Title: Paying The Cost
Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)
Genre: Gen (non-slash)
Characters/Pairings: Mary, Sherlock, Mycroft
Rating: PG-13
Warning: Contains spoilers for all of season 3, especially "His Last Vow"
Summary: Six episode tags to "His Last Vow" that could also go by the title "Five Times Mary Visited Sherlock In The Hospital, And One Time Elsewhere".
Author's Note: I am aware that there's a lot of controversy in the fandom around Mary and her role in Sherlock and John's life. I liked her from the beginning, and even after "His Last Vow", I am still fascinated by the ambivalence of her behaviour and her actions. There were many things between the lines that were left unexplored, especially that several-months gap between Sherlock's time in the hospital and the Christmas celebrations. This fic is my attempt at addressing some of that. Just a fair warning that if you're anti-Mary, this fic is probably not going to become your favourite. Thanks go out to Alipeeps for the beta.
Technical Note: I've never been to Royal London Hospital, and Google only gets you this far. I can only draw experience from my very limited knowledge of German hospitals. For those who are familiar with RLH or the UK health system, I hope I'm not too far off base. If so, please let me know and I'll be more than happy to fix it. Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

+-+-+-+-+

1) Royal London Hospital – Room C1311



It was that text that started it all, a text Mary unexpectedly received from Sherlock Holmes two weeks after Sherlock and John took Mary's case, two weeks after the paramedics took Sherlock back to the hospital, two long weeks after John hastily packed a bag and moved back into Baker Street.

The fortnight had been lonely and agonizing. She'd had too much time on her hands, had thought long and hard about her options. She'd handed over her life into the hands of her husband in the form of a silver flash drive. It wasn't so much the icy silence in an empty flat, it was the uncertainty and the waiting that ran her soul ragged.

In hindsight, she realized that it had been a utopian illusion to keep Sherlock's near assassination from John. She'd painted a picture of Sherlock Holmes after a rough outline given to her through the eyes of John, and she realized now that it lacked the sharpness and the straight edges to adequately reflect the real life version of the consulting detective.

She'd mistaken his social ineptness for emotional detachment, had underestimated his fierce loyalty to a man he had, in the most Machiavellian way, led to believe he was dead for over two years. Her biggest miscalculation yet.

Then there was the contempt on top of it. She wasn't sure she'd forgiven him for the misdirect at Leinster Gardens. Her plan already had holes that she'd tried to plug—shooting Sherlock had been one of those. John finding out about her true identity had ripped the plan to shreds. Of course it wasn't right to put all the blame on Sherlock, because she'd gotten herself into the mess in the first place, but it was always so much easier if you had a scapegoat.

Then she'd received Sherlock's text with the invitation, and she'd pondered ever since whether she should go, but in the end curiosity and a craving for some closure won over.

She was now standing in the nondescript hospital corridor, and took a deep breath. She rapped softly on the door to room C1311 before she opened it.

Sherlock was lying motionless, his eyes closed. Her trained eye couldn't help but notice his pallid face, the way his hair hung lifelessly over his forehead, the dark shadows under his eyes, stubble beginning to grow along his chin and jaw.

This was largely her doing. She'd said she was sorry, that half second after she'd shot him point blank. And she was, because she had to admit he'd grown on her, and he was, after all, the most important person in John's life next to her. That day, that minute, Sherlock wasn't supposed to be there in Magnussen's office. Maybe there would have been another way, but she'd had no time to think, no time to readjust.

In his hospital bed, Sherlock hadn't moved—he was probably asleep—and she suddenly knew she had no right to be here. She turned around, her hand reaching for the door handle.

"Mary." His voice was low, raspy.

She swung around to face him. "I'm sorry, this was a mistake. I shouldn't have come."

"You're here because I asked you to come." He met her eyes and nodded slightly to the grey chair next to the bed. "Sit."

"Really, Sherlock, I don't think—"

"I do," he interrupted. "I'm sure there's a number of questions you want answered."

