It was long enough since the divorce and since everything with her and the twitchy public school one, he kind of always wondered maybe, in a vague sort of way. He knew an appraising look when he saw one, and he'd gotten a few from her. More just browsing than I'd like that gift wrapped, please, but everything starts somewhere.

"It's the honeymoon phase. You can bet he's on his best behaviour."

"So 'im and 'er...? Really a thing?" Still couldn't believe it.

"Oh, for ages. Isn't it nice?" He wasn't sure if she was just seeing what she wanted to see after all. Unless, as his landlady, she knew more than she'd really let on.

And Molly had been the one to take overnight babysitting duty when Sherlock was getting clean again. But she'd slept on the sofa. He'd been there, he'd seen her sleepover nest made up of pillows and blankets that certainly hadn't come from Baker Street; he didn't think either of them would go so far as staging a scene just to hide where she'd really been sleeping.

Unreliable witness at best, he concluded. She had, after all, thought John and Sherlock had been
shagging, too.

Well, whatever. He had something that would be great to wrap up before the weekend, since he really was looking forward to Sunday lunch and he actually wanted to be there for it. Not only because Molly was one hell of cook, or because it was nice to spend a holiday with the people close to him, but mostly because he really wanted to be there for John. He couldn't imagine it. Christmas had been pretty awful; no celebration, no decorations, just a few drop-ins and short, grim-faced conversations. Doing the first birthday without Mary had to be killing him.

He said his goodbye to Mrs. Hudson and dialled the phone on his way back to the car; maybe His Highness would take pity on him and have a look.

Sherlock answered on the second ring.

Except it wasn't Sherlock. "Greg, hi!"

Okay, not the most damning evidence, John was given phone-answering duty plenty of times.

"Oh for—just put it in the sink, I'll do it with the next load. Serves you right," she said, her mouth away from the speaker.

That was a little more telling.

"If this is a bad time—" he started out of politeness, but really wanting more of the story.

"No, no, sorry. Someone just got a lesson in why you don't play aeroplane with a baby that just had lunch," she said.

He grimaced. Never had any of his own, but oldest of six, plus all assorted nieces and nephews; he was well-versed.

"Someone could have warned me she'd just had lunch," Sherlock grumped in the background; he heard the clank of buttons as they hit the stainless steel of the sink. "Did you put him on speaker? I hate speaker."
The case for couple was getting stronger, except they'd been like that for... Well, a pretty long time now.

He took his cue. "So I have something you might be interested in, if you wanna take a look."

"Mm. What is it?"

"Defenestrated pensioner, definite signs of a struggle. No witnesses, wife was downstairs with the neighbour. Broken glass was on the inside."

"Where?"

"Camberwell."

There was a pause; Greg got the feeling there was a silent conversation going on.

"Email me photos."

"Already did."

Footsteps retreating.

"I'll just stand here and hold the phone, shall I?" Sassy, but with no real heat. A bit amused, even.

He wondered what kind of a look she just got, or what kind of a look she gave him, since not a peep was heard from Sherlock.

Footsteps coming back, the quiet noise of a laptop being set on a hard surface, the sound of the phone being handed over and switched back from speaker to handset.

"Construction in the area?"
"None on that street."

"What was he doing before he fell, according to the wife?"

"Reading the paper in his chair when she left the flat."

"Mm."

Greg idly scanned the people crossing the street while he waited for the traffic light to change; no one of interest to any of his investigations (and really, he wasn't expecting it, but stranger things had happened—to him, in fact, on more than one occasion and usually Sherlock was, in some manner, present for it), but the bloke in the red hoodie was most certainly holding. Not his division.

"What time's dinner?" Sherlock murmured, his mouth away from the phone.

Bloody hell. He owed Anderson a pint.

The tone Sherlock used was Greg's answer; one he was well familiar with. Soft, asking permission in an absent sort of way while he calculated a timetable in his head. He briefly regretted phoning—Sherlock would only get so many passes for work before saving London from the forces of evil started to wear thin, if Greg's own marriage was anything to go by. Or the marriages of pretty much all of his colleagues, past and present.

"Six-thirty, John said he drove today just in case he needed the car for... anything," Molly answered hesitantly. She must still have been standing right next to him. Something else going on there, too. Trouble in paradise already, maybe.

Christ.

"The body's at Bart's?" Sherlock was back to *Sherlock* just like that.

"As of last night."
"I'll meet you there in an hour." The arse rang off.

Greg wondered why he needed an hour when Molly's flat was only ten minutes away by cab. He had more than one idea.

At least he had time to grab himself some lunch.

*

She was in the middle of doing the dishes when she heard Sherlock's mobile, followed by, "Oh hell."

"Everything alright?" she called.

Up until this point in the evening, she'd been stalling. He knew it, too, and he seemed perfectly content to let the status remain quo; neither of them wanted another row and now that John had taken Rosie home, there wasn't anyone to prevent it. She suspected that was why he'd taken the case from Greg, which had turned out to be bizarre but accidental; he wasn't sure how to be alone with her when they both knew a civil, adult conversation needed to happen.

On top of that, because it was never just one thing, she'd begun to worry a bit about what tomorrow—going to the grave—would bring. She'd tried not to think too much about it up to this point.

"Mycroft." The way he said the name was an invective. "He saw fit to warn me of his impending arrival in case we were 'in a compromising position.' How utterly blissful it must be to be an only child."

"He's not bringing you a case, is he?"

He snorted. "If only. Paperwork."

"Mm," she said absently. It seemed late for a visit, but then, it felt later than it was she supposed; it had only just gone eight.
A minute later, there was a knock at the door.

"Not much of a warning. Seems he's underestimating you," she deadpanned, using her thumbnail to scrape a bit of burnt cheese off of the baking dish.

He didn't make a sound, but she knew he was smiling.

She abandoned the dish to soak a bit more, rinsing and drying her hands while Sherlock let Mycroft into the flat.

Sherlock tossed a manilla envelope onto the breakfast bar on his way to the kitchen drawer to (presumably) get a pen; Mycroft followed him in to stand awkwardly in the space between the edge of the lounge and the dining table.

"Miss Hooper," he greeted.

"She has a first name," Sherlock said, clicking and scribbling his third pen. The others worked, but they were blue ink. He hated blue ink.

"Indeed. Molly."

She was struck with the thought that yes, he was going to be her brother-in-law. And that she'd actually spoken more with him than her sister's husband of fifteen years. Probably because they lived on the opposite side of the planet, but that fact did nothing to make it feel any less strange.

"Would you like some tea? Have you had dinner? I just put away the macaroni cheese but I could heat some up for you, if you like," she found herself babbling. She reasoned to herself that if it were John or Greg she would have done the same.

Really, though, it was Mycroft. He wasn't a normal brother-in-law.

"He's not staying, just need to sign some papers and then he'll be going far far away so we can get back to our compromising positions. Lots of them. All over the flat," Sherlock said, agitated.
Seven pens now, all blue. Well, one was green. She wondered if she should tell him that probably
the only black pen in the drawer was the chrome one with the giant pink plastic gem on top (a gift
from three girls in one of the teaching rotations a few years back; they'd called her the queen and
said she needed a sceptre, plus a pair of safety glasses with rhinestones glued on in lieu of a
crown, they were nice).

Mycroft rolled his eyes and she gave him a look that clearly telegraphed yes, I do put up with him,
and even I'm not sure why sometimes. Maybe he was a little bit more like a normal brother-in-law
than she gave him credit for; he looked the slightest bit amused.

"Really Sherlock, using a blue pen won't actually kill you," Mycroft said. "And just tea for me,
thank you Mi—Molly."

On her way to the kettle, she took pity on Sherlock and picked out the chrome pen, handing it
over gem-first just for emphasis.

You're serious? his blank expression said.

She gave him a too-bright smile before continuing on to get the tea started.

Sherlock, ever the adult and never needing the last word, used the black pen to write BLACK
PENS on the shopping list.

"There are some documents for you to sign as well, Molly. Standard security clearances and the
like."

"Security clearances?" she repeated rather stupidly, putting a few of the cut-out cookies that didn't
make the grade for Rosie's Easter basket onto a plate to go with Mycroft's tea. It was a holiday,
after all, or close enough, she reasoned. He didn't have to eat them if he didn't want them.

"Very basic, no state secrets, I'm afraid. Although you will undoubtedly be privy to even more of
those than you have been in the past."

"Even more—? How, ah, how many have I actually been privy to?"

"Technically, and over the course of our acquaintance, it's probably in the triple digits by now,"
Sherlock said, scribbling his name across the bottom of a page.

"Oh," she said. Because what else could she say?

She set Mycroft's mug and the plate of biscuits down on the breakfast bar, closer to the end near the wall than the lounge. It was about as engraved as his invitation was getting; her spine had finally clicked into place and she realized that this was her home and, while in it, Mycroft was Sherlock's brother before he was the chairman of the Bilderberg group or the entire NWO or whatever it was he did at the office.

With a murmured thank you, Mycroft pulled out a stool and sat to fix his tea.

"Having not heard from Mummy, I assume you have yet to phone her," Mycroft began conversationally, addressing Sherlock.

"Slipped my mind," Sherlock quite obviously lied.

"Mm," Mycroft's mouth flattened into a disapproving line.

"I haven't told mine yet, either," Molly offered, feeling the need to defend Sherlock. Or at least show some solidarity. "So far you and John are the only ones who know."

"And Greg," Sherlock supplied, eyes on the form in front of him but actually watching her reaction. "He caught me off guard."

He looked anticipatory, expecting her to be cross about it. She wondered why. Did he think she wanted to keep it a secret? Was there a reason he wanted to keep it a secret? Sure, it was a new thing, and still kind of too big to wrap her entire head around, but it was real. She knew that to be an absolute certainty. One more bullet point to add to the night's growing list of this is a conversation we should have.

"Please tell me you didn't say anything about his divorce."

"I didn't say anything about his divorce." It was more of a question than a reassurance.
Lovely. At least she wasn't there for it. Couldn't have been that bad or he'd have complained about it earlier.

Sherlock had always complained about Greg's marriage and how stupid it was for him to keep going back to his wife over and over when it just made him miserable and she would obviously never change. It was one of those things about Sherlock she'd fallen in love with in the first place; the way he cared about his friends—really cared, and not just about how their personal issues affected their work (and, by extension, his work), but about them—and his idealism. To him, marital fidelity and loyalty were sacred things, so much so that he took it for granted that everyone else felt the same way. Just thinking about what a truly good man he was made her a little melty inside.

She still gave him a look for good measure, though. "He is still coming Sunday?"

"Mmhmm." He reabsorbed himself in scanning and signing.

"And you, Mycroft? I ah, haven't got your RSVP, unless you—"

"He won't be coming," Sherlock supplied quickly.

She kept her gaze level and waited.

Mycroft spoke first. "Regretfully, I won't be able to attend. I did ask Sherlock to pass on my apologies, but it must have 'slipped his mind.'" She could hear the air quotes.

She wasn't sure if Mycroft was covering for Sherlock or trying to stir the pot. It felt like both.

"Oh. Well, maybe next time, then," she smiled. By the look she got, she very much doubted it. A pity or a relief, she couldn't decide which.

There was another minute of awkward silence; she tried not to goggle when Mycroft dipped a deformed bunny with too-brown ears into his tea. It seemed so out of place as to be comical.

"I quite like the touch of lavender in these," Mycroft said after he'd finished his biscuit.
"Oh, ah, thanks. We're um, trying to introduce different flavours to Rosie so she doesn't end up a
fussy eater. And, y'know, brain development from new sensory experiences and all that," she
added, trying not to sound like the obnoxious yuppie mum she sometimes felt like.

She had nothing to be defensive about; she only wanted what anyone wanted, to give a child the
best head start they could have in life. Just because she didn't squeeze her out of her own vagina
didn't mean she should just stand idly by and not participate.

Mycroft gave her an appraising look; there was something open and relieved in his expression that
looked out of place but, oddly enough, wasn't unsettling. It may have even been approval.

"Our grandmother used to use tarragon in shortbread and serve it with apricot jam. I always quite
liked that combination."

"Our grandmother never so much as poured her own tea," Sherlock contradicted.

"Scott, not Holmes," Mycroft clarified.

"Oh," Sherlock dismissed.

"She died when Sherlock was a baby. She was... a bohemian woman," Mycroft said rather
fondly.

"If by 'bohemian' you mean an alcoholic gold-digging cabaret singer looking for a ticket out of
Vichy France, then yes, I suppose she was."

She gave Sherlock another look, but he wasn't paying attention to her; he was sorting the
paperwork into three stacks.

"Says a former drug addict who spends his time finding missing cats for sweets shop owners and
writing scholarly tomes on cigarette ash," Mycroft sniped back.

Before Sherlock could escalate (and he would; she'd heard the stories from John), she stepped in
and laid gentle fingers on the small of his back, took the pen.
"Which one of those are mine?" she asked, using the clunky gem on the end of the pen to indicate the stacks of papers.

It was enough; he hovered over her while she signed on the lines marked with those little sticky-note flags. She couldn't even bring herself to be too annoyed about it. She liked having him close.

*

Molly stared out the kitchen window, leaning a bit against the edge of the sink. She'd finished the dishes after Mycroft left, then fussed over watering her plants, then finally just stopped and stared off into space.

They both knew what was coming and neither particularly wanted it, but they had to talk. It had occurred to him earlier that there were more things he should tell her, things that didn't directly involve her but she might think were important. None of it would be pleasant.

He was tired. It had been a long day full of people and not enough of her. He came up behind her, slid his arms around her waist. Held her because he'd missed her and, most importantly, because he could. She leaned back into him and it felt so right it ached.

He caught a glimpse of their reflection in the kitchen window; he almost looked like a stranger to himself.

It still seemed impossible that he had this. That Molly wanted him, even when he was terrible. He never thought he'd want this so much, even though he'd craved the feeling of being loved for as long as he could remember.

Having Mycroft in his space often had a way of unsettling him; he was always being observed, weighed, measured, judged. It hadn't been any different tonight, except that he didn't feel like he'd lost control of his own space. Or that he'd ceded anything to his brother's presence. It was different than all the times at Baker Street with John in attendance; John was always quick to defend him, but it still felt like they were chasing Mycroft out of their clubhouse rather than commanding him to respect their home.

Molly had done that, though. With tea and biscuits and a ridiculous novelty pen. She'd very quietly declared ownership of her flat and all within it, including Sherlock himself; the briefest of touches to the small of his back when he handed over the pen so she could start signing her own paperwork was enough to settle the matter conclusively.
Molly turned in his embrace, pressed her cheek to his chest.

"It feels so late," she said. "It's barely past nine and I just want to crawl into bed."

"Fairly certain there's no law against it."

"I should take a bath and shave my legs so we don't have to rush in the morning."

"Mm," he said, not bothered in the slightest about the prospect of having to rush. He only needed five minutes and he could shave while she was in the shower. If she were amenable. They hadn't shared the bathroom at all yet.

Well, once, last year, when she was putting on mascara before work and he'd gone in to brush his teeth before passing out in her bed, but neither of them had been naked. He'd actually rather enjoyed it. He'd seen her countless times by then without make-up, but watching her apply it had reminded him of being a child, watching his mother.

He pushed away that association, even if he understood it for what it was; he was rather hoping they'd get around to the much-lauded make-up sex tonight and he really didn't need that spectre at the feast.

"There are a few more things I didn't tell you last night when you asked," he started. The sooner he got it over with, the better.

Instead of pulling away from him, she squeezed her arms tighter around his waist.

"Let's go upstairs, first. If you tell me while I'm in the bath, I'll be less likely to storm out of the flat again." He felt her smile against his chest.

It made him feel a bit better about the impending conversation; if she could joke about it, she wasn't that angry with him any longer. Their current position also suggested as much, but he didn't want to assume past 'mixed feelings and the need for comfort.'

He told her to go up first; he went about shutting off lights and laptops and the like, then went
upstairs and plugged their phones into the chargers and changed into his pyjamas. She'd washed the sheets; he was glad that they wouldn't smell like baby.

He knocked on the half-open bathroom door, feeling a bit strange about it; he'd only seen her completely naked once. Twice, if one counted the morning after. It added another layer of nerves on top of everything else. It didn't help she used the rose oil in the bath, either.

She told him to come in and he took a breath to centre himself. It was only Molly.

The bathwater was already opaque with soap; she was submerged to the shoulders with her knees above the water and her wet hair was clipped on top of her head. He supposed he'd stayed downstairs longer than he thought.

He sat on the closed lid of the toilet; he picked up her hairbrush from where it sat next to the sink just so he had something to occupy his hands.

She didn't seem inclined to speak, preferring to allow him to chose where to begin.

"After I shot Magnussen, Mycroft was going to have me sent to Eastern Europe," he said, figuring it was as good as anywhere to start. Molly didn't mind a non-linear narrative, anyway.

He told her about it being basically a death sentence and almost ODing on the plane; she hadn't known about that relapse. To say she was unhappy about it was an understatement, but at least she smiled a little bit when he told her about the case he'd been solving and her role in the conspiracy and how antagonistic she'd been as a man. He didn't know why he told her about it, except that it was context and she liked hearing about his cases and it would distract her from the unpleasantness of the circumstance.

He tried not to get distracted when she lathered her leg with shower gel and picked up her razor; it seemed so... perverse to watch her, somehow. Shouldn't be, he'd had actual sex (well, almost; performed sex acts, plural) with Janine in the bath and the shower, and had most definitely had actual sex with Molly, but this was more... intimate.

He couldn't start thinking about that now; he had to get through this.

He told her about drugging Mary and Mycroft and his parents and that he'd tried to keep her as far away from all of it as he could because... he hadn't consciously realized then, but he was probably trying to keep her safe. Unburdened, even if he'd felt a shade of guilt at the time for not extending
the invitation to her as well, especially considering her role in bringing Mary round to the idea. He hadn't wanted to drag her into something that had the potential to go horribly wrong since it hadn't been an absolute necessity that time.

