

Holmes Boys: Christmas — Originally He Wanted To Be a Pirate

By J. H. Watson
(~16,000 words)

Savouring the last pain au chocolat with his Breakfast Blend tea and reading all of the available English papers, ten-year old Mycroft Holmes was seated in his favourite chair in the house (Mummy's really beautiful *and* comfortable one that, while technically designated as a "lady's club chair," had the advantages of being slightly lower to the ground and not as long in the seat as Father's chairs). He read the papers every day. It was an experiment he'd begun during the long summer vacation from school to see if he could accurately determine the outcome of various events and predict others from reports in the press. He'd even devised his own database and a method of scoring his results. Mycroft was quite pleased to note that changes in his process of observation had resulted in a 347% improvement in his score. He frowned as the thought came that the Labour Party would be doing quite well in the upcoming elections. Mummy and Father did *not* approve of the Labour Party.

Mycroft made a note on his shirt cuff about a change to his stock portfolio regarding Austin Rover (while technically the account was in Father's name, it was one that neither Father nor Mummy knew about as Mycroft had long since shifted the start-up funds back to Father's actual account). There was little chance that he would be caught like those stupid American kids who ran afoul of the SEC by overtly manipulating stock sales through newsletters and the burgeoning electronic bulletin boards. Mycroft's broker did occasionally question the difference in shares and results between Father's two portfolios, but Mycroft had deftly handled that by

implying the first portfolio was constrained by Father's government work. The second portfolio was strictly confidential. This had resolved both the questions and any potential indiscretions of his broker.

Mycroft was really quite pleased with the way things were going.

Nanny dashed in wringing her hands with an expression on her face that Mycroft had learned to associate with a crisis regarding his little brother, Sherlock. "What has he done now?" Mycroft asked as he folded the paper in his hand and stood.

"He's up on the roof and I can't get him down," Nanny replied. "I'm afraid someone is going to notice or he'll get hurt, and then there will be a scene."

"A scene" was something to be avoided at all costs. One scene led to another and another was Mummy's displeasure. Mycroft rolled his eyes ceiling-ward and said, "Show me."

Nanny led Mycroft outside. Mycroft did not like outside. It was filled with all sorts of things that triggered his allergies and resulted in either an unsightly red nose and blotchy face or medications that adversely affected his ability to think. And outside was dirty. In addition, outside almost inevitably led to physical activity, either forced upon one in the name of *exercise* or necessary to resolve a problem. Unfortunately, the problem was often his little brother, Sherlock.

Once he'd gone far enough to get a clear view of the roof, Mycroft looked up and saw a pair of skinny, little legs dangling out of the largest chimney, the torso stretching into the flue. "Sherlock!" Mycroft called.

For a moment the small hands holding onto the edge let go and the body began to slip farther down the flue. Nanny gasped and clutched her sweater. The small hands flailed for a

moment, regained their hold, and the torso of the little boy reappeared. Nanny let out an faint, “Thank, God!” under her breath. Mycroft, who had long ago given up on the belief in the power of deities, particularly over his little brother, released the breath he was holding. If guardian angels did exist, Sherlock’s would have quit long ago.

Sherlock looked down at the figures in the garden and waved. The upper portion of him was covered in soot. He appeared completely unconcerned that his knees and shins appeared scrapped and bleeding.

“Sherlock, come down this instant!” Mycroft yelled.

“No!”

“Sherlock, come down or —” Here Mycroft paused a moment to consider carefully what he was about to say. He knew that he might need to follow through on whatever threat he uttered, so the threat had to be one he was prepared to act upon, however, it also needed to be something that Sherlock would consider both believable and terrible.

As Mycroft was racing through various options and subsequent scenarios, Nanny called up, “Sherlock, sweetheart, come down or Santa will put you on the naughty list and you won’t get any Christmas presents.” Mycroft gave Nanny a look of disbelief and disappointment.

“But Nanny that’s what I’m doing,” the little boy hollered down.