She let out a sarcastic chuckle. "You don't know the half of it."

He kept his eyes trained on her, waiting for her prompt. She gave him an incredulous look. "You're actually serious."

"Very."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Gosh, I don't know. Why the Leinster Gardens charade? Why expose John to the truth, and why tell him to trust me right after? Why invite me here? Take your pick."

“It was necessary,” Sherlock just said.

“Which one?”

“All of them.”

“Yeah, that isn’t helping.”

“But you understand the notion, don’t you, Mary?”

She looked at him, confused for a moment. “The notion of certain things of questionable morality being necessary?”

“You *shot* me. Nearly killed me, in fact. Because you thought it was necessary.”

“It was necessary to protect John. To protect *you*, in a sense.”

“Yes, and I understand that,” he said, his voice as disconcertingly emotionless as ever.

“Do you? Part of it was so that John would never know. You certainly threw a wrench in *that* plan.”

“Yes. Because it was necessary.”

“From my point of view, that’s debatable.”

“Would you prefer he lived a lie for the rest of his life? A lie you thrust on him. Admit it, there’s a part of you that’s glad that you don’t have to hide anymore.”

Her first instinct was to say yes, and it wasn’t that she hadn’t mulled it over a thousand times in her head. She wanted to tell him, wanted desperately to trust him with the secret of secrets—one that could mean her life or death.

She gave Sherlock a cold stare. “Do you even have the faintest inkling of what those two years did to him? He thought you were dead. He thought he’d lost his best friend forever, the first person he’d fully trusted in years. Perhaps ever. Sherlock, he was a wreck when I found him. How could I add another blow on top of that by telling him who I really was? It would’ve completely destroyed him.”

“So you lied to protect him.”

“Yes, that’s what I said. As did you.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly lie…”

“You lied by omission. And in your case, it was so much worse.” Silence settled for a long moment, and Mary’s expression softened somewhat. “We’ve both done terrible things to protect the people we love. And we’ve become experts at justifying them to ourselves. But in the end, that’s not what matters. What matters is that we have to live with the consequences.”

“Calculated risk,” he just said.

“You’re always so sure of yourself, Sherlock. But you know what? You misjudged John that time. It earned you a bloody nose and I hope some damn regret. And it’s shown me that the great Sherlock Holmes isn’t infallible. Do you ever even consider there might just be consequences you wouldn’t be able to live with?”

He narrowed his eyes, not sure what to reply. Mary went on, “This is your biggest weakness, Sherlock. People are unpredictable. You expect them to behave the way you think they will, but sometimes they don’t. That’s when it gets messy. Messy like the fact that I’m sitting here, carrying the child of my estranged, enraged husband who will probably never speak to me again.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, drawing in a breath before opening them again. “You need to give him time.”

“Yeah,” she let out just above a whisper.

“Tuesdays and Fridays at 2. I’ll make sure he’s not here.”

She frowned, not able to keep up with him. “I’m sorry?”

“You can come on Tuesdays and Fridays at 2.”

“To visit you?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “God, I had hoped you’d be quicker to follow. Yes, to visit me.”

“Why?”

“A mutual arrangement that will benefit John.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will,” he just said.

And that’s how Mary Watson found herself boarding the District Line to Whitechapel every Tuesday and Friday afternoon.

+-+-+-+-+

2) Royal London Hospital – Room C1311

Tea and a lemon and poppy seed muffin. That had become Mary and Sherlock’s thing.

Apparently the tea they offered on the ward was ghastly, and the to-go variety in the cafeteria was barely better. The proclivity for the muffin had been a challenge, because the man seemed to consider eating a mere nuisance born out of sheer necessity. But with Sherlock, it was often an off-hand remark or a genuine flicker of a smile that she’d learned to read.

Today, Sherlock’s treat stood unspoiled on the hospital bedside table.

“Something must be wrong, you haven’t even touched your muffin,” she commented.

“Not hungry,” he just said.