He realized he was getting redundant and rambling a bit; he was also processing on another level just how deep his feelings for her had run and for how long. A preponderance of evidence, each last piece written off as something else, deemed inadmissible. He wondered if he'd ever get to a point in the future where he felt like he'd made up for his stupidity.

He fell silent, then, wiggling one of the tines of the hairbrush under his thumbnail for something to do since he was running out of words that weren't just nonsense.

"Tom phoned me on that Christmas Eve," she said eventually, almost like a confession.

He couldn't help the spike of jealousy.

"It wasn't a very long conversation, but he said his parents had asked after me, even though we'd split. I think, ah, I think he might have been thinking about asking me to start over. I told him there was someone else. He, ah, asked if it was you. I, um, I didn't deny it. I mean, I didn't lie or make anything up, I just let him fill in the gaps. I only thought—since we were talking about that Christmas..." She gave a half shrug.

"I wasn't consciously trying to sabotage your relationship," he said. Unconsciously, on the other hand... well. Self-awareness only suited him when it worked in his favour.

"I know. And I could have stopped you if I really wanted to. I was greedy, though, trying to have my cake and eat it too. I mean, I do feel bad that Tom got hurt because of me. Sometimes..." she paused, tried to sort out what she wanted to say next. "Sometimes I felt like I was cheating on him. With you. And sometimes I felt like I was cheating on you with him, which was just stupid, because we'd never be—or, well, I didn't think we ever would, and, I dunno. It's silly."

"Did you feel like I was cheating on you with Janine?" He hadn't actually considered that before.

"No! I mean, I didn't even know about it until after the fact, which kind of did hurt because I thought we were friends, but that wasn't really our level of friendship anyway, even if I wanted it to be. And then, I mean, later you said it was fake but you didn't really talk about it, so I just tried to forget it like I tried to forget Irene Adler."
"Neither of those were my finest moments," he said quietly, feeling like a complete shit.

Molly seemed to wrestle with something, choosing her next words carefully. "Did she, ah, ever text you back after the picture?"

"Don't know. I blocked her number."

"Oh. You, ah, you didn't have to do that."

He didn't know how to tell her that he really did; he didn't want even a shadow of temptation to ruin what he had—he didn't want to be like John. It came tumbling out anyway, even if it wasn't his secret to tell.

"John was cheating on Mary. Only texting, nothing physical. Yet. And it was with my sister."

Molly dropped the razor and craned her neck around to look at him. Her eyes were almost comically wide, her lips already forming a question.

"He didn't know it was Eurus. He thought she was just a girl he met on the bus, which doesn't make it any better. But it went on for months. I... I'm only telling you because I'll never do that to you. Ever. I wouldn't want you to think less of John, either."

"But you do," she said, seeing into him again.

*It is what it is*, he said with his expression. He didn't want to feel that way, and he'd tried to absolve John of some of his guilt because it was tearing his best friend apart, but a very small part of him still felt betrayed on Mary's behalf.

Molly was quiet for a moment. "Everyone in my family always insisted my Dad never cheated on any of his wives before leaving them. I always wondered if they were just defending him to us kids, or saying that to make themselves feel better about it, or if they really believed it. I mean, I don't think he slept with any of them or whatever until he was at least separated, but I mean... Infidelity isn't just about sex. It still hurts people, even if it's not physical. Not really my place to judge, though, either way." She groped under the water and found her razor, went back to finishing her legs.
He'd wondered about that, a bit; she wasn't the most scarred child of divorce he'd ever met, but she wasn't completely unaffected, either. More well-adjusted than most, probably thanks to her mother and grandmother and regular contact with her father throughout adolescence.

"I'm still mad at Mary, by the way," she said abruptly, pulling the plug from the drain. "And hurt, and all that. But I don't hold it against you."

She stood and he swallowed hard; he knew he was probably allowed to look, but he still felt...

He didn't know what he felt. Lots of things. Relief that they'd said what they needed to and there hadn't been any shouting and Molly had at least forgiven him. A bit emotionally drained. Closer to Molly, if that were even possible. And desire, so much it was almost overwhelming.

He knew what he wanted, but he wasn't sure of the next step. He didn't know how to ask. He didn't think he'd be rejected, considering she'd extended the invitation in the first place and, up until this point, casual nudity hadn't exactly been a thing (though he was very much in favour of that changing in future), but there was still the niggling fear that he would somehow miss the line between intimacy and sexuality and blunder over it like an idiot.

She unclipped her hair and wrung it out before twisting it back up; her wet skin had broken out in gooseflesh.

Finally, his body moved when his brain failed to provide a course of action; he took her towel off of the bar and held it open for her to step into, like he was helping her put on a coat or something equally inane.

He hated feeling so clumsy.

Molly knew, though, she always knew; she leaned forward, cupped his cheek, looked up at him with those soft, dark eyes. Drew his face to hers as he wrapped the towel around her just to have something to do with the damn thing, wrapped his arms around her as he kissed her.

Her arms were still wet when they wound around him; his shins bumped the rim of the tub.

She broke the kiss enough to mumble, "I do need to dry off sometime, you know," before diving right back in. He smiled against her mouth and moved back enough that she could step out of the tub; he pulled her body flush with his and kissed her while she tugged the towel free from his grasp.
He didn't stop kissing her while she made a valiant attempt at drying herself off, partially because he found the entire situation absurdly funny and he was kind of an arsehole, but mostly because he couldn't force himself away.

She dropped the towel in the tub and they stumbled to the bedroom, somehow ended up across the bed with her mostly on top of him. He was so turned on he thought he could die from it; it had to be the scent of roses on her skin. And her. Just her.

There was so much he wanted to do to her, to do with her and, now that he could, he didn't know where to start. His hands skated over her sides, the skin still damp where she missed whole swathes with the towel, dropped to cup her arse. He quite liked the way it felt in his hands.

Her hands were under his shirt, rucking it up to under his armpits; she scratched her nails lightly against his chest and he groaned into her mouth.

Just how much she wanted him was nothing short of amazing. She wasn't shy about it, either. Every kiss felt like an invitation, like permission, like ownership. He hoped every time would be like this, even though he knew it probably wouldn't be. He refused the analogies the deepest recesses of his mind were supplying, lines cut up neatly on the back of a CD case and needles in a coffee mug.

She pulled back, tugged his wrist; he got the idea and sat up, stripping his shirt. She traced the lines of his chest, just like he'd imagined she would, he leaned in to kiss her again before groping behind him to pull back the bedcovers. It was a mad scramble to get farther up the bed while trying to maintain as much contact as possible and to divest himself of his pyjama bottoms at the same time, but they managed it.

Finally, finally he got his hands on her again; he kissed her neck and kneaded her breast, swiping his thumb over the nipple until his mouth watered for it. He shifted further on top of her, used his teeth over her collarbones (gently, he wasn't some overeager schoolboy desperate to mark her as his), lower, until his mouth closed over the tip of her breast.

He was good at this. He knew he was; he'd done his reading and had aced the practicum. He wondered if he could make her come just from this, if multiple orgasms were a thing for her and, if so, was there such a thing as too many, there was so much he wanted to—

Slow down. Let's just concentrate on the first orgasm, shall we? Molly in his mind whispered (and oh thank God it was her, because anyone else from the peanut gallery would just be strange and uncomfortable).
He kissed a trail to her other breast, kept his hand bracketing her ribs while he used his thumb to tease her nipple again, dragging it through cooling saliva, over the areola, along the underside, swirling around the very tip.

He shivered as she ran a delicate finger over the shell of his ear; apparently that worked for him, too.

He moved his hand from her breast, felt each dip and rise of her ribs as he moved lower to stroke over the soft, flat expanse of her stomach, muscles jumping under pebbled skin as he teased and swirled his fingertips in meaningless patterns. The skin over her hipbones was the most sensitive; her whole body jerked at the first touch.

He needed more of that. He left her nipple with one hard suck, his lips covering his teeth and biting down just a bit before letting it fall free from his mouth completely; he left a trail of wet kisses downward until he got to her hip. He scraped the ridges of his bottom teeth over the silky skin before following with his tongue, his lips; he wanted to eat her like ice cream.

And of course, once that thought took hold, he knew exactly what uncharted waters he'd be setting a course for next.

He ran his hand down the outside of her thigh, cool and so smooth from the bath; her leg was bent at the knee so he only needed to shift his weight a little to run his palm down her shin. He really didn't care that her legs had been unshaven before, or that they were bare now; he wanted to know everything, feel every texture.

He shuffled back on his knees, stretching out a bit from the position he'd jackknifed himself into between her legs; he kissed along the line of her her pubic hair while running his hand up her calf, urging her thighs wider.

He chanced a glance up at Molly; her head was tipped back against the pillow, one hand wrapped around a bar of the headboard and the other twisted in the pillowcase next to her head. Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted.

He'd never wanted so much in his life. Not just to fuck her, but to possess her completely. It was thrilling. It was terrifying.

He needed to stop thinking, start doing. He spared one swipe of his tongue to the crease of her
thigh, brushing his thumb through damp curls to alight on her clit before following with his lips in a gentle kiss.

He felt her shift above him and one of her legs came to rest over his shoulder, and oh, that was so much better. He licked and kissed and used his tongue in every way he'd read about, cataloguing her reactions, finding what she liked. He thought he could happily do this for hours; the heady rush of pleasing her, of making her respond to his mouth was better than a crime scene. He smiled a bit at the thought of her thighs wrapped in police tape, decided it best not to share that image with her. Maybe later; she would probably laugh.

She was quieter during oral sex than she had been while he'd fucked her; he wondered if it was due to the nature of the sensations or if it was social conditioning or something more primal. He had a lifetime to find out, he supposed. Right now, though, he'd really like to hear her come, to feel it against his mouth.

He moved his hand from where he'd clamped it over the top of her thigh, used his fingers to caress her labia in counterpoint to his mouth.

"Inside," she all but ordered. "Fingers inside me," she panted.

He wasn't about to argue. He used two, began to slowly fuck her with them. Her shoulders and hips pressed into the bed as her back arched; her thigh muscles went rigid before she began to tremble. He wanted to watch, to see her come apart.

She was gorgeous; flushed red from the roots of her hair to her sternum, perspiration standing out clearly on her skin, every muscle in her body tight, ready to spring. And then it happened; he felt the pull of it around his fingers, against his tongue. His cock, long neglected, throbbed in sympathy.

He gentled his touches, letting her fuck herself through it the way she liked rather than overwhelming her with sensation. Never had he been so grateful for the very limited experience he did have; he felt like he should send Janine a fruit basket. That wasn't really a place he wanted his mind to be going right then, though.

He kissed the inside of Molly's thigh and slowly withdrew his fingers, marvelling at the slick glide of them in her body. Some other time, he'd see just how many times he could make her come just like that, but tonight was too urgent. He needed her, needed to be inside her, needed to feel her pressed as close to him as possible.

He kissed his way up her body, met her sated smile with his mouth as her hands curled into his
he kissed his way up her body, met her sated smile with his mouth as her hands curled into his hair and over the back of his shoulders. He forced himself to calm down, match her pace. Discipline, Holmes, exercise some.

"Is there anything you're not good at?" she asked after pulling away, amusement and affection dancing in her eyes.

He pretended to think a moment, cocking his head and squinting one eye. "No," he deadpanned, widening his eyes and jutting out his chin a bit and pressing his lips together in something approaching guileless.

She laughed and kissed him again, pushed him until he rolled over onto his back.

He liked the direction this was going. Very much.

Molly climbed astride him and his hands went to her hips; she leaned down to kiss him again. She reached between them and palmed his cock before taking it in hand, shifting up and forward enough to position him; she held it in place as she began to slide down onto him.

Dear God, he thought. He loved that she took control like this, took possession of his body because she knew it was hers to do with as she liked. He loved the way her eyelids fluttered closed and she teethed her bottom lip as she took him deeper, her cheeks and neck the most alluring shade of pink. He loved how his hands fit so perfectly around her hips, her arse, her waist. He loved the way her body gripped his cock, feeling her heartbeat from the inside.

He loved her, so much so he couldn't fathom how normal people lived with this kind of thing for months, years, sometimes their entire adult lives. How they didn't drown in it.

She rolled her hips once he was fully seated, then sat back to give him an unobstructed view of the line of her body. He didn't know where to look first; her face, her neck, her breasts (fuller now with arousal, nipples so dark against her pale skin), the nip of her waist, his hands splayed over her hips, the hollow between her legs where he could see his cock disappearing into her body.

He closed his eyes; if he kept watching he'd be overwhelmed by the visual and everything would be over entirely too quickly. Thank God the long-term affects of his drug abuse hadn't included sexual dysfunction, though delayed ejaculation would come in rather handy right about then.

Molly had braced herself with one hand on his chest and the other her own leg; he felt her move again and opened his eyes to see her arch as she reached behind her to grab his thigh, her other
hand cupping her breast momentarily before sliding over her stomach, then lower to tease herself (hopefully to another orgasm) as she rode him.

He held onto her hips and thrust into her as she pulled away on the upstroke; she moaned and he did it again. They found a new rhythm, together; he knew for certain he couldn't last like this for very long.

"Molly," he panted. "I can't—"

He swallowed, mouth too dry to finish his thought. "M close," was the best he could do, watching her again through slitted eyes.

Molly moaned and opened her eyes to look at him. Her gaze locked with his and he was lost; he hissed through his teeth as he came so hard it was almost painful. He was dimly aware of her own surprised cry when he felt her contract around him; it seemed to go on and on forever, milking every last drop from him and then some.

She collapsed on his chest, a dead weight.

"That was... unreal," she mumbled after a moment.

He put his arms around her, swallowed again and tried to breathe, nodded and hummed an agreement. It was about all he could muster.

After another minute, she shifted. She planted her elbows next to his head and just looked at him, smiling. She traced her fingertip down the bridge of his nose, kissed him sweetly.

He'd never thought he could be so in love. He'd never imagined it could be like this.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who's interested, visual references for the rings:

Molly's rings are kind of a mix of this one: http://www.berganza.com/ref-19778-Art-Deco-diamond-ring-circa-1935.html?feature_id=170
This one:
https://in.pinterest.com/pin/AfvTAYe9rQt9A1iwMR8x3tDylKC_adaHKKj9k1_lQHbsXjdrA0Jnk2I/
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Friday.

Chapter Notes

Thank you again to everyone who's been reading, reccing, reblogging, leaving kudos, commenting, and just being generally all around lovely people. And, as always, thank you to my betas, Britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

Only two more chapters to go after this. The epilogue, when it happens (if it happens) won't arrive with the regular schedule, but sometime in the distant future.

*

The drive was less tense than she'd been expecting. Sherlock was a person that liked driving; he was just as at ease behind the wheel as he was anywhere else. Not that she was a nervous driver, but she didn't do it often enough for it to feel completely natural. She was very much like David in Shaun of the Dead, didn't see any benefit to owning a car in London.

She thought it was a bit funny that he'd hired (or borrowed or somehow otherwise acquired, she hadn't asked) a Land Rover, but it did suit him. Posh, but kind of rugged and utilitarian; more like the Royals at Balmoral than some upwardly mobile accounts manager that lived in a new village-style development in Kent.

She tried not to gawp at the village as they drove through. It was so strange to her to think that Sherlock grew up in a place like this and not London. Well, before boarding school, at least. She'd grown up in a small village, but it was different. More fields, more postwar boom housing, a bit less charming.

They didn't speak; the silence was heavy, but trying to fill it would just make it worse.

They parked the car; it was only a bit past 9:30. They got out anyway and walked up the hill towards the church. It was warm and sunny, but she felt like it should be dreary and cold.
Sherlock made a beeline for the biggest tree in the churchyard, reminding her of the way a cat always prefers to walk along a wall or an edge of some kind and not out in the open. He scanned the area and quickly spotted the burial site, then began to look around for the best spot to observe from without being noticed. He gave up after a few moments; apparently they'd already found it.

He checked his watch and noticed her peering over his arm, so he bent his wrist so that she could read it. 9:38.

"Well, while we're here, care to meet the rest of the family?" he said lightly, offering his arm.

He led her through the haphazard rows of old tombstones and she was glad she'd chosen boots over anything else; the ground was soft and slightly uneven, still soaked from the week's rain. He stopped every now and then and then to point out a stone bearing the last name Holmes.

There was even a Mycroft, 1881-1922. "Great-grandfather. Married an American heiress. Railroads, I think? Really surprised I even remember that much, I thought I'd deleted it all."

"Young," she commented, not really having anything to add.

"Shot," he replied, a bit of his normal self in his voice, which was good to hear. "Hunting accident. In an armchair in front of the fire in the library. Apparently he failed to mention to said heiress that he had an older brother in India and he wouldn't be inheriting the title. She did get the house, though."

"Your family has a title. Of course they do," she said, light and a little sarcastic; really, nothing should surprise her with him.

"Don't trouble yourself, dear, I'm—" he squinted, tilted his head, calculated, "—seventeenth in line. Barring catastrophe, you won't have the dubious distinction of being the Viscountess Sandhurst Molly Hooper."

"Holmes," she corrected. They hadn't discussed it, obviously. But she'd thought about it. More than once. "Molly Holmes."

Sherlock looked startled. "You would... want that? I hadn't thought you such a traditionalist."
"I'm not. But it's you. And it's only three letters, two in the middle and the one at the end. Barely a change," she rambled, slightly unsettled by the sudden thought that for whatever reason he now thought less of her for wanting to take his name. Or he didn't want her to.

"Molly, forgive me, but I'm about to do something highly inappropriate to the setting," he said; he bent down and kissed her soundly, one hand coming to cradle the side of her head.

He pulled back with a smile—the first one she'd seen from him since last night—and something in her eased just the slightest bit. She smiled back and they continued on.

He checked his watch again and his posture stiffened; it was time, she supposed. They made it back to the tree just in time to see the vicar exit the building carrying a simple wooden box, an elderly couple in tow.

She slipped her hand into Sherlock's and squeezed, I'm here; he squeezed back I know.

It wasn't much of a procession at all, just the three of them. The casket was too large for cremated remains, but much smaller than a coffin; she wondered how much they'd actually recovered.