“What *are* you doing?” Mycroft asked.

“Checking that Santa can come down the chimney.”

Mycroft gave Nanny an accusing look and then said, “Come down now, Sherlock, or I won’t allow you to play on my computer for two weeks.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Branch broke.”

Sherlock pointed to the large shade tree that grew beside the house. Sure enough, the branch closest to the nursery window had broken off roughly three feet from the open window. Mycroft sighed. It could have been worse. Sherlock could have come down with the branch.

Mycroft knew there was no way he was going to get up onto the roof. The traitorous thought, “*Because you’re too fat and out of shape*” flitted through his mind, but he swatted it away with the knowledge that there were other people to do the physical work.

To Sherlock, Mycroft shouted, “Sit down and stay there. Someone will be up in a moment to get you down.” To Nanny, he said, “Find out if we can get to the roof from the attic or if we have a ladder that will reach the roof. Then get someone to help him down.”

It took thirty-five minutes before Sherlock appeared back in the nursery, bloody and filthy, and chattering away in that extremely fast way he did when excited. Mummy and Father were due back from a brunch at any moment and Nanny still had laundry to finish, lunch to prepare for the boys, and Mummy’s holiday correspondence to complete. Nannies did not simply watch small children these days, especially if they worked for Mummy. Without looking at Nanny, Mycroft said, “I’ll bath him.”

“Oh, thank you, Mycroft. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Sherlock is so... different.”

Mycroft knew Nanny had been about to say *difficult*, but really Sherlock wasn’t difficult. He rarely threw tantrums, although he was given to impressive displays of stubbornness, sulking and pouting. He was healthy (if a bit thin) and physically proficient, so he was rarely ill or

physically challenged. And he certainly wasn't mentally challenged. Quite the opposite. He learned quickly, usually instantly, and often unconsciously. Mycroft had taken to testing the limits of his little brother's ability to learn and reason, pushing Sherlock with ever increasing challenges.

Sherlock's prodigious intelligence was a fact Mycroft, as well as Mummy and Father, took great pride in. Sherlock was invariably brought out during parties to show off how he could read things like newspapers and books, although he was not yet three.

It was just unfortunate that at the last presentation, Sherlock had loudly observed Father's boss had tucked Father's silver cigarette lighter into his pocket where two silver spoons already rested. Sherlock had found Mycroft's explanation of kleptomania quite interesting, but matters had been a bit strained at Father's office for several weeks.

But Nanny had said *different* and the word stuck in Mycroft's mind as he helped his much younger brother out of his soiled clothes and into the tub.

"Ow!" Sherlock cried as the water stung the abrasions and cuts on his legs, arms and hands. They were all minor, but they joined a host of others in assorted stages of healing. Along with contusions, Mycroft suddenly realized, Sherlock could easily be mistaken for an abused child.

The wounds were all self-inflicted. Sherlock seemed to have no fear of injury or sense of risk and would plunge head first, often literally, in seeking the answer to whatever question came into his lightening-quick little mind.

“If you would think first, before engaging in reckless action, you wouldn’t always be in pain,” Mycroft said with a certain guilty exasperation. He started scrubbing his brother gently and cataloging the collection of injuries. “Sherlock, where did this puncture come from?”

Sherlock made a face and shrugged. He stopped staring intently at the soap bubble on his hand and looked instead at his body. “How come bruises change color?”

“You mean ‘why do bruises change color.’ Do not start questions with ‘how come.’ And the proper medical term is contusions. Give me your other arm.”

“kay.” Sherlock held out his other arm for his brother to lather. When Mycroft didn’t say anything else immediately, Sherlock asked, “Why do contusions change color?”

Mycroft rinsed the arm he held and used it as a specimen as he answered, “The small blood vessels called capillaries break under the skin when stressed and the hemoglobin — blood — seeps out and coagulates resulting eventually in phagocytosis in which the blood breaks down into biliverdin, bilirubin and finally hemosiderin. The hemoglobin appears red-blue like this. The biliverdin is this greenish color. The bilirubin is yellowish and the hemosiderin is dark golden brown like this one.”