She studied him a little more closely. Something was indeed off. He'd been more taciturn than usual, and it was only now that she took in the slight sheen to his skin and the glazed look in his eyes. She reached out to touch the back of her hand gently to his temple.

"You're running a fever."

"Judging by the IV ampicillin they added today and the increased tenderness of my surgical scar, it's most likely a delayed post-operative wound infection. Tried reading the chart. The handwriting of the medical personnel here is appalling."

She lightly shook her head at Sherlock deducing his own condition. "I'll let you in on a little secret. They do that on purpose, so nosy patients like you can't decipher it."

"That's adding insult to injury."

She smiled. "I'm guessing you've tried asking for details, but you've aggravated the nurses enough to be as uncourteous as they can possibly be."

Sherlock snarled at her. "One of Mycroft's little schemes, I'm sure."

"What—saddling you with Nurse Ratched?"

Sherlock frowned. "Nurse who?"

She smiled. "Oh Sherlock, you can be so adorably clueless."

He shifted his position in his bed, trying to hide a discomforted moan as he did. "Another reference to pop culture I'm not privy to, I'm guessing."

"Something like that, yeah. Anything I can do?"

"Any chance you have skills in miracle healing?" he tentatively inquired.

"Not part of my secret agent training, I'm afraid."

Sherlock gave her a weak smile, and she found herself worrying more than she thought she should. "You know, I could—"

"Don't," he interrupted her.

"Don't what?"

He lay with his head against the pillow, his eyes now closed. "Whatever you were going to suggest. I can assure you that Mycroft has my medical care more than sufficiently arranged. I can barely tolerate John's hovering. Whatever it was you were going to propose, it's the last thing I need."

She gave in to a small smile. "Well, all right. What is it that you'd like me to do, then?"

"Some gossip would do nicely, thanks."

She raised her eyebrows. "Gossip? Are you sure?"

He weakly waved a hand. “Too tired to think. Gossip is about all I can tolerate. Might put me to sleep very nicely.”

She folded her hands in her lap. “Okay, then. Let me see. Janine?”

He drew a grimace, his eyes still closed. “I think I’ve gathered what I needed to know from this week’s papers.”

“Oh, wait, I have an update on Nina.”

“She was the one with the French boyfriend, was she not?”

“Husband now.”

“Ah.”

It took a mere three minutes of Mary starting to recite the story of the secret wedding scandal for Sherlock to be fast asleep.

+-+-+-+-+

3) Royal London Hospital – Acute Critical Care Unit

“This wasn’t the plan,” Mary said softly as she stood in front of the window that separated her from the ACCU room they had moved Sherlock to.

John’s best friend looked pale and forlorn among the white sheets and flashing instruments around him. Infusion bags and perfusors led to tubes that fed into a central line fixed to his neck. An ECG monitor emitted low, steady beeps that faintly reverberated into the corridor, an oxygen mask was placed over his nose and mouth.

“And what *was* the plan, may I ask?” she heard a vaguely familiar, precisely accentuated voice inquire from behind her.

The lank man took a few steps closer to stand alongside her. Mycroft. Of course.

She quickly shifted her focus and collected her thoughts. “Putting Sherlock in mortal danger was never part of the plan.”

Mycroft’s mouth formed a bitter smile that didn’t reach his eyes. His tone was bone-dry. “Funny how a small calibre shot to the abdomen seems to be mutually exclusive of precisely that.”

“It was a calculated and a low risk, one that I had perfect control over. Unlike,” she pointed at Sherlock’s bed on the other side of the window pane, “this.”

“You like to be in control, Mary. Or should I say Amy?” He said it matter-of-factly, as if he’d known her for years. It occurred to her that perhaps he had, in a one-sided observation kind of way.

She let her gaze wander over the medical equipment grouped around Sherlock, deciding to ignore the weighty innuendo. “How bad is it?”

“Post-operative wound infection with first signs of systemic spread. Unfortunately multi-resistant, which is why he has been moved to critical care.”