They watched in silence as the vicar opened his bible, did a reading, offered his own council, left; they were too far away to hear the words being said. Victor's parents stood side-by-side, Mr. Trevor's arm around his wife's shoulders. They said their own words, stood a few moments longer, then went back down the path toward the church.

She chanced a look up at Sherlock; his face was stone. He waited another minute until Victor's parents had disappeared past the church, then gently tugged her along with him to the grave site. They didn't have much time before a groundskeeper would be coming to complete the burial.

Sherlock stood without a word; his eyes remained on the temporary grave marker, one of those simple aluminium things with individual letters held in place by tracks like a pub menu. Finally, he shook his hand loose from hers and reached into his coat pocket. He bent down and dropped something on top of the casket, sparing a second to touch his fingertips to the wood.

When he straightened, she saw that it was an eyepatch. Not medical, but the kind that was a bit naff and came with a plastic sword and a felt hat.
Her heart broke for them, all of them. She swallowed thickly but a few tears spilled anyway; it wasn't even her grief, but it was so overwhelming.

Sherlock sniffed, dabbed the inside corners of his eyes with his fingertips; he handed her the handkerchief from his pocket and steered her gently back toward the path with his arm around her shoulders.

He stopped dead after they rounded the corner of the church; Victor's parents stood on the pavement, obviously waiting. Her arm went around his waist in the only kind of protective gesture she could manage.

"Sherlock?" the man said tentatively, taking a hesitant step forward. His hair was light, but he'd obviously once been a ginger; he was about John's height but had once been taller; he wore glasses. "Sherlock Holmes?"

Sherlock drew himself up, a man facing a firing squad with dignity. "Mr. and Mrs. Trevor," he answered, his tone neutral; Molly heard the rawness in it, the uncertainty.

The man smiled then, came forward with his hand outstretched. "It's so good to see you, son. You have your father's bearing."

Sherlock removed his arm from her shoulders and they shook hands; Mrs. Trevor stepped forward and he bent to give her a formal kiss on the cheek. Molly moved back enough to not get in the way, but kept her hand on his back, just above the belt of his coat.

"You've done well for yourself," Mr Trevor said. "We've seen you in the papers. Always said to the missus, 'and we knew him when,'" he made a gesture with his palm flat, about head-height for a child.

Mrs. Trevor looked at her; it was hard to smile but they both managed something tight, polite.

"And who is this, dear?" Mrs. Trevor spoke up, then, in that kind of way that all older women had; letting their husbands go first, but not letting them completely dominate the conversation, gently reminding them of their existence. Molly wondered if she would become that kind of woman, one day. If she already was.

"My fiancée, Molly." Sherlock shifted back so she could shake hands with both of them.
"She's lovely, congratulations. You're a lovely couple," Mrs. Trevor said, her eyes shining with it.

Sherlock smiled, a small, bashful thing; genuine.

"When are you getting married?" Mrs. Trevor asked, but there was nothing of a busybody in it.

"May," Sherlock supplied, not missing a beat.

*News to me*, she thought, but the lie was forgiveable in the context. She was actually pretty proud of how he was handling the situation.

"A May wedding is always nice," Mrs. Trevor said. She reached out and gave Molly's forearm a light squeeze. "You'll make a beautiful bride."

"Thank you," she replied, her turn for a bashful smile.

There was a lull; Victor's parents stood and looked Sherlock over, a thousand half-formed what-ifs flitting through their minds. They were smiling, though, matching expressions of wistful pride on their faces.

Mr. Trevor finally broke the moment. "Well, we won't keep you," he said. "I'm sure you've got to get back to solving crimes."

Sherlock nodded, grateful for the out. "Mm, yes, we only came down for the morning. The work never ends, I'm afraid."

"Quite so," Mr. Trevor agreed, holding out his hand again. When Sherlock took it, Mr. Trevor covered their clasped hands. "Thank you for coming. It's so good to see you again, Sherlock. You've grown into quite a man."

Sherlock didn't have any words; he just nodded and looked briefly down and away. Mrs. Trevor stepped in and goodbyes were said all around; Sherlock slipped his arm back around Molly's shoulders as they walked away.
They got in the car and he put his hands on the wheel, tipped his head back against the headrest and exhaled harshly while staring up at the roof.

She didn't really have anything to say; she reached over and laid her hand on his knee, giving it a reassuring little squeeze. He took one hand from the wheel and dropped it to cover hers, then interlaced their fingers. They sat like that for another moment before he pulled himself together and reached for the seatbelt, started the car.

"There's one more place I'd like to go today, if you don't mind," he said, checking his mirror as he pulled away from the kerb.

"Your old house?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Mm," he agreed.

It was only a short drive past the village proper; Sherlock stopped the car at a gated drive and hopped out to unlock it. The lane was narrow and neglected, though it showed signs of recent use by more than just whatever vehicles had been at the scene on that Sunday.

"The land is still farmed," Sherlock said, answering the question she hadn't asked. "I don't know who does it now. It was Mr. Reginald when I was a kid."

"Mm," she nodded.

They crested a small rise and the house came into view.

"And you grew up in Downton Abbey," she said, taking in the size of the place. Hardly Highclere Castle, but a far cry from the three bedroom semi she grew up in.

"Television?"

"Good guess."
"Balance of probability."

Sherlock parked the car and they got out; a string of police tape fluttered nosily in the breeze.

"How old is this place?" she asked, tipping her head back to look up at the fresh plywood over the long-destroyed roof.

"Sixteenth century, but there was an extensive Victorian restoration," he answered matter-of-factly, coming to stand next to her.

He held out his hand and she took it automatically; he led her around the outside of the house and told her bits and pieces he remembered. He showed her the tombstones in the back garden and explained the cipher his sister had come up with. He took her to the well, which had, until recently, been half-buried under a collapsed shed. She peered over the edge, curious as to how deep it was; he tugged her back, away from it. She took the action for what it was, let herself be led back to the house.

He let them inside. Aside from the places that had been recently disturbed, everything was covered in a thick layer of dust and chips of paint that had peeled off the walls.

"It's a shame," she muttered to herself, running her fingers over the elegant woodwork of one of the doorways.

"It is," Sherlock agreed. "It's listed. Can't fix it, can't tear it down. Well, it could be fixed, but my parents never wanted the headache." *Or the reminder, probably, was left unspoken.*

"Mm. What about Mycroft? Couldn't he just cut through the red tape, bend some rules?"

"English Heritage are a law unto themselves, beyond the scope of even his power," he said, possibly repeating something from Mycroft, if the intonation was anything to go by.

"Scary," she said.

His lips quirked into one of those tiny, soft smiles of his.
They went upstairs; he showed her his old bedroom. There was no trace of his presence as a child; no furniture or crayon scribbles over the green and blue diamond motif wallpaper or an errant button or plastic army man to mark the room as belonging to the little boy he once was. The ceiling was sagging, water-stained, and the wallpaper was peeling; the window was almost opaque with thirty-odd years of grime.

She ran a finger through the dust; he stood behind her while she looked out the window taking in the view he had as a child. His arms went around her waist and he hooked his chin over her shoulder; she leaned back into him.

It was still hard to believe how easy he was with his affection. She supposed he'd only ever needed permission.

"I always thought I'd live here again someday. If I ever had a reason to leave London."

She wasn't sure, but she felt like there was a very big question in those simple statements. What that question was, however...

She said the first thing that really came to mind. "I liked growing up in the country. I mean, as a teenager I hated it, but as an adult I can see the appeal again."

It was, apparently, the right answer, or close enough; he leaned his head against hers and held her just the littlest bit tighter.

They stood like that for she didn't know how long, no more than another minute or two but it felt like years. Eventually he let her go, pulled her away again, showed her the other rooms.

"That one was Eurus's," he said, only gesturing to the door from a few feet away rather than going inside. "That's where the fire started."

The walls were blackened and there was a hole in the floor; she assumed they were safe enough in the hallway.

"Have you heard anything from Mycroft yet about when you can go back to see her again?" she asked, speaking before actually thinking. After everything else today, that was probably not a conversation to have again.
"Not yet. I thought you were opposed to it?"

"Only, I still don't like the idea of you going into that place, and what could happen, but I know you need it," she said. "So... not really opposed. Just concerned. But I do trust you."

"Thank you," he said. Then, "Let's go home."

She couldn't agree more. It was only a little past noon and she was feeling tired; she couldn't imagine he was faring any better.

"Will you drive? I'm starting to get a headache," he said when they made it down to the car.

"Do you want something for it? I have—"

"Half a chemist's shop in your bag, I'm well aware." He gave her a small smile. "No thank you."

She took the keys and got in the driver's seat, set about adjusting everything. Sherlock watched her as the electric seat crept ever so slowly forward and up; he was biting his lips in an effort not to laugh.

"Shall I go back inside and see if there are any phone books my parents left behind?" he finally asked, no longer able to contain himself.

"Hilarious. Because I've never heard that one before," she scowled at him.

"As long as your feet reach the pedals..." he shrugged.

"In a minute, my foot's going to go somewhere else."

*

He stood in front of Musgrave Hall without his coat and jacket, his sleeves rolled to the elbows,
Molly beside him.

He’d got tired of yellow car and the sights of the A24 (country lane, country lane, house, country lane but with a gate this time, OH MY GOD COWS, country lane, house-house-zebra crossing-pub, country lane); he had things to do inside his own head and he could only stare at Molly so much before she started to fidget, anyway.

So, Mind Palace.

Musgrave Hall. Not as imposing in the daytime, just another shamble of an old country house that the National Trust had no interest in.

Molly craned her neck, squinted at the plywood on the roof just as she’d done when they got there.

_First you should do something about that, I think_, she said. _Maybe the windows, too._

He passed his hand over the outline of the building, re-shingling the roof with period-appropriate slates, adding moss and weathering and texture; he put the glass back in the windows, swapped out splintered and cracked grey wood for new, white frames. He left the decaying lime plaster, but fixed the worst of the crumbling brick. Replaced the overgrown weeds with flower beds; Mummy had never fusses much with them, but he remembered her with pruning shears and a sun hat and jam jars with fresh flowers on the table in the kitchen. He added a patch of yellow tulips just for Molly, complete with tacky praying mantis yard art (and oh, he was sure there was a metaphor in that somewhere, but he wasn’t about to examine it right then).

_The door’s right there, Sherlock. You have the keys. Stop hesitating._

"I'm not hesitating, you're hesitating."

_Not your finest comeback, even in your own head_, Mary said, coming to stand on Molly's other side. _Go on, then._

"You didn't bring John?"

_Someone needs to watch Rosie. I did bring his gun, though._
He smiled. If anything terrible lurked inside (and oh, it most certainly did), he had Molly to nice it away and, if that didn't work, Mary would just shoot it.

"Right then," he said, squaring his shoulders and striding to the door.

*I like the riding boots, by the way,* Mary said to Molly somewhere behind him. *Pretty sure he does, too.*

*Oh yeah,* Molly agreed.

It was dark inside, night time. Everything looked as it had that night with Eurus, rather than it had earlier in the day. The television off to the side was on, snow and static and no picture. He heard the floorboards creak; the sounds of children's footsteps pounding up and down the hall overhead.

He closed his eyes, breathed. He felt Molly's hand at the small of his back, heard Mary double check the magazine on the Sig. When he opened his eyes, the space had changed; daylight filtered in through new windows, the walls were plastered and painted, the woodwork cleaned and refinished, chairs and rugs and things added where appropriate. He knew it would be the easiest room to do.

He wound through the maze of hallways to the kitchen, restoring with a thought as he went, Mary and Molly behind him like the three of them were one dog and one stoner shy of an episode of Scooby Doo. Flickering-Redbeard-the-dog and Wiggins appeared briefly in the doorway to what had been the Victorian-era sluice room, but was the laundry room when he was a child; he waved them both away, pulled the door closed with a thought.

He observed the scene in the kitchen. The golden light of late afternoon fell in patterns on the floor, any time from spring to autumn, he couldn't tell. Dinnertime. Mummy, somewhere in her forties; Mycroft about thirteen, Eurus five. Dad wasn't there. Some godawful casserole slathered in white sauce on their plates, everyone had a glass of milk.

He wasn't sure if it was a memory or a composite sketch.

Eurus, apropos of nothing, reached across the table and knocked Sherlock's glass over. It fell onto his plate and rolled away, milk going everywhere.
His younger self didn't say a word, just looked first at Mummy, whose back was turned, then Mycroft, whose mouth was open, eyebrows knitted together. His brother was going to scold Eurus, then Mummy would scold Mycroft, then she would give a milder scolding to Eurus, and then she would fuss over Sherlock and he'd get dirty looks from the two across the table for being the favourite.

His younger self leapt from his chair and began apologizing, laying it on thick and working himself into a state because he'd knocked over his glass and Mummy, don't be cross, it was an accident, I'll clean it up. Mycroft scowled and contradicted him and he screamed, his little face contorting and going red with rage, calling his brother a liar.

Mummy closed her eyes and white-knuckled the tea towel she'd grabbed to sop up the milk, her lips thin and bloodless as she pressed them together.

Sherlock realized that she knew exactly what he was doing, but she felt powerless in the face of her own children. He felt a surge of anger at his father for leaving her alone to deal with it while he was off project-managing at some drill site or twiddling his thumbs through meetings or whatever it was he did.

Of course it wasn't his fault either; it wasn't as though children magically paid for themselves. And the fossil fuel industry wasn't exactly booming in West Sussex. He could have easily uprooted the family and gone to Aberdeen or Lancashire or Oklahoma, but they'd chosen as unfettered and idyllic an upbringing for their children as they could manage.

Molly's arm slipped around his waist, her body warm at his side.

_It'll be different for us_, she said. _Then, We'll make mistakes, too. But we've got more help than they ever had._

With that, Mary patted him on the shoulder and gave him a small, cocky smile as she stepped past him. She took aim at the pendant light over the kitchen table and fired. The chain broke and the light crashed to the table, exploding like a supernova when it hit. His hand came up to shield his eyes automatically; when he let it drop, the kitchen was completely different. Modern but rustic, whites and blues and granite like Molly's kitchen. Shadow shapes; the impression of children running around the table; a taller figure and a smaller one corralling them to their seats. There were other figures, too; adults milling around in the background.

He tried to remember if his parents had had friends. He couldn't recall a single cocktail party or summer barbecue or holiday gathering; even birthday parties had been just the five of them. Well, six; he had the vague notion that Victor had been present for at least two of his. No other friends from school, not that he could recall having any.
Eurus hadn't gone to school, he remembered. They'd tried with nursery school, he thought, but she hadn't ever gone to his primary school. His parents must have made some kind of special arrangements; he didn't have any of that information. There was just so much he didn't know.

_If you ask, they'll tell you_, Mycroft said, appearing in the kitchen, leaning back against the worktop with his hands resting on the edge. His tie was loosened and his sleeves rolled up, as casual as he ever got. _Do keep in mind what it will cost them to do so, brother mine. Is it worth it to make them relive it? Are the details truly that important now, thirty years later?_

"Well, yes, considering the giant holes in my memory," Sherlock said, annoyed.

Mary handed him her mobile.

_It isn't just about you, though, is it?_ John asked on the screen, Rosie wriggling in his grasp as she reached for the phone. _For once, maybe exercise a little restraint and just let something go, yes?_

He looked at Rosie and had the terrible thought, _what if she turns out bad?_ before pushing it away; she wasn't his, obviously, but he wouldn't love her any less no matter what she did. And yes, it did hurt to think of her life being anything other than happy and healthy and sane and successful, especially since he'd been the one to rob her of her moth—

The slap was sharp, sudden.

_No_, Molly said, staring him down.

He rubbed his cheek, looked away. Those sentiments weren't going away anytime soon, whether he (or she) liked it or not.

_You see, Sherlock, it isn't easy to care. This is what I tried to protect you from._ Mycroft fixed him with a heavy gaze.

_If you're finished wallowing in guilt now, we've got a lot more ground to cover_, Mary said, plucking her mobile from his fingers and giving Rosie-on-screen a bright smile before disconnecting the call.
They ascended the rickety, narrow staircase that had once been for servants that Mummy had never let them use because it was too dilapidated; they ended up in the wing that had mostly been closed off because it was more space than they needed. Old paintings, old furniture (some of which resided with Mycroft, now), dust and sheets and heavy draperies. Hide-and-seek, playing explorers and looking for treasures, not much else in there. He left those rooms as they were, something to come back to later. The ghosts needed somewhere to live, too.

They took the next set of stairs, up to the attic and what had once been the schoolroom and the servants' quarters; they used to play in the schoolroom and Mycroft had taken over the largest of the servants' rooms as his own personal study. Everything on the top floor had burned in the fire or been destroyed by smoke and water.

He restored Mycroft's room to what he remembered it being; stacks of books and pictures of Golden-Age Hollywood stars on the walls (autographed and framed; they'd belonged to someone who had lived in the house before, dug out of an album in a wardrobe), snacks and sweets stashed with the odd comic book and action figure. Sometimes it was easy to forget Mycroft had once been a child, too.

He moved into the schoolroom. He didn't like it there; it was dank and dark and smelled like stagnant water. They'd spent countless rainy afternoons arranging desks into ships, building forts, drawing on the chalkboard, playing board games and Legos and building obstacle courses for matchbox cars. There was an ancient steamer trunk with a lid that could sever a finger if it fell; inside were clothes pilfered from old wardrobes, enough to put on any play they wanted. Mostly they made Mycroft wear the patchy mink stoles and elbow-length gloves. No wonder he was such a good Lady Bracknell—maybe he had a touch of Uncle Rudy to him after all.

Molly shot him a look and he rolled his eyes. She didn't like it when they picked at each other.

He could see the shadow of a child in the farthest corner; the horror-film lighting in the room sent a chill down his spine.

Cloudy, foetid water began to run toward him as the figure started to approach; its gait was uneven, shambling. Sherlock turned his head away and closed his eyes tightly; he didn't want to see.

*You've seen corpses that have been in the water before, Sherlock,* Molly said. She sounded clinical, not unkind but not particularly warm like she usually was.