“Cool!”

“You can often tell what produced the injury by observing the bruise. For example, this is where you flung back your arm and knocked over the floor lamp last week.”

Sherlock sighed and said, “Sorry.”

“And this... Sherlock, what were you smashing with the poker?”

Sherlock’s eyes widen in alarm and shock. He’d been certain no one had seen him pounding the stuffing, literally, out of his toy elephant.

“Never mind,” Mycroft said shaking his head. “Close your eyes tightly.” Mycroft wet his brother’s messy mop of dark curls and applied shampoo. Sherlock made Mycroft identify the source of at least half of the bruises on his body. The little boy remained completely unconcerned about the unnerving catalog of damage to his thin, and despite evidence to the contrary, fragile body. His only complaint came when Mycroft approached with the disinfectant ointment.

“No!” Sherlock said and started to run.

Mycroft called, “Sherlock Holmes, put your trousers on!”

Sherlock got as far as the hall before the appearance of Mummy. He stopped just short of running into her legs and ruining her stockings. Mummy would not have liked that at all.

“I believe we’ve discussed the inappropriate nudity in public, haven’t we, Sherlock?”

“Yes, Mummy,” he responded in a small voice, eyes downcast. Mycroft enveloped Sherlock in the large towel he’d grabbed before dashing out in pursuit. “Ow!” said Sherlock as Mycroft hugged him close.

Mummy asked, “Why is he all blotchy and bleeding?”

“Phagocytosis,” replied Sherlock smiling eagerly for recognition.

Mummy didn’t respond but looked instead at Mycroft. “He’s been a little careless playing,” Mycroft replied disingenuously.

“He looks like a child from a council estate, Mycroft.” Mummy managed to convey her disgust and disapproval with a glance. Sherlock’s expression crumbled and his lips turned down.

“Sorry, Mummy.”

“At least he hasn’t damaged his face. Keep him covered up until he heals. I’ve come to inform you that we’ve been invited to Lord and Lady Hamilton’s for the holidays. I told you befriending Lady Beatrice would be useful.”

Sherlock squirmed in Mycroft’s arms and said, “But what about Santa? How will he find us with our presents on Christmas?”

Mummy stared at Sherlock for a second as if he’d said something profane or incredibly stupid, which was much the same thing to Mummy. She raised an eyebrow and said, “Mycroft.”

“He’s not quite three, Mummy. I thought perhaps another year or two, in case it comes upon any other children his age.”

“Hmmm,” Mummy pondered the boys for a moment or two. “Yes. You’ll probably correct. Although the pretense is rather tedious. Especially Christmas Eve.”

“Nanny and I will take care of everything, Mummy,” Mycroft said wishing Mummy would stop talking about the subject of Santa. Little Sherlock’s eyes swiveled back and forth as if watching a tennis match and he was listening intently. Mycroft knew exactly how bright his baby brother was and a child who was already checking chimney’s would not need much evidence to piece together the truth. “As a matter of fact, I was thinking of taking Sherlock to Harrod’s Christmas Grotto. I could get him some new long trousers as well.”

“Harrod’s!” Mummy’s eyes brightened and she tapped the invitation in the palm of her other hand as she looked into the distance while saying, “Shopping. Yes. I’ll definitely need something new for Lord and Lady Hamilton’s. And we’ll need better gifts for them. I’ll check my records, but I believe he collects Asian pottery and she was coveting that little 19th Century

botanical watercolour in the hall.” She peered down at her eldest, who was keeping a firm hold on her squirming youngest. “What should you get Lady Beatrice?”

“I was thinking of a book,” answered Mycroft.

“A book? Oh, really, Mycroft. I’m disappointed. Jewelry, I think. You must get Lady Beatrice something memorable. Something that thrills her, impresses her parents, but isn’t too gauche or pushy. Perhaps a small necklace.” Mummy stopped in her reveries and said accusingly, “Mycroft, you’ve gained weight.”