She drew in a heavy breath, because she knew that these cases could be touch and go. What Sherlock had going for him was that he was an otherwise healthy man, but his body had also taken quite a beating in the last two weeks. She sent a quiet prayer to the powers that be for his immune system to overcome the infection on its own.

“Does John know?” she asked.

Mycroft gave her a chiding look in lieu of a response, and Mary added, “Of course he knows. How’s he holding up?”

“It’s funny that, in your capacity as a wife carrying his child, you are to ask *me* this question.”

“Come on, Mycroft. You know perfectly well that the situation between John and me is somewhat precarious.”

“Quite an understatement, some might say.”

“You’re evading my question.”

Mycroft hesitated, then said, “Not well, as expected.”

Mary’s heart sank. “Please tell me you’re having him watched.”

“Discreetly, as usual,” Mycroft responded, then looked at Mary for a long moment. “Tell me, Mary, is there anything you need?”

She was taken aback. “Me?”

“This can’t be an easy time.”

“I nearly killed your brother, and you’re concerned about *me*?”

He shrugged almost imperceptibly. “There’s a time for holding grudges, and a time for putting them aside to focus on the bigger picture.”

“Ah. So I’m part of your bigger picture, am I?”

“Mm-hm. Very much so.”

“And where exactly do I fit in?” she asked.

“You will understand that I can’t divulge that information to you.”

She nodded knowingly. She’d expected nothing less, knowing full well that pressing Mycroft for any more than that would be a futile endeavour. “To come back to the original question, and thanks for asking, but I’m okay. Just make sure John is safe, that’s all I need.”

“Very well.” Mycroft took a mobile phone out of his jacket pocket and looked at it, then turned to her. “If you wish to avoid meeting your husband, you should leave now.”

She briefly narrowed her eyes, wondering just how it was that both Holmes brothers seemed to be watching out for her, but she let it slide.

Leaving the ACCU, she discarded the protective gear outside in a small changing room before continuing to the elevators. Just as she stepped into the elevator car, she caught a glimpse of John walking past with brisk steps before the metal doors slid shut.

“Going down,” a tinny voice announced from the speakers, and Mary pondered just how apropos that statement truly was.

+-+-+-+-+

4) Royal London Hospital – Room C1320

It had taken three long weeks for Sherlock to recover enough to be transferred back to the regular ward. He’d been resuscitated once in the ACCU. Terms like organ failure and multi-drug resistance had been ever-present, and everyone started preparing for the worst.

But Sherlock wouldn’t stop fighting, and in the end he’d pulled through. Again. She could only admire the man more, despite everything.

Confined to his hospital bed, weighing a stone less and looking years older from the recent ordeal, she still couldn’t help but let a small smile spread across her lips as he attacked the poppy seed muffin she’d brought. The simple task of eating was enough to drain his energy, but she knew it was just one of all the many steps in the right direction.

Between the slow bites, he seemed to study her, and she could see some of the keenness returning to his expression. “You’re very quiet today,” he observed.

“Just one of those days, I guess,” she evaded.

“Something wrong with the baby?”

“What? No. It’s not that.”

He seemed to visibly relax, which she found slightly odd, but she’d long since stopped trying to discern Sherlock’s state of mind.

“You’re worried,” he stated.

She stared out the window at the sun illuminating the city’s rooftops. “Of course I’m worried, Sherlock.”

“Why?”

“There’s about a million answers to that.”

“He’s fine, you know.”

She shook her head just slightly. “Is that an actual fact, or just something you’ve learned to say to make me feel better?”

“He was here this morning, and I can tell you with some degree of certainty that he’s slept more than six hours for at least four out of the last five nights. He’s had a decent breakfast. Porridge with cinnamon, if you want to know. He’s treated himself to a chai latte, which he only does when he feels a certain level of personal achievement. His attempts to make me ‘cheer up’,” Sherlock drew quotations marks in the air, “were clumsy at best but endearing in a sense. He even brought me the ghastly oatmeal shortbread from the wholefood shop he thinks I like.”