Image files flashed behind his eyes, skin and bloat and distortion, colours and textures and peeling
He felt a tiny hand slip into his. It was cold and wet and too squishy; he froze, terrified.

"I can't, Molly. Please, don't make me. Please."

This is your Mind Palace, Sherlock. You're the one that controls it. Only you. Tell me what you want to see instead.

"I... Not a corpse. I want... I want to see who he would have grown into. If we'd grown up together. Who—who he'd be now."

I think we can do that. You're running a Cray up here, she tapped his temple, not some Sinclair ZX81 you dug out of someone's basement. Go big.

The hand slipped out of his grasp and he opened his eyes, heart pounding and throat too dry to swallow.

In front of him stood a man, young-ish for forty but laugh lines around his warm brown eyes; his skin was tan, cheeks and nose red from a life spent outdoors; clean-shaven but was the type that could just as easily wear a neatly-trimmed beard and look rugged and sporty, rather than greasy and unkempt (like Sherlock himself, a fact he'd always rather lamented); his red hair was short and spiky, a kind of finger-mussed and windswept rakish style; his grin was wide and white and easy, the sort that promised a wild night out with the lads that ended with someone in lockup or running from an angry husband in some foreign city.

He stood with his hands on his hips, casual, open, but still commanding; he wore Navy Blue 3C Dress, but it could have just as easily been a rugby shirt with the collar popped and a pair of designer jeans and trainers.

You know, for someone who claims not to even know the gender of the PM, he looks an awful lot like Prince Harry, Mary said next to him, jostling him with a friendly elbow.

Molly, the traitor, laughed. (At least they were getting on inside his head.)

"I watch the news. I can't help if some of the inanity gets retained."
Victor laughed, a hearty, joyful thing. It wasn't an actual sound, but the idea of a sound. Sherlock felt an answering smile spread across his face.

What does he do for a living? Molly asked.

"He's stationed in the South China Sea. Patrols the shipping lanes."

So he fights pirates.

"He fights pirates."

What else? What about his life?

The room darkened and a sheet unfurled over the wall with the chalkboard; a slide projector shuffled and started clicking up images. Exotic locations, tropical forests and beaches and tall rocks, cultural landmarks and tourist attractions from around the world; in each was Victor with a different beautiful woman (or women) under his arm, most of them Southeast Asian, though some possibly Korean or Japanese. A girl in every port.

Kids?

"None that he knows of. But probably not. I don't imagine him being the cavalier sort."

Is he happy?

"Yes, I rather think he is."

Good. I want you to keep him here. I think... I think he'll keep the other him at bay, because he doesn't want to be remembered like that. So just... remember him like this. And, y'know, he's probably out there in the Berenstein Universe rappelling down ropes onto rusty old fishing boats and rounding up bad guys as we speak, Molly said, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze.

"The Berenstein Universe?" He had no idea what she was talking about; a quick scan of his files revealed nothing.
Google it, Mary said. Probably don't ask her about it, that would be weird.

He looked between the two of them and shook his head; he still couldn't help but sometimes think women were a different species entirely.

So, are we going to get this place cleaned up or what? Mary asked.

Sherlock closed his eyes, opened them. Everything was freshly painted in bright colours; a modern child's playroom—gender neutral, because even he couldn't predict the future. There were shelves of books and plastic bins with toys and art supplies and one of those rugs that was printed with a road, lots of pillows and cushions and the costume trunk with the lid fixed so no little fingers were lost.

Adult Victor took down a board game from one of the shelves and began to set it up; young Victor (hale and hearty, not the other one) came running in and flopped down across from him to help.

He might start moving some of the Rosie things from the nebulous space he'd set up as baby when Mary was pregnant; most of it was just retained facts about growth and development, nothing about Rosie herself. Now that her personality was emerging and he was observing more of her likes and dislikes and quirks he was going to need a more suitable space. Later.

They moved on, taking the main staircase down to the first floor and the hallway that led to the family bedrooms. His parents' room was the first, the door closest to the stairway. He waved a hand inside and made it into about what their bedroom in the cottage looked like now, except with less clutter. He got his hoarding tendencies from his father, who had just about every issue of every magazine he'd subscribed to since 1997 (and would have more, if Mummy hadn't tossed everything from before and after their four-year stint in the States back then), along with boxes of old radios and cameras and digital calculators older than Sherlock himself.

He made a mental note to never, under any circumstance, let his future wife and his father go to a car boot sale together.

You really must tell them soon, Sherlock, Mycroft said from the doorway of his old bedroom.

"Yes, fine. I'll phone tonight. Two calls in a week, Mummy will think I'm either using again or dying."
Or she'll be overjoyed one of her children actually turned out somewhat normal after all.

He rolled his eyes and waved his hand to make Mycroft's room into the Diogenes because he was too lazy to think up anything else. It was his brother's favourite place, anyway. He even gave him a never-ending sweets buffet.

Molly pinched his arm. Hard.

"Yes, I know it as well as you do, saw the signs for years, I'm not completely dense. But at least in here he doesn't have to worry about getting any fatter. Food makes him happy, and when he's happy, he's less of a wanker."

My, if you haven't grown up, brother mine. Did you hit your head?

He made Mycroft start to expand like Violet Beauregarde, three buttons popping off his waistcoat as he instantly put on two stone.

Molly stomped on his foot and ground the blunt heel of her boot into his toes. Thank goodness she wasn't that violent in real life. Well, mostly.

"Fine," he said, letting Mycroft deflate back to normal. "You have no sense of whimsy."

Molly just looked at him, unimpressed.

They moved on to his old bedroom. He stood in the centre, not sure what to do with it. Putting it back as it was when he was a child hardly seemed fitting. The space was still undeniably his and felt like a bedroom; he didn't want to turn it into a lumber room or a library or a lab (though he did know what room he'd use for that; there was a sitting room on the ground floor that had its own chimney, which could be retrofitted for a fume hood, but that was later).

He supposed recreating Baker Street might be appropriate. No, that wasn't really right, either. The idea of a bedroom without Molly seemed just as alien now as as bedroom with her in it would have been two weeks ago.
They'd already talked about furniture and redecorating at the flat (still technically her flat, but really theirs, now), it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to make it into a variation of their bedroom as he'd been picturing it.

Walls painted a shade of blue somewhere between Prussian and Cadet but paler, wardrobes and dressers and the vanity table because he liked it, lamps and curtains. A print of Klimt's *The Kiss* as the artwork over the bed, since it reminded him of her (okay, them). A green-and-floral duvet, nothing naff, something to coordinate with the painting like *Field of Poppies* (he'd have to look online, something like it probably actually existed out in the real world, worth investigating). It would be a little busy, but as long as it was inside his head, it really didn't matter. Patterns and textures were good for holding memories, a bit like velcro.

He realized he was maybe taking a bit of inspiration from her outfit for Sunday. He was so besotted it was ridiculous.

*Oh, it's cute. And you're allowed to be,* Mary said, linking her arm with his and giving a little squeeze. *Enjoy everything you can now, because you know it's not all fun and games later, even if nothing tragic happens.*

He took her words as a simple truth; he reached out and laced his fingers with Molly's.

The only room left was Eurus's. Well, there were two other rooms along that hallway, but they'd only been very boring guest rooms decorated in cringeworthy brown and burnt orange and avocado and mustard yellow; he fixed whatever structural and cosmetic damage there might be with a thought, but left them otherwise empty. They'd be useful one day, probably.

The three of them moved down the hall to stand in front of Eurus's door.

Adult Eurus stood behind six year old Eurus, both of their faces completely blank. Like dolls. Or death masks.

He wanted to create a space in which the both of them could coexist; a space where they could both be the people he knew were in there, somewhere. The baby sister he made laugh. The younger, lost sister that held onto him so tightly while something inside her broke and something else started to mend. He wanted somewhere safe for them, a tiny haven untouched by his own anger and hate and betrayal and everything else he felt for them. They at least deserved that much.

He fixed the hole in the floor, laid out soft carpets for perpetually bare feet. Baby Sister hated shoes and it had always been a fight to get them on her; Lost Sister only wore those ballerina flats because the floor was too cold and she wasn't allowed socks (and he really didn't want to think
because the floor was too cold and she wasn't allowed socks (and he really didn't want to think about why).

He painted the walls a light basil green; green was the colour of life, of growth. He chose shades of brown and beige and cream for draperies and lampshades and cushions; kept the textures natural, neutral, the kind of thing that wouldn't be overstimulating, linen and jute and suede. There was only one bed; they were the same person and now that he knew what it was like to sleep next to someone as both an adult and a child (being bigger, being smaller; the protector, the protected), he wanted that feeling of security for his sister(s) as well.

No toys or books for either of them; extraneous. Two violins. Pot plants, lots of them, clustered around the windows. Relaxing, safe, soothing. And warm, telomeres be damned.

He was satisfied that they would be alright there—not happy, but not rampaging—and left the room; he pulled the door closed and blinked a series of hasps and padlocks and deadbolts into being. He was hopeful, not stupid.

Although, if Moriarty could escape being chained up in a straight jacket, Eurus could probably rewrite the entire place into a space station or an amusement park and he'd be none the wiser. The thought of his mind no longer belonging to him was, to say the least, an unpleasant one; he reached out and Molly was there to take his hand and centre him.

He really couldn't let himself get too dependent on this. On her. Inside his head or out of it.

"Are you going to have another panic attack because you have feelings?" Mary asked. Rather unnecessarily cruelly, he thought.

"No."

*The more you have to love, the more you worry about losing it. Welcome to adulthood, Sherlock,* Mycroft said from the doorway to his room. He was smiling around a pastry.

Mary rolled her eyes. *He's not worried about losing Molly. Well, he is, but he's a lot more worried about losing himself.*

*Yeah, that's on me,* John said, stepping out from one of the spare rooms. Well then, he knew what was getting moved over to there. John was scattered all over the place, in cardboard boxes and scraps of paper wedged into case files, pieces lying around at Baker Street and crammed haphazard into his own flat with Mary-and-the-baby; probably about time he got consolidated and
organized, too.

Mary walked down the hall and took Rosie from John, swinging her to nestle against her side; it hurt to see. He'd prefer gory and violent and terrifyingly grotesque to the kind of ache he felt for the both of them.

_You didn't tell Molly about that_, John said, nodding to something behind Sherlock.

He turned, looked; the coffin.

_At least, you didn't tell her the bit about how you smashed it to pieces. Why's that?_

Before he could answer, he heard the first notes of Stravinsky's _Rite of Spring_ from two violins through the door to the Sisters' room. He clenched his jaw.

"I don't want her to be afraid of me. Sometimes _I'm_ afraid of me."

_Inanimate object, mate._ Then, John looked at him. Really looked at him. His posture was stiff, military; only his head moved when he talked. _You're afraid of me. You're afraid you have the same capacity for violence that I do._

Phantom pain in his ribs, his eye reminded him of the rather vicious beating John had given him, deserved as it was.

He had the fleeting thought that Molly didn't know the extent of it; he'd played it off as his own fault when she'd fussed over his eye and later taken his stitches out. He'd been careful not to let her see him without a shirt, either. She would probably be angry if she knew and he said he wouldn't lie, but he hadn't even thought of telling her and he wasn't about to stoke that fire again; he pushed the guilt away, avoided looking at her. Avoided looking at the coffin.

Sherlock had been in many, many fights over the years. Him-or-me, I-will-actually-die-if-I-don't-win fights that he'd been lucky to walk away from. When John had hit him, he wasn't trying to kill him or incapacitate him; he was treating him as an object. Everything he was raging against made flesh; Sherlock was Mary's coffin. And it terrified Sherlock that he could be the same way, channelling his own rage into pure destruction. He'd never been so out of control before.
It was abhorrent. He was above that. But he'd thought he was above human connection and love and its physical expression, and there he was, tangled up in a family and not discounting the possibility of eventually adding one or more of his own genetic contributions to the mix, should Molly be amenable.

Now that those floodgates were jammed open, he had no control over what might come through. If his newly-acknowledged capacity for love was nearly infinite, then what about his capacity for the opposite?

_Honestly, I don't even know why he thinks he needs me in here, he's so much better at tormenting himself than I ever was_, Moriarty said, bored, leaning against the wall next to Eurus's door, dressed in Westwood once again, hair slicked, inspecting his nails. A single violin agreed with a staccato giggle.

_One would assume you're here to provide a counter-example to his fears about his self-control issues_, Mycroft said lightly. _He did so want to throw you off of that roof._

_Oh, please. He's still just sore I beat him to the punch. So to speak. He wouldn't have done it anyway._

He started to feel powerless, out of control, too many voices and too much noise; he was cornered and they were all so much bigger than he was, so much louder. He had nowhere to run; he tried to summon Redbeard like he used to to calm himself down, but then he remembered. Murky water began to drip from the ceiling, the walls.

Lost, alone, inside his own head, a helpless child surrounded by demons.

This was exactly what he'd been afraid of. He dropped into a crouch, huddled into himself with his arms wrapped around his knees. He closed his eyes, tried to pull back into his mind even though he knew he wouldn't be able to (or if he were, that he'd never get out; the inkling of a plot of a film tickled his mind but he brushed it away).

And then he felt a hand on his cheek; tiny, warm, unpleasantly sticky and smelling of marmalade. Rosie patted his face and burbled something motivational at him; she was quite possibly the most enthusiastic, vivacious human he'd ever met.

He wondered, briefly, if her one year old brain had already begun developing that extroversion as a coping mechanism in the face of her own loss. Was that possible?
She wobbled and her knees folded; her backside met the ground with a crinkly, padded thump. She laughed; she always laughed when her legs gave out under her. He hoped she maintained that aspect of her disposition as she got older. She didn't sit still for long; she began to crawl away.

She made a break for the stairs; he scooped her up, once again in his adult body, and let her lead the way (making a mental note that they needed baby gates for the stairs at the flat, why didn't Molly have them already?).

He wasn't running away, it was a tactical retreat. He'd confront everything they wanted him to confront later. Even he had limits and pushing them wasn't fun any longer, not since his last relapse. Really, even before that. Jumping off a building and spending two years alone like a wild animal had mellowed him a bit. And, well, so had meeting John. He'd been slowly changing without realizing it for quite a while, it seemed.

Rosie ordered him outside with a single, demanding little finger; as they walked through the back garden, he heard Eurus's song drift down from the open window above. It didn't bother him as much as he thought it should have. Maybe he was just all out of fucks to give for the day.

He found a level spot amongst the roots of the old beech that was everyone's favourite tree; Mycroft used to read there while Sherlock drew in the soft dirt with a stick and Eurus would spin in endless circles around the trunk, fingering the bark and making up nonsense rhymes (which were probably doomsday prophecies or actually her own translation of the complete works of Rumi, God only knew with her). They were surprisingly nice memories.

He reclined against the tree, comfortable in the way no real tree would ever be; he put Rosie down next to him to play in the dirt. Good for her immune system, he reasoned.

It was midday, midsummer, too warm outside but cool in the shade; he was surrounded by the gentle sounds of bees and birds and the rustle of leaves in the breeze. He closed his eyes and breathed.

He let himself fall asleep.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Friday evening, Saturday.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone again for all the love <3 And thank you to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch.

One more chapter to go after this but, as it isn't finished yet, it's probably not going to show up Sunday (I'll have something unrelated and kind of unpleasant to tide everybody over, though). At least it's a long one. And there's some fluff. And then, eventually, there will be an epilogue. Might even be a sequel, if I can get my shit together enough to get it down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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"Mum? Hi," Molly answered the phone. She'd just flipped the second cake layer onto the cooling rack; she gently started to peel the parchment from the bottom.

"Molly! Have you talked to Ellie yet?"

"What? No. It's a little early for her to be phoning. Is everything alright?" It would only be half-seven in the morning over there; the kids didn't usually let her have a lie-in, but she never phoned before they were all fed and parked in front of the telly, always after eight at the absolute earliest.

"Oh. I won't ruin the surprise, then!" Mum was too excited. Not *they're finally able to visit* excited. Which probably only meant one thing.

"Is she pregnant again?" Molly slumped, closing her eyes and clenching her jaw. Of course. The biggest thing to happen to her in forever and *of course* Ellie stole her thunder. And it wasn't even on purpose this time. It was her own fault for not calling her Mum sooner.

"I said I wouldn't ruin it!" She could picture the expression on her Mum's face, eyes wide and cheeks sucked in while she pursed her lips, fingers coming up to her mouth as if they could keep the secret in. Molly made that face herself sometimes and it annoyed her when she realized she
was doing it because it annoyed her when Mum did it.

Sherlock chose that moment to come lumbering down the stairs. She’d heard the shower running; he’d been up for the last fifteen minutes or so but he still looked a little sluggish.

"Well, you already did, a bit. I'll pretend I'm surprised anyway. Just a sec." She moved the phone away from her mouth and turned toward Sherlock as he went to the cupboard to get himself a glass. "How's your head?" she asked.

He made a face and tilted his head side-to-side in combination with a kind of wiggle that meant better, mostly, but still not great. He looked more tired than in pain.

"Do you want me to warm something up for you? I wasn't planning on making anything and we have leftovers that should be eaten."

"Who are you talking to?" her mother asked.

"Sherlock," she answered her mother, then waited for his answer.

Molly had never talked much with her Mum about Sherlock or the various places he'd had in her life up until that point, but Mum knew some of it. She knew about how Sherlock would stay at her flat because she'd had the bad timing to phone once just after a row about it with Tom. She knew they'd been friends for years since Molly had mentioned she wasn't going to be alone for Christmas way back when, it's fine, Greece is a lot nicer than Leeds, send me a postcard. She knew a little about him dying and little more about him coming back, but only from the papers and not from Molly herself.

"I think I can manage the microwave by myself, dear," Sherlock said, leaning into the fridge to rummage.

So 'dear' was going to be a thing, apparently. At least, a sarcastic thing. Which was okay, even if it was a little weird. Pet names were weird. She didn't even want to have that conversation because it was weird just by itself. But she could live with dear. She'd draw the line at pet or love or (hurgh) darling, though.