Mycroft sighed. There was absolutely no point in trying to deny it. Certainly not to Mummy. “Yes, Mummy.”

Mummy was silent for another moment, before she continued, “Even your shoes look tight. Well, there’s nothing for it but to get you a new suit, shirts, shoes, and whatever else can’t be altered. The rest we can set aside for Sherlock when he gets older.”

Sherlock frowned at this and tried to look at his brother, but Mummy said, “Sherlock, control yourself and stand still or there won’t be any presents for you on Christmas.”

Sherlock froze. It was hard. It was very hard for him to be still when his mind was racing with possibilities and things he wanted to say and ask about Santa’s Grotto and Mycroft’s clothes and Christmas and going to see Lady Beatrice and well, everything. But Mummy *never* threatened idly. Like Horton the Elephant (not the one on his bed which was just a stuffed elephant toy that Nanny named Horton, but the one in the book that Sherlock still kind of liked even though it was for babies and was rather silly and had pictures that didn’t look like anything real), Mummy meant what she said and said what she meant.

Mycroft has said this was one of Mummy's strengths. It made people listen to her. And Mycroft said Mummy knew *everybody*. Well, everybody who was important. Which meant that Mummy surely knew Santa Clause and could tell him not to come. So Sherlock shut his eyes and concentrated as hard as he could on standing still while listening to everything that was being said.

"I suppose I could move massage and we could spend the morning doing some shopping at Harrod's," Mummy said looking thoughtful.

"Nanny could take us," Mycroft offered.

"No. Nanny has to finish wrapping all of the business and social gifts as well as finish addressing the holiday cards. She seems to be slower this year."

"That's because—" Sherlock started.

Mycroft clamped a hand over Sherlock's mouth and finished with, "That's because Sherlock is great deal more active this year."

Mummy stared at her eldest with narrowed eyes. As a distraction, Mycroft suggested, "You know Mummy, I read in the paper that Boodle's has a new collection for the holidays."

"Tempting, but I believe diamonds are a bit too strong for your first gift to Lady Beatrice."

Mycroft blanched and his hand fell away from Sherlock's mouth. "Mummy, I meant for you! Never Bunny!"

"Never say never, Mycroft. And don't call her 'Bunny' in public. I'm certain her mother will take steps to see that Lady Beatrice sheds that baby fat soon."

Here Mummy paused and took another assessing look at her eldest. Mycroft hurriedly added, “I was just thinking that it would be boring waiting around for Sherlock to see Santa and perhaps you’d rather pop over to Boodles while I took Sherlock to Harrod’s.”

“Why are you trying to get rid of me?”

There was, of course, no way that Mycroft could tell Mummy that trying to dance attendance on her and take care of Sherlock was more than he thought a ten-year old, even an exceptional one like himself, could handle. In addition, he feared that if Mummy found out his true size, he’d not only be denied puddings, but forced to live on rabbit food served in Nouvelle Cuisine portions. But Mycroft was after all Mummy’s son. He replied, “Sherlock and I have some...*private*...shopping we were hoping to do. Without you or Father present.”

Mummy smiled. “I understand.”

Both Mycroft and Sherlock relaxed. Then Mummy continued, “However, I still need to do some shopping as well, so we’ll go together and, after we get your clothes sorted out, we’ll split up and meet at an agreed time. I think we should get an early start. I have a dinner at eight.” With that Mummy started back down the hall and both boys let out a long exhale.

Mycroft said, “We’d better get that disinfectant on and get you dressed.”

“No,” replied Sherlock, who started to dash off.

But Mycroft caught him by the skinny arm. As he wrapped Sherlock back up in the towel, Mycroft said, “If you don’t let me treat your legs, I won’t help you with your letter to Santa and it won’t get mailed in time.”

“What letter?” Sherlock asked suspiciously.

“You have to write a letter to Santa telling him what you really want for Christmas.”

Sherlock looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Can’t I just tell him tomorrow?”