Her eyes travelled to the unopened packet of biscuits on the nightstand and her mouth curved into a small smile. At the same time, it was a bitter reminder of what she’d lost.

She looked at him. “Promise me one thing, Sherlock.”

He returned her gaze, his expression unreadable, so she continued. “Give your darndest to make him happy, seeing how I'm not the one who's going to be doing that.”

“Oh, I wouldn't give up on him so easily.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How can you even say that? You waltzed into a restaurant after two years, thinking John would welcome you with open arms. Have you not learned a single thing?”

A faint smile spread over his lips. “He forgave me fairly quickly, didn't he?”

“I lied to him. For over a year. He married a lie. Then I shot his best friend, nearly killed him. That's ultimately worse than anything you ever did to him.”

“I don't think that's what matters.” He studied her face for a moment, then told her, “I'll talk him round.”

She looked up at him, surprised. “This isn't quite a 'talking round' situation, Sherlock.”

“Oh, but it is. However, it might take some time.”

“Which I only have a finite amount of before I give birth to his child.”

“Well, I'm hoping it won't take *that* long.”

“If you know John Watson only half as well as I think you do, you also know he is the master at holding grudges.”

Sherlock drew in a breath, getting bored with this particular line of reasoning. “Mary,” he said sternly. “John loves you. He will love your child. He will love *you* if you give him enough reason to start trusting you again.”

She snorted out a quick breath. “Yeah. That’s the real issue here. Do you truly see John ever trusting me again?”

He took a long moment to answer, then simply said, “Yes.”

Mary sighed. “That’s easy for you to say.”

“Oh, on the contrary. Just you see, Mary Watson.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

He gave her a mischievous smile. “No, you really don’t.”

“Okay, maybe not.”

He let his head sink back against his pillow. “And now, if you please, I could use some good old gossip. Your friend with the French husband, how is she faring?”

“Seriously, Sherlock?”

“Please,” he drew out the word. “Anything but medical jargon and fretting and fussing. I’ve had about enough of that for two lifetimes. At least. Three perhaps.”

She laughed. “All right, then. Good old gossip it is.”

+-+-+-+-+

5) Royal London Hospital – Room C1320

“So this is it?” Mary asked Sherlock. “Going home tomorrow?”

“There are few occasions I have been looking forward to with more fervour.”

Her mouth curved into a small smile, and she studied him more closely. He was still pale but had regained some of the weight he’d lost. His eyes had reclaimed its inquisitive spark, and the recalcitrant air that tended to surround him had annoyed many a nurse in the past weeks. It was time he had a change of tapestry, so to speak.

“John helping you settle in?”

“And Mycroft, no doubt,” Sherlock said in a grim tone. “God help me if he recruited my fanclub again.”

She let the silence stretch on for a moment, studying her fingernails in her lap. “I’m guessing we won’t be seeing a lot of each other from now on.”

“I don’t know, Mary. That’s entirely up to you.”

She gave him a look. “Yes, why don’t I just ring your doorbell twice a week for a nice cuppa with you and my enraged soon-to-be ex-husband?”

“Don’t you know who you’re speaking to?” he tut-tutted with a half-smile. “I know a good many locations in London where one can blend in to disappear into a crowd of invisible mediocrity.”

“Any of them carry poppy seed and lemon muffins?”

His smile briefly widened. “Two. No, wait, three.”

“Well, then I guess that’s settled.”

Sherlock studied her a long moment, his mouth

+-+-+-+-+

6) HM Prison Belmarsh – Visitor's Room

Nothing said prison quite like ill-fitting grey sweatshirts and laceless slip-ons. Seeing the usually so immaculately dressed Sherlock Holmes in the standard-issue inmate outfit increased the level of bizarreness several notches, and Mary suddenly felt very out of place.