"Is he there again? Doesn't he have a home?"
"Yes he does, and he's currently in it." She realized there was a little bit of Sherlock in the clipped way it had come out.

Mum had always been that way, treating Molly's male friends and boyfriends like they were just strays, dead weight her daughter was dragging around. She'd never done that with Ellie, but Ellie was the older one, the kind that attracted the same sort of bloke that had been Mum's type, at least on the surface.

She glanced over to Sherlock; she could tell by the line of his shoulders that he was listening.

Well, she supposed, he should know what he's in for.

"What do you mean? He's living with you now? When did that happen?"

"A while ago," Molly answered vaguely.

"So you did leave Tom for him. You really are your father's daughter."

Molly closed her eyes, pressed her lips together. Her Mum had never directly made the accusation before, but it still didn't come as a surprise. Mum always had a way of pulling out Molly's biggest insecurities like they were an affront to her own character and her skills as a mother—which was, to a degree, how she saw them.

"I left Tom because I didn't want to marry him," she replied simply. She heard Sherlock rifling through the cutlery drawer; he had a preference for certain forks (or spoons) for different foods. *Weirdo*, she thought affectionately, even as the noise got on her nerves.

"Because you had the other one."

It wasn't exactly untrue on more than one level, but it wasn't even close to the whole story.

She squeezed the material of her pinny tight in her free hand. "We weren't together. Not in a relationship, not sleeping together. My problems with Tom had nothing to do with Sherlock."
She didn't need to explain it. It was bad enough that it was still all very complicated in her own mind, even if it was firmly in the past. She didn't need anyone else's commentary on it, especially not her Mum's.

Her Mum paused to sip her tea, probably gearing up for one of her judgement-laden tirades; she was always worse, picked at Molly more, when Ellie was pregnant. Which was all the bloody time, anyway.

"You ask why I don't phone more often, this is why," Molly said, taking advantage of the opening. She hated how high her voice got when she was like this.

And so it began; the endless rounds of *I just want what's best for you* and *you always trust the wrong ones*, projecting herself onto Molly. Molly placating and arguing by turns, *I know you do, I'm an adult and I decide who I trust*, on and on.

It wasn't a loud argument; it was an old and tired one. She started wiping down the worktop while they went through the routine.

Molly knew that at the core of it, it was only because her Mum did love her and didn't want to see her younger daughter get hurt in the same way she'd been. She didn't want Molly to be like her Dad in that respect, either, because she was like him in so many other ways.

Trying to fly under the radar her whole life meant everyone underestimated her. It didn't always work to her advantage; sometimes they mistook amicable for daft. Or sneaky. Which she was, sometimes. She never claimed to be a saint.

She knew her Mum was upset, too, that she'd miss out on the life of yet another grandchild because of the distance; she'd be there for the birth, probably, but it would be another few years before she saw them again after that. It might change after Bob retired, but that was still at least four years away. Ellie had broken her heart when she moved away. Mum would never say as much, though, because that was just how she was.

"I just wish you could find someone that makes you happy," her Mum sighed, finally, after winding down. It was as much a slight as it was a lament, implying her standards were too high and she was uncompromising (which was rich, considering how her Mum regarded all the men in Molly's life in the first place).

Usually this was the point where she reasserted that she didn't need anyone else to be happy, she was doing just fine on her own. Just because she wanted her own private island in the Caribbean didn't mean her life was unhappy without it. It was as much to convince herself as it was to
convince her mother, sometimes, but everyone got a little lonely now and then.

"I have," she said instead, glancing at Sherlock. He was watching her as he ate, plate in one hand and fork in the other as he leaned against the worktop, his expression guarded while he filled in the other half of the conversation in his head. Too anxious to even sit down; he knew he was being judged, rejected.

Molly felt a little hurt for him. A little bit for herself, too, but it was an old and small hurt that she'd shake off after she rung off. Sherlock, on the other hand, would probably take it to heart. She didn't like that.

"So there has been something going on with that... Sherlock." Mum said his name like *slag* or *homewrecker*.

"Not for as long as you think, but yes." Here goes, she thought, feeling like she'd just reached the split-second on a roller coaster when the car began to tilt and she could see everything below her, the heartbeat between the anticipation and the drop. "We're engaged."

"Oh," her Mum said. She sounded disappointed, maybe a bit pitying; disapproving. Then, "Are you pregnant?"

Really, she should have been expecting it, considering Ellie's news and her Mum's... Mumness. Even so, she was momentarily at a loss for words.

"Are you actually serious? It isn't 1970, Mum, I'm not going to marry some bloke just because he gets me up the duff! Which I am *not*.

"I'm only asking," she defended. "Honestly, you have to admit it's a bit out of the blue, if what you're saying about not being involved with him for very long is true. Is there something else going on?"

Molly shook her head, threw her hand in the air in an Oh my God gesture, rubbed her hairline. She kept her eyes unfocused, on the floor; she didn't want to drag Sherlock into it any more than he was already so she wasn't going to look directly at him.

"Is it really so hard to believe that the man I love feels the same about me and actually wants to spend the rest of his life with me?"
"I didn't mean it like that and you know it. But you've hardly mentioned him and I've seen things about him in the papers, what am I supposed to think? And what about Tom? It's so soon."

"Soon? It was a year and a half ago, which is more than the time we were actually even together--"

"You rushed into that and now you're rushing into this--"

"Jesus Christ, Mum, why can't you ever just be happy for me?" She didn't like to shout at her Mum; when she was a kid it might have even got her a smack, but she'd had enough.

"It's not that I'm not happy for you. I just don't want you to get your heart broken. I know you're getting older and you feel like time is running out--"

"I'm thirty-six, Mum, not ninety. Fuck's sake." She cringed; she could only remember a handful of times she'd said fuck in front of her Mum. It wasn't as though her Mum used it very often, either.

"And thirty-six isn't too old to be fooled by a man," her Mum said.

"Oh for the love—He's not some—" she groped for a word "—Svengali!"

She wanted to just lie down on the floor and kick her feet and flop around like a dying fish. Why was it always like this?

"Fine, it's your life, you know it better than I do," her mother said after a weighted pause. She twisted the knife even as she raised the white flag. Yet another accusation was left unspoken; Molly was a bad daughter that didn't talk to her mother enough.

There wasn't much more to say after the truce was called, just some tense, idle chit-chat about Mum's work and Bob and the full report on the state of Ellie's brood. Molly had only met the eldest two, just the once when they'd visited ten years ago; she would like to see them more, but there was no way she was flying to Australia. She could handle three or four hours, but a full day on a plane? Not a chance in hell.
Molly didn't tell her about Rosie's party or Easter lunch; she felt a bit bad for not inviting her. Mum didn't know Rosie or John (or anyone else there), so it would be uncomfortable. Not that they'd come anyway, they always went to Bob's daughter Julia's.

Finally, the whole agonizing ordeal was over; she rang off and set the phone down and just stared at it for a moment while she felt Sherlock's gaze burning a hole in her back. He'd finished eating and put his plate in the sink already, but he'd stayed to listen to the rest of the conversation even after it had settled down.

"Well, that was an enjoyable way to spend the last twenty minutes," she said finally, as much to herself as to him.

She straightened up from her slouch and went to the sink to wash her hands; she had things to do. Mum wasn't going to rain on her parade.

She turned on the tap and risked a glance over at Sherlock. He was watching her, but not just idly. He was in the plateau phase right before a deduction. *Oh goodie*, she thought. *The fun never ends.*

Just like that, he shifted back into himself on standby. "Svengali?" he asked, amused.

"You're not going to let me forget that one, are you?"

"Nope."

*

"Here, try this and tell me what you think," she said, handing him her glass when he wandered back into the kitchen. She was road-testing sparklers and cocktails for Sunday's lunch. Mostly because she was looking for an excuse for a drink, he thought; two birds with one stone.

She had music playing and she was keeping herself busy; it was her preferred method of dealing with unpleasant emotions. She did the same things when she was at a baseline level of contentedness, so she was actively willing herself back into that state. He admired her for the way she was able to do that; if he wasn't repressing or ignoring his own feelings, he was wallowing in them. Molly was like a blacksmith, bending and reshaping hers into what she wanted them to be.
He took a sip and he wasn't even sure what he was tasting. Gin, cucumber, and abject misery. Probably best not to say that out loud.

"This one is..." He took another sip, just to make sure it was as terrible as he thought. "Are you trying to lower everyone's expectations before the meal?"

"Think it'll work?" she asked dryly.

"No," he said lightly. He set the glass closer to the end of the worktop, on the far side of her two maybes.

He knew she was still upset over the call with her mother. He also knew there was little he could do about it. He really wasn't bothered that her mother disliked him without ever meeting him; that was the default. It did bother him that Molly was bothered.

He didn't really know how to offer her support, even though he felt the overwhelming need to. Most of the time he was able to ignore or dismiss the effect his instinct for compassion had on him; he hated that frantic feeling of helplessness he got when someone he cared about was hurting and there was nothing he could immediately do to make it stop. Now that he was remembering more and more of who he was as a child—before he'd buried it under years of self-imposed isolation and drugs and endless distractions—it was even harder. It was like he'd only had a candle burning during a power cut and every light in the house had come back on at once.

Her posture told him that physical affection would only make it worse, even though everything in him wanted to just wrap her up in his arms and keep the entire world away from her. He'd exiled himself to the sofa for as long as he could stand it just to give her the space she needed. He wondered if it had been long enough.

He felt like he hadn't touched her enough today; the need for it was less a craving and more a compulsion. He knew the neurochemistry behind it, but knowing didn't mitigate the effects. Touching was good, anyway. Strengthened the pair-bond, made a relationship healthier in the long run. Really, every single brush of fingertips was an investment in their future.

For something to do, he picked up one of the 'maybe' drinks and swirled it, sniffed it, took a sip. This one was better, lemon and elderflower, sweet; needed something, though.

"That's the frontrunner at the moment," she said, pouring a shot of crème de voilette into another glass. That one was going straight to the I-would-rather-drink-paint-thinner section. She diverted from the cocktail to click over from the recipe tab to her YouTube playlist to skip whatever song it was that came up.
"Sad Underwear Dance Party?" he asked, reading the title of the playlist out loud.

"I had a lot of lonely Saturday nights," she defended. She didn't sound particularly offended or ashamed; her tone was light.

"So you danced in your underwear."

It's not as though he'd never danced alone in his flat. Mostly ballroom, waltzing around by himself, though more dancing-dancing when he was younger and usually high. Which Molly didn't really need to hear about because even thinking about his past drug use made her angry and sad by turns. But he'd always been in at least pyjamas when he danced, not just his pants. He wondered if it was some kind of body-positive affirmation of self thing, or if she just liked being in her underwear.

"And you never have." She returned his flat question with one of her own. She scrolled and clicked on a video, turned the volume higher, went back to mixing her drink. She started to move her shoulders and hips in counterpoint in time to the music.

He glanced at the video, trying not to stare at Molly while she wiggled around. He'd never seen her dance. Well, from the corner of his eye at the wedding, but that was with the ex, and he hadn't really been in the mood to see other people having fun.

Watching her now was strange; not for the way she actually moved, which was both endearing and oddly alluring, but it was... He couldn't explain it. It felt like an intensely private moment, despite the upbeat music and her smile as she mouthed the lyrics. He swallowed against a wave of emotion that made little sense in the context. He didn't have a name for it; it was something like the shame or embarrassment at his voyeurism, but it was longing and sad and pulled at the back of his throat like thirst. Chemical misfire in a fatigued brain, he told himself.

"They're very... sweaty," he remarked, gesturing to the video. He really didn't know what else to say.

"And that's why you have a dance party in your underwear," she said, using a glass stirring rod that was most definitely lab equipment and not from some trendy kitchen collection to finish the drink.

He wanted to kiss her. He knew he was allowed, but he wasn't sure if it was appropriate and he
was having a hard time gauging the progression of her mood. He was having a hard time gauging
his own mood, for that matter. Not bad or melancholy, but... off.

She kept moving as she sipped the cocktail; she made a face that indicated it wasn't what she was
expecting and she wasn't sure what she thought of it; she took another sip before handing him the
glass.

He obliged her and yep, it was every horror he'd imagined. It was like chewing on the lining of an
old lady's handbag with a cough medicine finish.

"Molly, that's not a cocktail, it's a punishment," he said, putting the glass with the others.

She laughed, a surprised, delighted thing. Her cheeks were a bit pink from the alcohol and her
eyes sparkled with it; she stepped closer and touched her fingertips to his ribs as she pushed
herself up on her tiptoes to kiss him.

Finally, he thought, taking full advantage of what she was offering and resting his hands at her
waist, cursing the layers of fabric between his palms and her bare skin. At least it was something.

She pulled back entirely too quickly for his liking. "I have three more recipes I want to try. Fair
warning, I plan on getting at least a little bit pissed tonight."

"Shouldn't take much more than a thimbleful," he said, squeezing her waist. He knew that wasn't
even remotely true; Molly had the tolerance of a docker twice her size. She could probably drink
him under the table.

She gave him a look. "I was a medical student. Cliches exist for a reason."

Valid point, he conceded with a tilt of his head and a look up and away. Then he kissed her again
because he could. It might be the new normal, but the novelty had yet to wear off.

Molly went back to mixing her drinks and bouncing along with the music, which he enjoyed
exponentially more when she took off her jumper; she wasn't wearing a bra under her t-shirt. It
was, apparently, Christmas. She tasted the drink, he tasted the drink, it got moved into the first
spot because it was the least awful so far.
He tapped his foot in time with the music; he wasn't quite in the mood to dance, but the alcohol and Molly were getting him there. He still felt slightly disjointed, out of place inside himself.

And then the song changed to "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" and he couldn't help but smile; Mycroft had practically worn out the vinyl of his Queen albums before he'd left for school. Dancing around in the lounge while Mycroft did his homework was one of Sherlock's few fond childhood memories. He'd inherited the albums and had played them quite a bit until he'd left for school himself; he didn't like much modern music, but they were one of the few exceptions.

He waited until Molly put down the bottle she'd been pouring from and he grabbed her hand, pulling until she turned to face him. She laughed more as they moved together in time and he stepped back, held her hand as she twirled, then pulled her in closer so their hips were aligned as they rocked to the beat.

It was more than a bit surreal, he thought; his imagination knew no bounds, and yet he'd never envisioned anything like this. Every last bit of it was ridiculous, and yet there they were, and it was fun.

The song changed to something he only vaguely recognized, but he didn't care; they just kept moving. Molly paused to drain one of the glasses (the cucumber one, strange woman); in for a penny, he shrugged to himself and downed the remainder of the first runner up. He had the vague thought that this was probably what normal people's university years were like.

They danced and danced until the playlist reached a slow, down-tempo song. He wondered if she had the songs timed for when she would need a bit of a break, or if it was random. Didn't matter; he pulled her close and held her hand over his chest while his free arm wrapped around her waist. They swayed together while they caught their breaths, the music dreamy and mournful; it made him want to kiss her, so he did.

The angle of the kiss became uncomfortable; he made an executive decision and gripped Molly's waist, lifting her up onto the worktop. She goggled at him; did you really just do that?

Yes, yes I did, he answered with his expression. He was a bit surprised with it himself, honestly.

And then her legs were around his waist and his hands were sliding over her arse, along her thighs, cupping her jaw, touching her everywhere he could; they kissed like it was their last day on Earth.

"We should... sofa..." she panted against his mouth, and yes, he was in love with a brilliant woman.
He braced her thighs with his hands and leaned back, pulling her with him. Either instinct or experience had her legs tightening around him, ankles crossing over his arse; he carried her to the far end of the lounge and gently deposited her on the sofa, following her down as she laughed and laughed.

They kissed and clothes came off and it was a little awkward, but they managed to have sex right there. Molly was even more vocal when she was a bit tipsy; he found himself becoming embarrassingly more talkative as well. She rather seemed to enjoy it, though, if how fast she reached orgasm was any indicator. Part of that could have been the variant of their position, too; he’d read about the coital alignment technique and it was more of a happy accident that the sofa wasn't long enough to accommodate his height, necessitating a shift upward. He had a feeling that would be going into heavy rotation, though the sofa not as much. Trying to cuddle after was mostly impossible and he quite liked that part.

They went back to the kitchen, eventually; it was entirely too early to go to bed and the dancing and sex had been invigorating enough to make lying around for long unappealing.

"Here’s something I never thought I would say: 'Am I too drunk and shagged out to ice a cake?'" Molly said, looking down at the two cake layers on their cooling racks.

He was too drunk and shagged out for a witty comeback, so he just laughed. Giggled, really; he was still rather giddy.

She deliberated for a moment, then decided that no, she wasn't; she got the bowl of buttercream out of the fridge and put it on the worktop, then grabbed her pinny from where she'd tossed it next to the sink. She was only wearing her pants and his t-shirt (which she'd snatched off of the floor first just to go and get them a glass of water to share because she wasn't going to wander around completely starkers, though he really wished she had).

He admired the view as she rummaged through the cupboard under the breakfast bar; it was base and crude and he really should be above it, except that now looking was acceptable. Maybe even appreciated. He liked the way she looked at him, at least. Always had, really, even years ago when he was still afraid of what it could mean.

She produced a vintage metal cake carrier that would be described as 'charming' and 'shabby chic' on some dreadful kitchen blog, white with a red top and decorated with stylized poppies. If it were anyone but her he'd snort at how achingly middle-class and on-trend she was. He understood her, though, and they were so very much alike in how they made an emotional connection with certain objects of a certain aesthetic from a certain era; they were both people out of their time, in a way, only decades apart from each other. Wouldn't it be a tragedy if they'd both been born when they
belonged? He'd be an old man by the time she finally made it into the world, dying before she
ever reached adulthood.

Good God, that was maudlin. Was he a maudlin drunk? He'd only ever been drunk a handful of
times, never liked it; maybe that was why.

He was getting tired of her dancing playlist on its endless random shuffle; he moved across the
kitchen and pulled the laptop closer to himself, standing close to Molly but far enough away to
give her room to work. It was a familiar, comfortable distance; lab distance.