“That’s just one of Santa’s helpers and he can’t remember everything every child ask for. He’s not that smart. Besides, it’s the elves who pack the sleigh.”

This seemed entirely reasonable to the nearly three-year old Sherlock who said, “Okay. But it’s gonna be a long letter. I want a lot.”

Mycroft eyes rolled towards the ceiling. “Why does that not surprise me?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I dunno know.”

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“Sherlock, you cannot have a real cutlass. Or a real pirate ship. Or a crew of cut-throats.”

Sherlock took a deep breath and sighed dramatically. His face screwed itself into a mutinous scowl as he glared at his brother who sat in front of the computer, fingers poised to type. The little boy was bouncing up and down on tip-toe to see the screen. Occasionally, he danced in place or twirled.

Mycroft gave his own dramatic expression of exasperation and added, “You don’t have much time before bed and I’ve got other things to do. Kindly focus on something reasonable that you would like Santa to bring you. How about an Action Man?”

“Can he be a pirate?”

“If you wish.”

“Then I want a whole crew.”

Mycroft sighed and typed “Action Man figures (app. 10).”

“Is that a crew?”

“Yes.”

Sherlock looked at his brother suspiciously, but said, “And a boat. A pirate boat.”

Mycroft typed “Toy sailing ship.”

“And an eye patch and a treasure chest and a parrot and a —”

“Sherlock, how about something that isn’t about pirates?”

Sherlock’s lips disappeared as he frowned in concentration. After a moment he said, “A skeleton.”

Mycroft paused a second before adding it to the list. “How about a new robe and slippers? Your old ones don’t really fit any more.”

Sherlock’s face made it perfectly clear what he thought of wasting a perfectly good Christmas list on clothes. Then he looked thoughtful and replied, “A pirate coat.”

“There’s no such thing as a pirate coat.”

Sherlock nodded his head emphatically. “Yes, there is.” He ran over to the stack of books by his bed and scooped up an armful and staggered back to the desk where he dropped them with a flourish. “See!” said Sherlock, pointing to the covers of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*.

Both showed men in the traditional oversized, full coat of a mid-17th Century gentleman with a nipped waist and full, flared lower section, the precursor to the frock coat. Sherlock flipped the pages of *Peter Pan* and displayed an illustration of Captain Hook in a similar coat with lace cuffs adding flourish at the wrist. He then turned to the illustrations of the pirate captains in *Robinson Crusoe* and Rafael Sabatini’s *The Sea Hawk*, *Captain Blood*, and *The Black Swan*. Finally, with silent eloquence, Sherlock pushed *Howard Pyle’s Book of Pirates* towards his

brother. Mycroft did not need to open it. He'd endured enough bedtime reading from it to know exactly what the illustrations showed as correct pirate captain attire.

Mycroft stared at the book collection on the table. No wonder Sherlock was fixated on pirates! There were the titles that Sherlock had appropriated from Mycroft's bookcase and their father's study, however, the rest appeared to be gifts from Mycroft himself. It had never been his intent to focus his little brother on pirates, he'd merely purchased books he thought would hold Sherlock's interest.

"See!" Sherlock said again. "Pirate coats!"

"Those are not actually pirate coats. They are merely the fashion of the times. No one makes them, or wears them, anymore."

Sherlock flopped down on the chair beside his brother, an illustration in disappointment. "How about..." Mycroft searched his brain for something that might interest his baby brother that wasn't pirate-related. "A train?"

"Cool! I could be a train robber. Like those men when Father was little."

"No. You are *not* going to play The Great Train Robbery. Not all of them got away with it anyhow."

"Can I blow the train up like in that old movie?" Here Sherlock attempted to whistle without a great deal of success, but managed to spit quite a bit.

"No, you are *not* playing 'Bridge Over the River Kwai.' And they blew up the bridge, not the train. Do your research. Get it right. You can run the train around its track and flip switches so it changes at the points and learn about calculating time and distance, speed and velocity."