The surprise on Sherlock's face had been very evident when he laid eyes on his visitor. For a fleeting moment, she'd read the relief and gratefulness in his eyes before the carefully crafted mask of aloofness came back to replace it.

The two guards who had accompanied him remained standing at a safe distance as Sherlock sat down at the chipboard table across from Mary. He gave her a curious glance as she took the words out of his mouth.

"I suspect I'm the last person you'd expect a visit from."

"Quite," he responded, underlying worry in his voice. "Has something happened?"

"Other than you being locked up for murder, you mean?"

His expression darkened, and she quickly added, "No, nothing's happened, don't worry."

"So this is a social visit?"

"Of sorts," she volunteered.

"I've been denied any outside visitors. How did you pull this off?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes you just have to remember who still owes you a favour."

"Mary Watson, always full of surprises."

She gave him a long look and tried to discern what she could. "Are they treating you well?"

"Well enough," he shrugged.

"Is there going to be a trial?"

He pressed his lips together briefly. "Who knows. Mycroft isn't the most loquacious conversationalist these days. I suspect he's still upset that I made such a blatant move. Sometimes he can't help holding unnecessary grudges. Such a debilitating trait."

"Sherlock, you murdered someone in cold blood."

He nodded. "Yes, I did."

"Is there any sense in asking why?"

He was quiet for a long moment, his pale eyes fixed on the table between them. "I assume you know what happened at Appledore?"

"I know John's version, yes."

“And what does John’s version say?”

“Something along the lines of, ‘And then all hell broke loose, and Sherlock drew my gun and shot Magnussen point-blank.’”

“Which is remarkably accurate.”

“But doesn’t answer my question.”

“No, I suppose not.”

Mary shifted in the uncomfortable plastic chair, fixing Sherlock with a determined glare. “You should’ve learned by now that evasion techniques rarely work on me, Sherlock. Let me ask you again. *Why* did you kill Magnussen?”

“I thought that much was obvious. He had to be stopped.”

“Perhaps so, but there are less drastic measures to achieve that than first degree murder.”

“It was evident the government wouldn’t do anything about Magnussen. You know what Mycroft called him? A necessary evil. It was me or…” He trailed off, his gaze fixing on a stain on the table’s surface. “You know, Mary, you and I, we ultimately want the same thing.”

“And what's that?”

“For you and John to be safe, to be happy.”

She let out a sarcastic chuckle. “Well, you certainly had a twisted way of making *that* happen.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

Mary couldn't help but shake her head. “Are you serious?” When Sherlock's expression didn't change, she continued. “You *are* serious. Gosh, you really don't know anything about human nature. Shooting Magnussen made John anything *but* happy. Happy is probably the farthest thing from it.

“Tell me, did you ever put yourself in John’s shoes? When your best friend commits murder right in front of your own eyes, that isn’t something you just shrug off as if it was the most normal thing in the world and happily move on with your life. Even *you* should be able to make that leap.”

Sherlock met Mary’s gaze, looking her straight in the eyes. His voice took on a cool, almost menacing tone. “You’ve seen Magnussen, you’ve seen his methods, what he’s capable of. You were ready to shoot him point-blank yourself not too long ago. I can only assume you came to the same conclusion I did: It was the only way to stop him, the only way to keep you and John safe. I made a vow to ensure the two—three of you could lead a normal life, be a family. And thanks to me killing Magnussen, you can have that now.”

She let out an incredulous breath through her nose, shaking her head in disbelief. “My God, Sherlock. For a while there, I thought you had an inkling of a conscience. I think I’m beginning to understand now how you could completely ruin John’s life without a second thought.”

He frowned in confusion. “Ruin John’s life? What do you mean?”

“Do you even have any idea what you did to him when you jumped off that roof?”

He didn’t hesitate in answering the question. “Yes.”

“*Do* you?”

He bristled. “My mind may work on a more rational level than most people's, but I'm not completely emotionally retarded.”

“And yet…”

“And yet what?”