"I'm signing you out," he more-or-less asked, giving her time to object.

"Okay," she replied absently, moving the first layer onto the bottom of the cake carrier, just as
careful and skilled as she always was.

He watched in his peripheral vision as she gently wiggled strips of baking parchment under the
base of the cake, presumably to keep any errant icing from getting on the plate. He used his own
login and brought up one of his playlists. He had one that was exclusively original recordings of
popular music from the interwar period; it had started out as being for a case (very rare records
going missing from multiple private collections and being uploaded to a host of dummy accounts,
in the end he'd deemed the thieves righteous in their work and didn't turn them in on the condition
that the albums were returned), but he liked it, so he kept it and added to it. For some reason it had
always reminded him of warm summer nights and low lighting and gin and strawberries, like
something stolen out of someone else's memories. Probably an unexpected quirk of his
neurological architecture, like a whispering gallery or a crooked staircase.

Molly popped the lid off of the bowl and slathered a thick layer of chocolate buttercream onto the
cake.

"This is nice," she said, referring mostly to the music, he suspected, but with a rich undertone of
contentment that echoed his own.

"Mm," he agreed. He made a mental note to tell her about the case sometime, but not just then. He
gave into temptation and moved behind her, encircled her waist with his arms and swayed with
the music for a moment, pressing his cheek to her temple, planting a kiss there before letting go.
He'd only been half alive before he had this, he thought.

He went to the freezer and came away with a bag of strawberries, inspired by his weird not-
memories. He dumped some into a bowl and put the bag back, popping one in his mouth to suck
on. He rinsed one of the used cocktail glasses and dropped in two strawberries, using a spoon as
an ersatz muddler, added gin and lemon from a wedge left on the cutting board, then reached over Molly to get the honey down from the cupboard. He topped the glass off with soda water and stirred it, tried it. Exactly what he was expecting; he liked it.

He waited until Molly set the spatula down and handed her the glass; she took a sip and considered, then nodded enthusiastically.

"Oh, that's gorgeous," she said. "It's like... What's that one called, with honey and gin? Bee's Knees? Something like that. Write down what you did, we're going with that."

He was inordinately pleased with himself for such a small, silly thing. He always did like being clever.

*

She stared up at the ceiling. The happy buzz from the drinks and the second round of sex had worn off and she was already feeling gross and hungover, unable to sleep. Sherlock didn't seem to be suffering from any ill effects; he was snoring for all of England, sprawled out like he was doing some kind of interpretive dance lying down.

She couldn't help thinking about the conversation with her Mum. She really didn't want to let it affect her, but they always did. Not too old to have her heart broken, feeling the pressure to rush into something because time...

Her Mum didn't know Sherlock, though. She really wouldn't understand anyway; Dad (who really had been the love of Mum's life) may have been the kind to hide his deepest feelings behind a veneer of good humour and charm, but that was about all he had in common with Sherlock. Sherlock was brilliant and fragile and sweet; Dad was clever enough, but he had the kind of resilience that came from being the type of person who, at his very core, lived only for himself. Sure, he loved his family (all three families), and he always made sure their needs were met, but he wasn't very giving of himself. His affection was... facetious, she supposed. She didn't like thinking poorly of him, he was her Dad, but she'd known from an early age that she'd rather die alone than have a man like him.

But what if. What if Sherlock was like that, too? If this was all a lark, a novelty, if he was relishing the new experience simply because it was a new experience and not actually thinking long-term? Or rather, he only thought he was thinking long-term, because he had no personal experience with what long-term really meant. (As if she did...)
She shifted into a more comfortable position, pulling one knee up and hooking a finger around a bar of the headboard, elbow flung wide on the side opposite Sherlock.

He'd always said he didn't do relationships and he hadn't ever had actual sex before. She did believe him, though it was odd to think of someone this day and age going without ever having a real girlfriend, even just a fling at uni or something online. She supposed the severe childhood trauma had just a tiny bit to do with it; that was something else to worry about. There was part of him that had stopped growing emotionally at age seven; how much of that was taking over now?

Was his view of marriage and love and commitment really that simplistic? No, couldn't be, not in his line of work. But he was an idealist, and what if their relationship stopped living up to his ideals? What if he started to rethink some of those long-held beliefs—would she end up as just a stepping-stone? Or would he start lying to himself, dividing his reality enough to let more than his eye start wandering while coming home to her every night? He knew every trick in the book and was clever enough to invent some himself; no matter how much she saw through him, he could learn to hide from her and he'd easily be able to hide an affair.

He moved in his sleep and she looked over at him, feeling guilty for what she was thinking. For doubting him.

She didn't doubt that he loved her. He'd loved her for a very long time, in his own way, platonically, even she'd seen that and had taken it for what it was. But romantically was all new.

He wasn't the kind to question an epiphany unless he discovered information that would contradict it. Having a limited sample size was bad science, though; more data points meant stronger conclusions. Probably a bit of confirmation bias in the mix, too. And that was the scary part; they were both high on the newness of it, the way it felt so right because it was something hoped for and finally realized. That would wear off eventually, and then what?

_Goddamn it, Mum, why do I let you do this to me?_ she thought.

No one made her second-guess herself like her mother. No one could twist a good thing into the threat of hidden dangers lurking just around the corner like her.

Molly knew all of it was mad. She knew it was moving faster than was probably good for either of them. There was this sense of urgency underlying it all, making up for lost time or trying to keep the momentum of it so that they didn't stall out; she didn't know which. There was the third possibility of Sherlock being more unstable than he was letting on, clinging desperately to her and to this because he needed normalcy more than anything. It was probably all three.
She had the thought that if she tried to slow things down, he’d take it as a rejection and close himself off. He was a person that needed to do things at his own pace, and that was usually light speed. Historically, she was more of an ambler, look-before-you-leap, but she’d been standing on the edge of this particular cliff for years anyway.

She turned her head to look at Sherlock again. *What are you thinking?* she wondered idly.

She eased out of bed and found her pants and Sherlock’s shirt where they’d ended up on the floor; the rest of her clothes were still downstairs. She wasn't really one of those wear-her-boyfriend’s-clothes types, since they were usually so big on her that they made her look (and feel) all of twelve, but she had her own big t-shirts to sleep in, so it wasn't that weird. Just pants and a dressing gown was weirder.

She went downstairs and got herself a glass of water; dehydration wasn't helping her mood and would only make her morning terrible.

He hadn't talked about Victor or his sister or how he felt about any of it at all today, not that she was really expecting it. She wondered if her presence had maybe been a buffer or a shield, mitigating the worst of it. She hoped so, at least. She didn’t know if he was bottling it all up or if he was just processing it in his own way. She thought it was probably the latter, but she felt like she didn't know anything right then.

*Thanks again, Mum, for shooting holes in my self-confidence.*

She downed the last of her water and refilled the glass, detouring over to the sofa to get her clothes on her way back upstairs. She put the glass on her bedside table and hoped Sherlock didn’t knock it over if he turned off her alarm again. He’d rolled into the centre of the bed; she prodded him until he woke up enough to make room for her. Once she was in bed, he pulled her close and mumbled her name; it still gave her butterflies.

She wanted this. She wanted to fall asleep next to him every night. She wanted to be Mrs. Molly Holmes. Her fears were silly. She knew Sherlock, really knew him, and it was going to be okay. If she let fear stand in her way, she wouldn't have made it this far in life; she wasn't going to let it ruin this.

*She looked down at her phone again, killing time while she waited for the girl she was interviewing for apprenticeship to arrive. Her days of misbehaving were far from over, but it was*
time to move up from freelance to senior management. If all went well, she might even consider franchising.

Kate was in the shower, getting herself ready for the session; it wouldn't hurt to take another peek.

She pulled up the last picture message he'd sent, enlarged it on the screen. It was staged, and rather poorly, but the devil was in the details. Light blue sheets, Ikean if she had to guess by the colour and composition, but hard to be certain with the lighting and resolution; practical, utilitarian. Such a delicate hand, a sliver of unmanicured thumbnail visible; her grip was firm, but not punishing. His fingers, curled and not entirely relaxed; surprised into submission. Long hair, still wet from the bath; comfort, familiarity, unafraid of her own vulnerability.

She ached with the domesticity of it all, the depth of intimacy. He'd gone and fallen in love with a woman with no sharp teeth, no malice. He really was such an innocent.

She wished she had a face to put with the name; she knew from John Watson's silly little blog that it could only be one woman. She'd even heard her name once; she should have known then by the way it had pulled him out of their stand-off.

Molly Hooper must be a remarkable woman in her own right, she thought. Probably not a stunning beauty; he'd never let himself trust a woman like that. Physically small; he liked to feel big, dominant, even if he so clearly wasn't. She would be someone who didn't overshadow him, but could stand up to him on her own. Clever and highly educated and, since she was from Bart's, most likely a doctor rather than just a technician of some sort.

She wondered if they'd ever played 'doctor.' He didn't strike her as the med-fet type, but really, how can one know if they like tiramisu or crème brûlée if they've never so much as sampled an entrée, let alone dessert?

No, it was probably all sweet kisses and soulful gazes, reverent hands and softly spoken words of love and devotion. About as thrilling as beans on toast.

She couldn't help but feel a little sad. He'd been so fun to tease and his romanticism had been refreshing; she always thought he'd be that rare type of man to love with his whole heart, were he ever to figure out that he had one. All flirtations had to end one way or another sometime, though.

Kate stepped out of the bathroom, her hair only partially blown dry; it always had such a nice body to it when she let it finish drying naturally.
"Sit, darling, I'll do your make-up." She loved to take care of her; it was rare for her to be allowed to do so before a session. She supposed Kate was a bit nervous; it had been years since she'd let anyone else domme for her. Maybe there was something to be said for monogamy after all.

_Congratulations, Mr. Holmes_, she thought, pressing the 'yes' button and confirming the deletion of the photo. She smiled at her lovely Kate as she picked up the eyebrow pencil.

*

"You just got an email from your sister," Sherlock called from the sofa. He was using her laptop to video conference with Stella Hopkins—everyone seemed to have something they wanted wrapped up before the holiday. Molly was thankful he'd at least showered and dressed first. "Wait, move to your left and let me see the switchplate."

She wasn't looking forward to whatever the email said. Probably gloating, because Ellie's fecundity was a point of personal pride; chastising if she'd talked to Mum, which she undoubtedly had; a million very personal questions about the details of Molly's love life peppered with condescending advice about every aspect of a relationship.

At least if Sherlock was working he was staying out of her way. It wasn't that she minded having him near, but he was starting to get underfoot and she really needed to get everything on her list finished. She thanked him for telling her and continued slicing potatoes and arranging them in the casserole dish.

Of course the peace didn't last long. Sherlock carried the laptop over and held it in front of her. "Does this look like bread or chips to you?"

She glanced at the screen; lovely. "It looks like sick to me."

"Astute observation, Dr. Hooper. Now, if you would be so kind...?"

She put her knife down and wiped her fingers on the towel before doing a sight analysis of the stomach contents. "Looks like a bacon sandwich and coffee, probably ingested about an hour before vomiting. Oh, and hello, DI Hopkins."

"Hi," Hopkins said, looking slightly confused when she turned the camera back on herself.
Sherlock flipped the laptop around and walked back to the lounge, thinking; Molly went back to cutting her potatoes. She would think *well, this is my life now*, except that just then was much easier than being texted stills and having to look at them on her phone while she could practically feel Sherlock vibrating with impatience all the way from Baker Street. Which had actually happened. More than twice.

Things went smoothly for the next hour or so, until Sherlock began to prowl around the flat once he got bored with whatever he'd been doing after he solved Hopkins' case. He was getting nervous about tomorrow, she thought; he really didn't like parties or large social gatherings to begin with, and the anticipation of the emotions of the day added to the mix were already working on him. It wasn't even lunchtime.

She bore it for as long as she could; finally she made up errands for him to run just to get him out of her hair. Let the cabbies and the staff at Waitrose deal with him for a bit.

Once he was gone, she made a phone call.

"Molly," Greg greeted warmly.

"Hi Greg," she smiled into the phone, a reflex.

"I hear congratulations are in order. So, congratulations."

"Thank you. It, ah, yeah. It's pretty sudden, but well, I mean, yeah," she tittered, hating how awkward she felt just then.

"If you ever need a break, just ring me and I'll find something for him to do. Or help you get rid of the body."

She had a bit of a laugh over that, then got down to business. "I don't want to keep you, but I was ah, just thinking we should have a backup plan for tomorrow. You know how he is with parties. And I mean, I don't know how John's going to be, either."

"Yeah, yeah, good idea. Where is he now?"
"Terrorizing the off-license or the florist, probably."

Greg laughed. "You have anything in mind?"

"Not really? I mean, he's going to know that it's not spontaneous anyway, so it's not like we need to be too cloak and dagger. Maybe just some cold cases? I mean, I don't want to pull him out of the party, but it would be like giving a kid a colouring book and a quiet corner to just take a break with, y'know?"

"Yeah, unless he finds something, and then he's just gone until he solves it."

"Good point."

"What about Mycroft? Maybe he has something."

"Oh, he's not coming. Probably better, since Mrs. Hudson hates him, Sherlock picks at him, and John just backs up Sherlock. Well, from what I gather. I've never been in the same room with all of them together. Really, it's still a bit surreal being in the same room with him at all now."

"He's an alright fella. A little... up himself, but I think that's a family thing. I can give him a ring and see if we can bring him in on this. Maybe just a text to him while Sherlock's distracted so he phones and gets his mind off it for a little bit."

Molly hummed and nodded, glancing again at her list and mentally reordering a few things. "It couldn't hurt, right? I mean, what could possibly go wrong there?" she said, hoping irony would work like an incantation to keep any bad luck at bay, like throwing salt over her shoulder.

"Famous last words," Greg said; she could tell he was smiling.

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"It's going to be weird tomorrow," Molly said, staring up at the ceiling.

"Undoubtedly." He took off his trousers, hung them on their hanger back in the wardrobe.
"I mean... I don't..." She finally spit it out. "I feel like they're all going to be looking at me. Because of, y'know." She lifted her hands, let them drop back to her stomach.

He really didn't know, specifically. There were quite a few reasons tomorrow was going to be weird and they'd all be looking at her, and some of them had the potential for overlap.

"Because of what?" he asked, stripping out of his pants before pulling on his pyjama bottoms. Really, he'd prefer to be naked, but Molly was dressed and he didn't want to make her think he had any expectations. Not that he was opposed, either.

"Because of—how everyone knew about me and how I always... felt about you. And now how it's changed, they're going to look at me differently."

"And that bothers you." He pulled back the blankets and slid into bed, rolling onto his side and propping his head on his hand to face her. He didn't know if this was a thing she needed space for.

"A bit." A lot, is what she meant. She paused. "I think they all thought I was a little pathetic, sometimes."

He scowled at that. Did they? Obviously John had underestimated her importance to both Sherlock and himself numerous times, nevermind the affection Sherlock hadn't always bothered hiding, but what about Greg and Mrs. Hudson? And what about Molly herself? Did she think she was pathetic for not giving up on him?

"Anyone with eyes could see you've been one of my closest confidantes for years. If anything, they'll be looking at me for being the idiot who didn't see what was right in front of him. And they'll remember every single instance that I mistreated you, so I think most of the scrutiny is going to fall on me."

"You've never mistreated me," she said, turning to face him. "You can be demanding and kind of awful when you're overwhelmed, and I know you tried to use your masculine wiles to manipulate me a few times, but you've never mistreated me. There were lots of times when I saw you were making it a point not to do anything that would cause me grief. Like at the wedding, and not just when you didn't humiliate Tom when you could have. You stayed away from me and Tom because you didn't want to say something that might embarrass me."

"Yes, well," he said, clearing his throat and looking away. That wasn't the reason, exactly; he
mostly didn't want to be a third wheel to yet another couple, and especially not when Molly was with that drip.

She turned her face back to the ceiling. "Only... I dunno. I don't want us to be monkeys in a zoo. And I know at least one of them is going to ask when we're going to have kids. And when the wedding is. And they're going to ask me if your bad habits are driving me crazy yet. I mean, I know it's just teasing, but sometimes it gets to me. I don't like when people put me in a situation where I feel like I have to defend you or my feelings for you. I mean, I don't have to, but they're our friends so I can't just tell them to piss off."

"You've felt like you had to defend me?"

"Sometimes, yeah. When you're being a bit high-strung or when something's upsetting you and you get testy. They think you're just being an arsehole, but I know you're not, and the things they say as a joke can be kind of hurtful sometimes. I know, I'm too sensitive, but I can't help it. And, I mean, I know I've done it, too, sometimes, and I feel bad about it."

He didn't think he had words that could adequately express what he was feeling just then. Love so overwhelming it made his throat raw and the bridge of his nose tingle, unworthiness; also a deep lament that he'd never had an ally like her when he most needed it, before his skin was thickened by public school and years of dealing with idiots who couldn't rub two brain cells together long enough to make great cognitive leaps such as water is wet and rain falls from the sky.

He slipped his arm around her waist and rested his head next to hers on the pillow. She turned her face and they were nose to nose.

He had no idea what to say to her. He wanted to tell her she didn't have to defend him, it didn't matter what people said, and he'd never taken her snark or teasing as anything more than exasperated affection. And he'd always liked her affection, however he could get it. He wanted to tell her he felt like he didn't deserve her kindness, sometimes, and he was so sorry for ever being an arse to her, even the times when he didn't realize he was doing it and especially for the times he did. He wanted to tell her he was sorry he'd ever been the cause of people seeing her as lesser, even if they were the stupid ones. He wanted to tell her just how grateful he was for her love and how, without her, he wouldn't have made it through some of the darkest times of his life.

He rubbed the tip of his nose against hers and it made her smile; she moved one of her hands to lay against his jaw.

"I want to get married as soon as we can," he all but blurted. "I can phone Tuesday to book the appointment and we can go and give notice Thursday."
"Her eyebrows rose. "You have somewhere in mind already?"