Sherlock slouched in his chair and looked glum. “Why can’t Santa bring me anything I *want*?” he whined.

“He won’t bring you anything at all if you don’t change your attitude, young man. How about a book?” Sherlock perked up and before he could say it, Mycroft added, “*Not* about pirates. You have quite enough of those. How about something historical?”

Sherlock made a face, looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, “Can I have something ‘bout science?”

“Yes. Very good.” Mycroft typed a few more moments and then pressed another set of keys. The dot matrix printer attached to the computer began to slide back and forth as the ratchets fed the green bar paper into a neat stack on the other side. When it finished, Mycroft gave the last sheet a pop with his finger to snap the perforations and separate it from the remaining stack, tore off the holed edges on each side that fed the paper through the printer and handed it to his little brother.

Sherlock studied it, his forehead furrowing. He looked up at Mycroft and said, “I don’t want a robe. They look stupid.”

“It will keep you warm. Besides, you have to put something practical on the list so it doesn’t look like you’re just greedy.” The fact that the list was two pages long and contained a number of ridiculously expensive and inappropriate items supported Mycroft’s assertion.

Sherlock gave another of his dramatic sighs and handed the list back to his brother.

“Kay. Still want a pirate coat an’ a cutlass.”

“Sherlock. Be good. Now let’s get you to bed. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

Sherlock dragged towards the bathroom like a prisoner towards the gallows, but, to Mycroft's surprise, he didn't put up much of a fuss during his bath or brushing his teeth. Mycroft did take careful note that Sherlock's bathrobe barely reached half way down his forearms, the sash was lost, and his pajamas displayed a great deal of ankle. Mycroft also made a mental note that his baby brother needed a haircut. Certainly before they went to the Hamilton estate for the holidays.

Sherlock had collected *Kidnapped* from table before crawling into his bed. Mycroft pulled up the covers and tucked his brother in. As he turned to leave, Sherlock said, "Read me a story."

"Why? You can read."

"I know, but sometimes...sometimes I like having you read to me."

"Not tonight. I have a lot of things to do."

Sherlock compressed his lips a second before saying, "kay. 'Night."

"Good-night."

Mycroft started to collect his school books, but turned back to look at his little brother. Sherlock had pulled his Paddington Bear and stuffed rabbit beside him, so that they appeared to be looking at the book he held. Sherlock began reading aloud, "Kidnapped by Robert Louis Stevenson. Chapter 1. I set upon my journey to the house of Shaws. I will begin the story of my ad-ven-tures with a certain morning early in the month of June, the year of grace 1751, when I took the key for the last time out of the door of my father's house."

"Seventeen fifty-one."

Sherlock looked up as Mycroft approached. "What?"

“The date is pronounced seventeen fifty-one, not one seven five one. Here.” Mycroft picked up Paddington Bear and sat down on the bed placing the stuffed bear in his lap. Sherlock slid over slightly. Mycroft took the book from Sherlock who promptly picked up the bunny and cradled it in his arms. Mycroft then said, “But no more than one chapter and then you have to try to sleep.”

“Kay.” Sherlock slipped part way under Mycroft’s left arm and nestled against his older brother who began reading to the little boy, the bear and the bunny.

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For the rest of his life, whenever he thought of Heaven, Sherlock Holmes would envision Harrod’s at Christmas as seen by his not-quite-three year-old self. He would, of course, never admit this to anyone and would only offer a contemptuous smile whenever anyone asked him how he pictured Heaven. But tucked away in the attic of his mind palace, Sherlock held this first impression of Christmas, all bright and light and mesmerizingly, magnificently within reach.

Then the frenzied crush of people and noise engulfed him setting his little heart and mind racing with excitement and a rush of adrenaline. He spun in place and began pointing and saying, “Look over there! I want to go there! Where’s Santa? Can we go over there? How do they hang the stars? What’s that little girl eating? Can I have one? Oh, oh. Do we get to go up?”