She couldn’t hide the bitter undertone from her voice. “You let it happen, knowing full well that John's life would be in complete shambles.”

“We’ve discussed this before. It was necessary.”

“And you never once thought it might be worth telling him that you were still alive, giving him some sign, plant a seed of doubt? You know, I think the fact that all those people knew but he didn't, that might have caused him more hurt than the fact that you made him watch you fake your own suicide. He thought you trusted him. More than anyone.”

Sherlock's voice was barely audible when he said, “I do.”

“But you didn't trust him with this.”

“A mistake on my part,” he meekly admitted.

“Yeah, I say,” she said in a raised voice, looking at Sherlock intently.

Sherlock’s voice was unexpectedly tender. “Has he said anything to you?”

“About this? You? Yes, he’s said plenty.”

“I’d like to speak to him.”

“And I assume you’ve asked Mycroft to make that happen but they’ve been denying you any privileges?”

“The fate you suffer when you’re in prison for first degree murder, I imagine.”

“And you expect *me* to get John in here when some of the most powerful people in the British government can’t? I’m starting to think you overestimate my influential prowess.”

“And yet here you are, talking to me.”

“Yes, and I’m afraid that’s all the string-pulling I’m going to be able to manage for a lifetime.”

Sherlock's face fell visibly, and she couldn't help but feel a certain kind of sympathy for the man. Perhaps he didn't deserve to be imprisoned. He'd certainly done a very bold, even brave thing—something not many men she knew would have the guts to do.

"So is this," she made a sweeping gesture at the room they were sitting in, "a permanent solution, then?"

He shrugged slightly. "Who knows. I'm fairly certain Mycroft's working on certain… arrangements. Like I said, he's not telling me anything, but he's *so* easy to read."

"He's your brother. He loves you, don't forget that."

"Love," Sherlock said with disdain. "My brother isn't capable of love."

She gave him a knowing smile. "I don't think I've ever met a more dysfunctional family, but I wouldn't discard the notion so quickly, Sherlock."

"Well, whatever it is that he has planned, I'm sure it'll involve a certain degree of humiliation and a good amount of rightful punishment. I'd even venture as far as saying that I've earned it. Wouldn't you say?"

"Perhaps I'm not the right person to ask that question."

"No, perhaps not."

"So what happens now?" she asked.

"I assume you will leave to your spend time with your lovely husband, and I will go back to my concrete dwellings, pondering the percentage of limestone of the wall and the amount of hydrochloric acid it would need to etch a hole in it large enough to crawl through."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"Yes, I do, but I don't have a satisfying answer to the question you're asking."

She pondered the answer for a moment, then said, "Sherlock, I'm sorry."

"I know," he simply replied, and she wondered if he truly did. Before she could ask, he added, "Promise me one thing, Mary."

"Anything."

"Give your best to make him happy."

It took her a moment to realize what he was saying, and that he was repeating her own words back to her. The irony of it had a bitter undertone. She gave him what she hoped was an encouraging smile. "I will. My very best."

"And that's all I can ask for."

With those words, he rose from his seat, the two guards springing to attention right away. Before he walked away, he turned back around. "Will you tell him that you were here?"

She nodded. “I have to if I ever want him to trust me again.”

“Will you tell him something from me?”

“Of course.”

“Who wishes to fight must first count the cost,” Sherlock simply said.

“But you didn’t,” she replied, recognizing the Sun Tzu quote.

“Not until the very end.”

“So you’re saying you may have miscalculated?”

He smiled a knowing smile. “Just tell him. He’ll know.”

And then he was gone, the heavy frame of the door snapping into its lock behind the three men with a loud clank.

As she got up and walked towards the exit, she wondered what cost he had been referring to, his own or John’s. It was hard to tell.

This man, Sherlock Holmes, would forever remain a mystery to her, but she also had the feeling it wasn’t the last time that they had met. She very much hoped it wouldn’t.

+-+-+-+-+

THE END.