"Islington Town Hall. We're both atheists and our guest list will be short, so a church wedding is pointless. Mycroft changed my address retroactive to last Monday and the gas and electric bills have been switched to my name to prove it, so I've been living here more than long enough to be eligible to register there. If it were the old days, I'd have whisked you off to Gretna Green already. Oh, and you'll have to memorize a second NHS number for me. I know you know the first already."

"I've written it on enough forms," she said.

"I memorized yours when I saw your personnel file on Stamford's desk at Bart's. Which was the same day I met you," he said, unsure why he was volunteering that information at all. "Didn't think I'd ever need it, but it has a pleasing symmetry. I like palindromes."

Molly smiled; it was a familiar look that meant something along the lines of sometimes you are so weird and I find it highly amusing and endearing, though slightly [annoying/ invasive/ socially unacceptable/ other not good: unspecified]. A moment later she leaned in and kissed him, just an affectionate press of lips.

"Town Hall is fine, I suppose. I mean, I kind of want a church wedding, but nothing big or fancy. I just like churches. I don't think I want a reception after, it's too much stress. Maybe a nice meal, though."

"I wouldn't be surprised if every church in London is booked for the next year. I don't want to wait that long."

"I was actually thinking about this yesterday and we could, ah, look into the church in Barns Green, since you used to live there. I think that's one of the rules. Or if you were christened there."

"I was." As was Mycroft and probably Eurus, if they could get her through the doors without her bursting into flames.

"The chapel there looked nice, from what I saw of it, and it's a nice day away from the city but not too far, and um... You said you wanted to live there one day again anyway, so I thought it would be nice to get married there. It's, um, just a thought."
He wondered if she was already thinking along the same lines he had been yesterday, starting their own family. Was it too soon? Probably. But if she was thinking about it... It was exciting and frightening and it made his chest a little tight; it was so hard to believe that this was his life. If everything weren't so real and present and mostly awfully mundane, he'd think his body was actually out there in the real world and this was all just a final dream while his brain was dying from an OD. That really wasn't the kind of thought he wanted to be having right now, though.

"It's something to think about, I suppose," he said, rather diplomatcally. Churches were tedious. But he could see the appeal of traditionalism and ceremony for some things and, even if this wasn't one of them for him, it was for Molly. In the context of doing something to make her happy, it wasn't really a hardship at all. "I'll start making phone calls on Tuesday and see who has the earliest date available."

Molly gave him one of her radiant smiles and kissed him again, which led to more kisses, which led to slower, more sensual lovemaking than anything they'd done before; who knew one simple act could have so many nuances and convey so much?

He lay there after, feeling bone-deep contentment as Molly twitched her way into sleep in his arms. They could do this. They were really doing this. It was the most thrilling adventure he'd ever embarked upon, he thought.

Chapter End Notes

The video with the sweaty people dancing: Jimmy Eat World's The Middle
You can supply all your own favorites for the rest :D
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Sunday.

Chapter Notes

And this is it, the last chapter. It may be some time before I put out the epilogue, but I have one planned.

So, for everyone who's been sticking with this fic, thank you. All your comments and kudos and recs and reblogs and lovely conversations mean the world to me. It's so great to connect with people who love a thing as much as I do, and sometimes it's so easy to let all the drama of the fandom get me down, but you guys make it all worth it. So again, thank you all. <3

And to my betas, britpickers, and cheerleaders: madder_badder, shoedog, MrsMCrieff, and Emma_Lynch, thank you all again so much for your hard work and for putting up with me.

And also my deepest thanks to maybe_amanda, a dear friend and one of the few people who can pull just the right threads in my brain to get things untangled. Thank you <3

*

"Good morning, my perfect, wonderful girl," John said, scooping Rosie out of her cot. She was already standing, stomping foot to foot.

Any day now, he thought. Once she started walking they were all in trouble. She could already scale a sofa; trust her to climb before she bothered with walking.

They had a leisurely morning; he hid a few plastic eggs under overturned bowls and blankets and the like, but Rosie lost interest after the first one. He probably should have made her up an Easter basket, but she had enough soft toys and she was too young for sweets and he really didn't know what else to put in one for a baby.

She's not going to remember this one anyway, Mary said. Next year, she'll get one.
He really hoped she'd stay quiet today. He was trying very hard not to think about her missing it. Missing all the milestones. Tomorrow was the actual day; it was so hard to think about that night. If he'd have pulled over like Mary had kept ordering him to, Rosie would have been born right there in the car, probably.

He smiled and shook his head, remembering, as he struggled Rosie into her party dress. He was glad Mrs. Hudson had thought of it; picking out outfits wasn't his area. As long as she was clean and dressed in weather-appropriate kit, it was a win in his book.

He got her packed in the car and off to Islington they went; he hoped like hell Molly could keep a leash on Sherlock today because his own temper might get a little short and he didn't want to make a scene.

You won't. Mary said.

He refused to look over at the passenger seat.

Sherlock answered the door; he didn't seem nearly as anxious as John was expecting. He even smiled, for chrissakes, which, while not as rare as one might think, was pretty remarkable considering the circumstances.

There was the usual exchange of pleasantries as Molly bustled over, looking like she fell right out of a 1950s period drama, complete with apron and swing dress and real flowers tucked in her hair. There was friendly when do we eat, smells amazing chit-chat while he got Rosie out of her coat, then cooing over the outfit and Molly asking Sherlock to go and get her phone; John tried not to goggle when he actually did. The man who couldn't even be arsed to get his own phone out of his own jacket pocket was playing fetch for his girlfr—future wife. Jesus. Up was down, day was night, the entire world had gone mad.

Molly took a million pictures, asked John if he wanted a drink, then removed herself to the kitchen again. Sherlock probably didn't even realize he was watching her, either.

Oh, it's sweet, Mary said. Don't tease him. Well, maybe just a little bit, get it out of your system.

Oh, where to begin. If he started, it would be just like eating crisps. No, best refrain entirely.

"Oh, Sherlock, will you run upstairs and fetch Rosie's Easter basket? I left it—"
"In the spare room. Yes, dear." Sherlock even took their coats upstairs without prompting.

*Oh my God.* John bit his lip.

He wandered over to the kitchen where Molly was making a face while she tried to throttle a cocktail shaker.

"What's that, then?" he asked, shifting Rosie a bit. She was already starting to get antsy.

"Um, it doesn't really have a name. Sherlock came up with it."

He gave her a look; *You actually let him? You're sure there's not poison in it? Or human remains?*

She smirked and poured out some of the mix into a glass and topped it with soda water, stirred it and held it out for him to take.

Sherlock came back downstairs; Rosie lunged for him like she always did. John handed her over, figuring it would be a losing battle anyway. Sherlock whisked her off to the lounge while John took a sip of the drink. It wasn't bad.

*

"Zhua Zhou, Watson," Sherlock said, walking Rosie over to the lounge. "Ancient Chinese tradition, though variations thereof are practised throughout Asia. Granted, these aren't the traditional objects used in the ceremony, but they all have some cultural relevance or could be ascribed an emblematic trait for modern life, so let's pretend, shall we?"

*Never too early to introduce her to the broader world,* he thought, setting her down in front of her Easter basket and sitting next to her. "What you pick now is said to forecast your future. Of course it's meaningless since you haven't the cognitive ability to recognize the abstract symbolism of objects yet and fortune-telling as a whole is only for those individuals lacking imagination and unwilling to face their own fear of mortality and existential dread, but as an exercise in the perception of—oh. Bubbles. Interesting choice. Apt, as one could describe your personality as effervescent, and hopefully it will stay that way."
He plucked the plastic bottle from her hands and unscrewed the cap, then fished the wand out and blew a stream of bubbles just above Rosie's head so they floated down on her. She shrieked with delight and clapped her hands around one, babbling a string of loud, happy syllables when she made it disappear.

"Try not to get any of those on the sofa, please," Molly called from the kitchen.

"I hardly think after what that sofa's seen this week soap bubbles are going to—" he twisted around to look at her and oh. Right. Not the kind of thing you joke about in polite company.

Pfft, John, polite company.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, well. I won't get any on the sofa."

"Not ever again you won't," she said through clenched teeth.

"Now you're just spitting yourself," he sniffed, then ruined it by blowing another stream of bubbles in the air.

John looked between the two of them, mouth agape.

Right. Monkeys in the zoo. Best rein it in a bit.

John blinked, closed his mouth, shook his head, blinked again. "So, what time are we expecting Greg and Mrs. H?" he asked, changing the subject.

He tuned them out; whatever conversation that was to follow would surely be dull. He reabsorbed himself in blowing bubbles, trying to see how many he could get in a cluster.

"I know you're trying to sneak up on me with your phone," he said, eyes focused on the droplet of soap solution that was threatening to drip from the bottom of the wand. He shifted his hand to redistribute the liquid and concentrated on blowing just the right stream of air to add a fourth bubble to his current set.
"No one's sneaking," she said, taking a picture.

He made a face meant to convey yes, exactly, that's what I said; the surface tension in the ring finally broke. His record remained three.

Rosie reached out her arms in the 'up' gesture; she really did have a thing for phones.

"Will you?" Molly asked, holding out her phone. He made a show of rolling his eyes but put the bubble wand away and recapped the bottle; he used the bottom of her pinny to wipe the soap off his fingers, earning him a put-on, exasperated look.

He put out his hand and gave her his I'm-an-arsehole-but-you-love-me smile; Molly responded with the flattest look she could muster while trying not to actually smile at him while she slapped the phone into his hand. She scooped up Rosie and her grin lit up the room. He sprang up and got a picture while Molly had her face turned to Rosie and Rosie was mid-laugh. He very quickly texted it to himself, glad he had the foresight to put his phone on silent.

*

The doorbell rang and John all but ran for it, probably glad that it would get him away from their shameless flirting. Not that they were acting much different than they used to, really. She supposed that before, no one had had to worry that they'd start canoodling like teenagers once they got tired of the double act.

Sherlock had been fine so far, even if he was a bit keyed up. It probably helped that she'd been keeping him busy with little things like setting the table. The bunny serviettes were his idea; she'd seen him folding along to a video on her laptop and had turned around to put the ham in the oven; when she turned back there'd been a dozen rabbits on the table. At her surprised look, he'd said, "They just... multiplied," looking surprised himself. She smiled at the memory.

Right, she thought as she bounced Rosie on her hip to resettle her. Showtime.

There were greetings and cheek kisses all around, coats upstairs, Greg complaining about the traffic. Sherlock made the drinks because she was holding the baby while chatting with Mrs. Hudson about how nice the decorations were and how lovely Rosie's dress was.
It made her nervous when she shouldn't be. She just hoped they didn't make any comments about how he was on his best behaviour or insinuate that he was only doing it because she was making him or she was going to reward him for it later or whatever. And not only because he was Sherlock and had a reputation, but because he was now the Man, and Men didn't concern themselves with Woman things unless there was something in it for them.

Their friends were a little more progressive than that, she liked to think, but there had been plenty of times that they all slipped into certain roles at social gatherings. It was just how people were, she supposed. There was a kind of comfort in it, really, falling back on patterns passed on over generations. It didn't make it right, but it was what it was.

It was going to be fine. Everything was going to be fine. She bent down and picked up Rosie's Easter basket, set it on the coffee table. She dug out the little stuffed penguin Sherlock had come home with yesterday—an impulse buy from somewhere along the way in his errands—and handed it to Rosie to keep her occupied.

She looked at the timer on the oven; still three minutes to go on the ham. She glanced at Sherlock, standing at the breakfast bar and talking to Mrs. Hudson. She caught his eye and he gave her a small, soft smile; it was one she'd only ever seen directed at her and the fondness in it made her breath catch and her skin break out in goosebumps.

She wondered if there would ever come a day that she wouldn't find a reason to fall in love with him all over again. She hoped not.

The oven timer beeped a one-minute warning; she took Rosie over to where Greg and John were standing in the lounge with their drinks talking about football. Greg was the first to put his glass down and reached out for Rosie; he held a baby more comfortably and confidently than any man she'd ever seen. Pity he never had any of his own; he would have been great at it.

She handed Rosie over and hurried to the oven to shut the timer off before it started beeping.

* * *

"So those two," Greg said to John, tipping his chin in the direction of the kitchen. "Who woulda thought he had it in 'im?"

"None of us, apparently," John said tilting his head and raising his eyebrows while sipping his drink. "My money was on Irene Adler this whole time. Shows what I know."

"Y’know, once upon a time, I wondered if he fancied Donovan a bit. When he first met ‘er, I mean. She was still a DC and she’d had him over the hood of a squad car by the time I made it to the scene and ‘e was tellin’ ‘er her whole life story, really showing off. You can imagine how well that went."

He didn't mention that Sherlock had only been clean for a couple months at that point and he'd been wilder, less controlled than when John had met him all those years later. Mycroft had been the only thing standing between him and numerous counts of criminal trespass, B & E, perverting the course of justice, you name it. Donovan might have come ‘round and given him a second chance back then if he hadn't said something about the Brixton riots in ’95 making her decide to become a copper; he didn't know, but her dad had been one of the officers on duty the night Douglas died in custody. Not involved, but knew a bit about what really happened.

"Huh," John said, considering. "Well, in any case, I really hope it works out for them. You know, that day, when his sister staged that whole thing... I'm telling you, Greg, I've never seen him like that. I mean, I've seen him barely keeping it together a few times, but this was something else. He was panicking. And then he just lost it."

"Mycroft said he smashed up a coffin with his bare hands," he said, taking a few steps to retrieve Rosie's toy. Kid had an arm on her. He should have got her a cricket set. There was always Christmas, he supposed.

"You, uh, talked to Mycroft since then? Sherlock seemed like he was actually a little worried about him. Wonders never cease."

"Yeah, just yesterday, in fact. Seems like he's doin' a'right, not that anyone can really tell with him. He's on standby in case Sherlock starts being, y'know. Sherlock."

John laughed and took another sip of his drink.

Greg glanced over to Sherlock; he was still listening to Mrs. Hudson, but his eyes were on Molly while she buzzed about the kitchen. He was smitten, no two ways about it. Greg remembered the early days with Debbie, when he only wanted to be next to her every waking minute. They'd rushed into it, too, but they'd only been kids.

"Molly really went all out with the food and the party," Greg said when the lull in conversation stretched on too long.

"She did. She's been great. I mean, I know she likes this kind of thing. I texted Sherlock yesterday
to see how things were going and he texted me back, 'It's not a birthday party, it's D-Day.' I think she chased him out."

They both had a laugh at that, and then John turned serious. "I really don't know what I've done without her these last few months. She just did what needed to be done when I couldn't, never asked a thing in return. I mean, Mary—" his voice caught and he covered with a little rasp to clear his throat, "was her friend, but she didn't have to do any of it. She just got on with it."

Greg nodded again, unsure if he should ask how John was holding up. He got the feeling now wasn't the right time, but it also wasn't the right time to try to lighten the mood or change the subject entirely. He picked up his drink and took a sip.

"Y'know, I'd say 'e doesn't even know what he's got, but I have the feelin' he does," he said, using his glass to gesture in their direction. Sherlock was up on the worktop on his knees, both hands in the cupboard while Molly stood next to him, pointing at something on the top shelf; he twisted around and handed a serving platter down to her before jumping down. She smiled at him like they were the only two people in the room.

"He better not cock it up," John said quietly into his glass before turning on the charm as Mrs. Hudson approached.

"Those two," she said, her eyes twinkling. She stepped up and gave Rosie a tickle; Rosie handed her the penguin.

"Can't imagine what the wedding's goin'a be like," Greg said, thinking of John's wedding, then kicking himself because he hoped it wouldn't bring back any memories for him.

"Wedding? That's a little soon, isn't it?" Mrs. Hudson said, looking up at him.

He looked away at the same time John stood up straighter and found something on the ceiling interesting; apparently John knew too (which, yeah, best friend, course he would). Mrs. Hudson was no slouch and she figured it out right away.

"Sherlock Holmes!" she scolded. "Why didn't you tell me you're getting married?"

He looked guilty while she bustled over to him, but bent into the hug she gave him. Molly wiped her hands on her pinny and smiled prettily while Mrs. Hudson hugged her, too; she slipped her arm around Sherlock's waist and his went around her shoulders automatically. Greg had to admit
that they looked like they fit together.

"That's going to take some getting used to," John said, but he had a smile on his face.

And then it was time for lunch, Sherlock actually taking food to the table while Molly pulled the last of it out of the oven. Greg slipped his phone out of his pocket and took a picture of Sherlock, arms up while he moved a casserole dish over Molly's head as she bent over the table to do something with another dish. He wouldn't be sending it to anyone at work, even though he was sure they'd all love to see it. It was going straight to Mycroft.

John went for the changing bag while Greg slipped Rosie into her highchair. He was reminded of his own Mum when Molly took a few pictures of the table, obviously proud of the spread she'd put on. As she should be; it wasn't magazine-fancy or anything, but everything looked and smelled delicious and there was enough of it to feed an army.

He claimed his seat on the other side of John, trying to remember the last time he had a nice family dinner, one without too much wine after the meal and shouting in the car on the way home. Way too long; he really hoped he had more of these to look forward to in future.

*

"It's just so nice to have everyone together like this," Mrs. Hudson said to Molly. "You've done such a lovely job with the meal and the decorations."

John swallowed, trying very hard not to think about the person who was missing. He kept his eyes trained on his plate, squeezed his fingers around the knife handle as his hand threatened to spasm. He knew Mrs. H didn't even realize what she'd said but that didn't make it sting any less.

"I made the bunting," Sherlock interjected before Molly could say thank you.

John raised his eyes, face already pulling into when have you ever—; Sherlock looked at him and his eyes flicked down to John's left hand meaningfully. So he'd picked up on it. Really needed to start giving him more credit, John thought.

Molly shot them both a curious glance, first landing on Sherlock, then himself. There was a split-second of recognition in her eyes and then she looked back to Mrs. Hudson and took the compliment with demure grace before launching into a rant about pink and blue and how the widespread use of the ultrasound was a boon to medicine but had created a shift in gender politics.
because of marketing and it was producing a whole generation of children socialized to think in only black and white regarding what was appropriate for almost every aspect of their lives, from taste in clothing to careers.