This was when Mycroft regretted feeding Sherlock crepes for breakfast.

Mummy looked down at Sherlock and then glanced at Mycroft. Mycroft tugged at Sherlock’s coat sleeve and said, “Stop it! Behave! Control yourself.”

Sherlock started to say something, then glanced at Mummy and closed his mouth in a small frown. But the frown could only hold for a moment before an employee came by carrying

a armload of Cuddle Toys stuffed animals and Sherlock eyes opened as wide as they could and spun around to watch the progression of plush creatures down the aisle, his heart filled with yearning. He completely missed Mummy and Mycroft's conversation.

"I think, Mycroft, we should get Lady Beatrice's gift first. Jewelry is this way."

"I'm really not certain I should give Bun— Lady Beatrice jewelry, Mummy." As Mummy raised an eyebrow at him, Mycroft hastened to add, "She's certain to get something truly lovely from her family and I don't want to give her anything that looks cheap beside that."

"I assure you, Mycroft, you won't be giving her anything that looks cheap. Now let's get our primary goals finished first. That's how you succeed."

With that Mummy took off towards the jewelry room. Mycroft took two steps after her, turned, grabbed Sherlock's sleeve and tugged. "Pay attention, Sherlock and keep up. Whatever you do, do *not* get lost."

At nearly-three, you spend your life looking up or you end up looking at legs — especially at Christmas. Sherlock obediently followed, but his head was tilted and swiveling back and forth and as far around as it could go as he tried to absorb *everything*. Then they stopped in front a row of counters. Sherlock bobbed up on his toes so he could see. The cases contained the rows and rows of jewels and gold and silver, winking and twinkling and sparkling under the specially angled lights like the greatest pirate treasure ever. Immediately in front of them were necklaces. Mummy said, "It's that one lovely?"

Mycroft looked where Mummy indicated, blinked twice, and in an unusually choked voice replied, "For Bunny?"

“Of course not. Don’t be stupid, Mycroft. I was thinking your father might get it for me.”

Mummy looked up and instantly a Harrod’s clerk arrived and offered to show Mummy the necklace. Sherlock pointed to the blue gems on the necklace and asked, “What are those?”

“Sapphires,” answered Mummy.

“And those?”

“Emeralds.”

“With silver,” Sherlock added reaching out to touch the metal.

“No, dear, it’s white gold.”

“White gold,” he repeated. Sherlock crinkled his brow and pointed to another item.

“What’s that?”

“Canary diamond. You do have good taste.”

“White gold.”

“No, Sherlock, it’s platinum,” corrected Mycroft.

Mummy smiled down at Mycroft and said, “Correct. And how do we tell the difference?”

“Platinum looks cold with a grey cast. It’s sixty percent denser than gold and requires considerably less maintenance to retain it’s color and luster. Eighteen karat white gold looks warmer with a slight yellow cast while nine karat white gold looks even warmer and softer, but isn’t. Sterling silver has a blue-grey cast.”

“Very good, dear.” Mummy bent at the waist and kissed Mycroft on the head. Sherlock watched frowning. When she straightened she looked at herself in the mirror and ran her hand across the necklace. “Now will you remember to suggest to your father that Santa might want to fill my stocking with something like this?”

“Yes, Mummy,” Mycroft said with a soft sigh.

They continued down the rows of cases, stopping periodically either because Mummy spotted something she wanted to examine more closely or Sherlock spotted a stone that hadn’t been identified yet. Sherlock named every stone and every metal he could as they passed. By the time Mummy stopped at case containing relatively inexpensive jewelry designed for younger girls, Sherlock was getting bored and Mycroft had a rather extensive list of possible things for Santa to leave in Mummy’s Christmas stocking.

“Mycroft, what about this necklace for Lady Beatrice?” asked Mummy.

Mycroft studied the tasteful chain with small oval locket. He was attempting to estimate the largest possible crib sheet Bunny could hide in it when he was interrupted by Sherlock’s, “I want that!”