Mrs. Hudson just stared at her, unsure what to say, as did Greg, who looked more bemused than anything. John couldn't help gaping, either. He'd heard her and Mary complaining about the same thing more than once, but that was just them chatting over coffee or drinks, without an audience (well, besides him and sometimes Sherlock). He didn't disagree, per se, it just didn't seem that important.

Sherlock squinted, looked at her askance. "You are wearing pink flowers in your hair," he said, making his mild-mannered-sarcastic-arsehole face but keeping his tone playful. Oh dear God.

"I like pink flowers in my hair. I'm allowed."

"Yes you are," he agreed, his tone upbeat. "And they're very becoming." He smiled at her, oozing charm.

All eyes turned from Molly to Sherlock.

John realized then what he was doing. What he'd done twice in the space of five minutes. He'd pulled all the attention to himself to protect(?!?) the feelings of the two people closest to him while diffusing an awkward situation.

Huh.

Had he always done that? How many times had John thought Sherlock was just being a tit when, in fact, he was trying to control the mood of the room? He'd done it countless times in other contexts, using misdirection to get people to reveal information; it wasn't much of a leap to think he'd use similar tactics elsewhere for different reasons.

Molly's mouth was drawn into a flat line and her eyes narrowed in one of her I'm onto your shit looks, but the sparkle in her eye gave her away.

Sherlock tore his gaze from Molly and looked around the rest of the table. "What, aren't I allowed to pay my future wife a compliment?" he asked innocently before shoving a forkful of greens in his mouth.
Mrs. Hudson was the first to snap out of it and say something. "And you should, every day. Molly's a lovely girl and deserves only the best."

"I don't disagree. Unfortunately for her, she's stuck with me now, so she'll have to make do with what she's got."

John caught a flicker of annoyance pass over Molly's face; the banter bothered her and he wasn't sure why.

_You could do them both a favour and change the subject_, Mary said very quietly from his right. He glanced over before he could stop himself; no one there but Rosie, gnawing on a glazed carrot. Thank God for small miracles, he thought.

"The carrots and beetroot are really nice. Different. What's, ah, what's in them?" he asked, spouting the first thing that came to mind. He gave Molly the same kind of unassuming smile he used on witnesses and clients and he hoped it was genuine enough because it was all he had the energy for.

"Oh, ah, honey and miso. I got the recipe online."

The conversation moved back to the safe topic of food, then inevitably back to The Work; it was part of their lives and what had brought them all together, of course they were going to talk about it. When Rosie was a little older, there'd probably have to be a no-homicides-at-the-dinner-table rule, but for now it was fine.

"I suppose I'll have to put up office hours somewhere," Sherlock said when they got around to the subject of him not being at Baker Street all the time. He made it sound like he was being forced to drain a boil or clean out the shower drain.

"It'll be almost like having a proper job," John smiled at him.

Sherlock tipped his head back and slumped in his chair, groaning. He really was a such kid sometimes. "Must you insist on sucking all the joy out of my life? Has Mycroft been giving you lessons?"

Rosie, who had been absorbed in her food until this point and hadn't done much more than chirp
and wave bits of it at anyone who looked at her, decided that now was the time to speak up. She babbled a very loud, exuberant string of syllables at Sherlock, still melted over his chair like *The Persistence of Memory*.

He rolled his head to the side and fixed her with a pained look. "Et tu, Rosie?"

She kept at it, really giving him a piece of her mind (and oh boy was he in trouble), gesturing wildly with her little fists. John slid her plate closer to himself on the highchair tray; he didn't want food flying everywhere.

Sherlock snapped to attention and sat up. "Yes, well, when you put it that way, I suppose there are worse things," he said, completely serious.

It went on like that—amicable, pleasant, and utterly, bizarrely normal—until everyone was finished eating. Molly began to clear the table and Sherlock jumped up to help; he still couldn't help but question Sherlock's motives just a little bit. There was such a thing as trying too hard.

John wondered if Sherlock was trying to make up for the last six years, or if he was angling to make himself look better so Molly wouldn't have second thoughts, or if it was to get himself into her good graces (read: knickers) later.

*Or, y'know, he might genuinely care about her enough to want to help her with all the little things because he isn't actually from 1965*, Mary argued.

Yeah, but it's Sherlock. He's not bad all the time, but he's not often well-behaved without incentive.

*And Molly's not incentive enough?*

She never was before. Hard to believe that his balls finally drop and suddenly he's at her beck and call.

*Oh stop. Who's the only person we know who could get him to put his phone away without physically prying it from his hands? Who's the only person you've ever seen him willingly apologize to without prompting? And let's not forget, you went out of your way to do things for me all the time.*
Yeah, but, I mean, Sherlock. He might be doing it out of love now, but what happens when that wears off and he gets bored?

*You mean like when you got bored?* He imagined her holding up his mobile and giving it a little shake side-to-side.

He cleared his throat and pulled himself out of his thoughts, standing to take his and Rosie's plates to the sink. He returned with a damp flannel and bent over his (darling, wonderful, potato-encrusted) daughter to get her cleaned up. Mrs. Hudson had popped upstairs to powder her nose and Greg sneaked out to the back garden for a fag; John glanced at Sherlock to see if he was going to follow Greg out and if it was something he should be worried about.

The happy couple was side by side at the sink; Sherlock had his jacket off and sleeves rolled up, drying plates as Molly handed them to him. They were carrying on a murmured conversation, but John couldn't make out what they were saying. Molly elbowed Sherlock and he only dodged enough to just let her make contact; he turned to her and gave her the softest smile John had ever seen on his face.

John slipped his phone out of his pocket. He knew he probably shouldn't, it was a private moment, but he really wished he had more pictures of him and Mary in the early days. Well, any days, for that matter. All the days.

He surreptitiously took the picture and slipped the phone back in his pocket, then hauled Rosie out of her chair and inspected her dress. He shouldered the changing bag and took her upstairs for a fresh nappy.

It was so odd to think that this was Sherlock's home now; it was so clean and bright and organized, though he couldn't imagine it staying that way for long. It was always an odd thing, being in the private sections of people's houses. He used the bed in the spare room to lay out the changing mat rather than their bedroom but, even so, it was still strange. Too quiet, almost like being in a church. He supposed it was a sacred space, in a way. Baker Street had never felt like that, even after he'd moved out. Doors were always left open, the concept of personal space and privacy a vague one that was pretty much always disregarded on both sides. Not much different than the army, really.

Funny how living with a woman could change so much about a man. Change him forever, really; he wasn't the same man he'd been before he met Mary. He didn't look at the world in the same way. He didn't want to go any farther down that road today, though.

He asked Rosie how she thought the party was going and she seemed happy enough to tell him. She was definitely saying 'dada' as a distinct word; up until this point he hadn't been completely
sure, but the pause after it was definite and repeated. That was going in the baby book when he got home. He scooped her up and carried her downstairs, then parked her on the floor with her new penguin and the rest of the Easter basket, letting Mrs. Hudson take over for a bit while he pitched in with the cleanup. It was his kid's party, after all, he should do something.

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It felt strange not to be helping with the washing up. Really, though, she supposed she'd earned it, after all the years of cleaning she'd done for Sherlock. She didn't get to spend near as much time with Rosie as she'd like, so she was glad for it, really.

Rosie really did look so much like Mary sometimes, especially around the eyes. Hard to believe it was only four months ago. It was a good thing John had so many people to get him through it in all the different ways he needed. A mate like Greg, someone to do all the background things like Molly, and Sherlock to distract him when he really needed to get out of his own head for a while.

She was glad Rosie had Molly and Sherlock, too. Sherlock loved her like his own, it was clear as day on his face every time he held her. He'd be a good example for Rosie, she thought. He certainly had his own issues, Lord knows, but John was a troubled man and it was good she would grow up with another example of what a man was to compare to.

And Molly. She'd make a great Mum if they ever got 'round to it. She liked taking care of people, which made some sense since she was a doctor, of a sort. She had a strong sense of family. Mrs. Hudson herself had never really felt that until later years; really, it wasn't until Sherlock came along that she'd discovered she had any maternal instinct whatsoever. She supposed there was just something about him that brought it out in people.

Rosie held out a package of barrettes, colourful plastic ones shaped like fruit and ice cream cones and sweets. They would look darling in her hair, though it was still a bit fine to hold them. She took the card and pointed at each shape, asking her what they were and telling her she was right every time she babbled an answer. She was a delight.

Molly came over and snapped a few pictures, letting her know they'd be doing presents soon. She looked a bit more relaxed now that the meal was finished and everything had gone well. Sherlock wandered over a minute later; it was obvious he couldn't bear not to be near her for any length of time if he was in the same room as her. New love really was the sweetest thing.

"Sherlock, get a bit closer, we need a picture of the two of you," she said. Someone should commemorate the engagement.
He made a face like a stroppy teenager, but obliged her and put his arm around Molly's shoulders, looking as solemn as if he were at a funeral. That wouldn't do at all.

"Now one with a kiss," she said, waving her hand to gesture that they should get closer together.

"Mrs. Hudson!" He was actually scandalized. He wouldn't have lasted a day in the Sixties. Or the Seventies, for that matter.

"Oh, just on the cheek, then, go on," she said, eyes on her phone. She was glad she'd finally got rid of the old digital camera, the phone took much nicer pictures. So much easier to get right, too, no awful buttons and weird things on the screen.

Molly stood on her tiptoes, smiling, her palm resting on Sherlock's chest. His eyebrows were drawn together and he had an annoyed set about his mouth, looking at her askance when she was only able to hit his jaw because of the height difference.

"Get down here, you giraffe," Molly said, fond and a little exasperated, but not really.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow and he got that devilish look about him; in an instant he had her dipped low, kissing her like he'd just been away at sea. She flailed for a moment before flinging her arm around his neck and they held the kiss until Greg and John started whistling and clapping; even Rosie got in on the act with happy shrieks.

Sherlock pulled her up gently and they broke apart; Molly's cheeks were pink and her eyes sparkled and she laughed and laughed while Sherlock fought his own smile. The blush gave him away, though. Mrs. Hudson made sure to get a picture of that, too.

Sherlock cleared his throat and put on his serious face again. "So, presents?" he asked Molly.

"Presents," she agreed, grinning from ear to ear.

They really were the loveliest couple.

Sherlock and Greg moved the coffee table while John and Molly ferried the presents over; Molly handed Sherlock a notebook and pen to record the gifts while she took tons of pictures. John sat on the floor with Rosie to help her open them, sticking all the bows and ribbons on her head as
they went. Sherlock's lips twitched when John read the card from Aunt Molly and Uncle Sherlock; he was such a romantic.

*

"Alright, young miss, it's time for a bit of a sing-song and then some cake," John said, scooping Rosie up and taking her to the table.

He sat with her standing on his lap, since the high chair would make her too far away from the table. He kept a firm hold around her belly just in case she made a dive for the cake.

Greg lit the candle with his lighter and Molly turned off the lights; Sherlock played Happy Birthday on his violin while the rest of them sang.

He gave Rosie a kiss on the cheek and said quietly into her ear, "Now, let's blow out the candle."

He puffed out his cheeks and pursed his lips and she imitated him; he pointed to the cake and indicated for her to do it. She made little wuffing sounds, having no idea what she was actually supposed to be doing. He leaned forward to actually blow out the candle, since it was apparent she wasn't going to do it under her own steam.

He heard an indrawn breath from the vacant spot next to his right shoulder; a second later the flame was extinguished. He felt himself go very still and probably a bit pale. No one else seemed to notice that it wasn't him that actually blew it out.

He knew, his rational mind knew, that he must have blown it out. No one else was close enough. He exhaled the full breath still in his lungs, clearing his throat to cover how unsettled he was.

Sherlock launched into a piece John recognized; he didn't know the name of it or the composer, but he knew the music well. It was his nightmare song, the one Sherlock would sometimes play (and later deny) back when John still lived with him and it was a rough night. He played it other times, too, but mostly for the nightmares.

Molly turned on the lights and Sherlock's eyes were glued to the candle until she pulled it out of the cake and set it aside; his eyebrows were drawn together in the way that indicated he was trying to figure out something that didn't make sense.
No, couldn't have. He'd be shaking like a leaf and deducing the bloody wallpaper by now, freaking out like he did that time in Dartmoor.

John tried to get himself back to normal while he put a clean bib on Rosie (supplied by Molly, the graphic was a '1' wearing a party hat with streamers and confetti falling around it) and moved her into her highchair. Everyone stood at the ready with their phones when Molly put the first slice of cake in front of her. Even Sherlock stopped playing (and thinking) while Rosie went for the cake.

She prodded it with one curious finger, which came away with a smear of icing that went straight into her mouth. She laughed and looked around as if to say oh wow, this is good, do you lot know how good this is? and this whole piece is just for me? amazing! after she tasted it; a moment later she dove in with both hands. The carnage that followed did not disappoint.

John ate his cake automatically; objectively, he knew it was very good, but anything would have turned to ash in his mouth.

Sherlock circled the table with his plate in hand, cake untouched, not-so-subtly checking angles of... something. He'd definitely witnessed it.

And then there was a soft "oh," and he looked satisfied, finally forking cake into his mouth. He wandered back over to John and stood next to his shoulder.

"Just a draft," he said. "Miniature vortex. Molly's skirt started it with the drag created when she moved to the other side of the table, then everyone bringing their phones up at the same time perpetuated it."

He made a swirling motion with his fork around the table. At John's look of that sounds like bullshit and you know it, he said, "What, can't everyone visualize turbulence accurately in their own minds?" He shoved another forkful of cake in his mouth.

Wasn't impossible, John supposed. And believing that was better than anything else.

"Cake's lovely," John said, changing the subject.
"Mm," Sherlock agreed, eyes on Molly. They'd hardly left her all day.

"Better watch it, you'll be putting on weight soon."

"Need to compensate with more vigorous physical activity, I suppose. Shouldn't be a problem," he said with a smug smile before another forkful of cake.

It was never going to stop being strange, John thought. He was getting used to the idea, though, he supposed. He really couldn't let it pass without saying something, though.

"You can say I was right, you know. About this, completing you as a human being."

"I can."

There was a prolonged pause.

"And that's all I'm getting," John said under his breath. Really shouldn't have expected him to elaborate, he supposed. Even admitting John was right, however ambiguously, was the kind of victory he should get a trophy for.

Rosie had stopped eating long ago and had contented herself with mashing handfuls cake and icing between her fingers; John gently clamped a hand over her tiny fist before she could start throwing food.

"I think it's time to get you cleaned up," he said, taking in the state of her with a small frown. He'd have to take her out back and spray her down with the garden hose. Or at least cover the carseat with a bin liner on the way home. Good Lord.

"It's okay, I can get her," Molly said, handing off her empty plate to Sherlock like he was the wait staff (and oh, if that wasn't a beautiful moment) before sliding out the tray on the highchair. "I need the loo anyway, so I might as well give her a quick bath while we're up there. I think she's got cake in her ear. Do you have an extra outfit in the changing bag?"

"I do. Ta," he said, letting Molly take over. She really was a gem.
There was a light tap at the door from the bedroom followed quickly by "It's only me," from Sherlock.

"It's open," Molly called, getting Rosie soaped up with a flannel. She'd had to sit her in the old enamel wash basin she kept for soaking her feet; she'd taken it from Mum's years ago when she'd sold the house and had no idea where it had come from before that. It had probably seen quite a few babies in its time, though.

Sherlock slipped in and closed the door behind him, leaning back against it.

"Everything alright?" she asked, putting down the flannel and taking up the spray attachment. Best things ever invented, in her opinion. Well, besides antibiotics and possibly the internet.

"Mm. Just got bored," he said too quickly.

Overwhelmed, probably.

"I needed a break, too," she said. "Rosie makes the best accomplice."

He made a sound of amused agreement low in his throat, but didn't say anything else.

"Thank you for all your help today. And this whole week, really," she said finally, working a few drops of her own shampoo into Rosie's hair. She should probably keep a bottle of baby shampoo on-hand.

"It's my house, too. You shouldn't have to do all the work," he said, sounding uncomfortable and a bit... young? Bashful? Vulnerable? Hard to put a name to.

Whatever it was, it gave her a flutter in the pit of her stomach. He was taking it so seriously, the relationship, the idea of partnership; she'd always known he had it in him. She was vindicated and thrilled and proud of him and so... honoured, she supposed, that she was the one that he was trying for.
She kept one hand on Rosie's back and turned to face him. She gave him a warm smile. "I love you," she said simply, contentedly, so filled with the feeling that she just had to share it.

His lips curled into his own soft smile and his eyes crinkled. "I love you, too," he said, and it sounded so natural and so easy that it stole her breath.

He tilted his head as though something occurred to him; he leaned forward and moved his arm from where it had been resting behind his back. He looked at his watch and she understood what he was thinking.

"Is it...?"

"Close enough. I wasn't really paying attention to the exact time. Within five minutes." There was an edge to his tone, but he didn't seem particularly upset with the memory.

"Huh," she said, turning back to Rosie to rinse the shampoo from her head.

Only two weeks since then. So hard to believe. And yet, there they were, muddling through it together, fumbling their way towards... something. Forever.

"Mm," Sherlock agreed.

*

She swayed, swooped and spun in slow motion, remembering as she pulled notes from the aether.

Wet grass and mud and Brother, around and around; sticky-rainbow hands from dew and eggs, chocolate, jellybeans; the pleasure-pain of teeth from the headband against her scalp, vrrp vrrp vrrp of her tiny nails over the wales of her dress.

Brother felt it. She felt it, where he was. Family, vibrating along the strings, vibrating into her bones. Longing, though, one last piece missing, her piece.

She played it for him, always there, always with him, then-now-forever. Lost and found.
He was less like Brother now (never like Mycroft never never), more like Daddy. She wondered if he knew yet. Could he feel the flowers blooming, rippling back through time? Did he see them swaying in the breeze, hear the soft sigh of the East Wind as she danced with them?

No, he was too linear. Silly Sherlock. He'd get there, eventually. Until then the teasing would be so much fun.

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