Sherlock was pointing to a small charm bracelet featuring a tiny “treasure chest” charm dotted with chips of precious and semi-precious stones. “You can’t have that,” Mycroft said.

“Why?” asked Sherlock.

“It’s for girls.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s considered feminine and dainty.”

This did not seem to sway Sherlock, so Mycroft added, “And besides you’d get it caught on everything.”

Sherlock put his stubborn face on and Mycroft began racing through options to prevent a scene with Mummy present. In desperation, Mycroft said, “Remember what Nanny said about being good or you’ll wind up on Santa’s Naughty List and won’t get any presents.”

Mycroft could see his brother thinking hard. Sherlock scowled, pinched his lips, and folded his arms over his chest, but before Sherlock could marshal his arguments, came the call, “Mrs. Holmes. Mycroft. What an unexpected pleasure running into you here.”

The boys turned to find Lady Hamilton and Bunny approaching. Mummy smiled. “We were doing a bit of last minute holiday shopping.”

“We’re doing the same. Babs and Bobbie insisted on going off on their own to shop, so we decided to have a stroll through here. That’s pretty.”

“That’s what I want,” said Sherlock, pointing to emphatically at the bracelet with the treasure chest charm.

Mummy and Lady Hamilton exchanged a glance.

“I’m gonna be a pirate when I grow up,” Sherlock clarified for Lady Hamilton and Bunny.

Mycroft sighed and said, “Sherlock, I’ve told you that’s for girls.”

“Why?”

“I told you—“

“Pirates never wear jeweled bracelets.” Everyone turned to look at Bunny. She continued, “The other pirates would steal them.” Here she dropped her voice to fierce whisper. “Even if they had to kill the person wearing it.”

Sherlock tilted his head and looked again at the bracelet. Bunny finished with, “That’s why real pirates hide their loot.”

“Don’t say loot, dear,” Lady Hamilton admonished. Bunny and Mycroft exchanged a look.

Sherlock studied the bracelet for a moment more and then said, “‘Kay.’”

Mummy said, “Sherlock, do not say ‘kay. Okay is marginally acceptable. You should say ‘all right.’ Mycroft, please correct him.”

Mycroft caught the small frown on Sherlock’s face. Mummy turned to Lady Hamilton. “I was planning to look for something new to wear to your holiday gathering.”

“I was here to find something myself. Why don’t we go together?”

Mummy looked down at the three children and pinched her lips together. Mycroft immediately said, “Mummy, why don’t Bun— Lady Beatrice and I look after Sherlock and do some of our own shopping while you and Lady Hamilton do yours? We could also take Sherlock to see Santa and then meet you for tea.”

Mummy smiled as she replied, “What an excellent idea.”

Lady Hamilton looked doubtful. “I’m not certain they’re old enough to roam Harrod’s alone.”

“But you always say Mycroft is not like a normal 10-year old, but like a little old man,” Bunny protested.

Lady Hamilton flushed as she peeped at Mummy. Mummy was smiling even broader. She raised an eyebrow. Lady Hamilton said, “Well, he is very mature for his age and you know not to wander off with strangers. You do know not to leave Harrod’s without me for any reason, yes?”

“Mother!”

“Alright, you two may shop on your own for a bit.”

“And take me to see Santa,” Sherlock added.

Mummy placed a hand on Sherlock's shoulder and gave it a brief squeeze. "Yes, dear. Now stay together and we'll meet you here at four, if we don't find you at the Christmas Grotto. Mycroft, here's a little money. Make certain you get something nice for *everyone*." Mummy slipped Mycroft a small wad of notes before she and Lady Hamilton took off for the Women's department.

Bunny leaned over the counter and looked again at the charm bracelet. "Oh, look, they have a cute little bunny charm." Sherlock made a derisive noise. "And they have a little book that's really a locket and charms that can be engraved."

"There's a pony," Sherlock pointed out.

"No ponies," Bunny declared sharing a glance with Mycroft. "But it is rather pretty and practical, too. It helps you remember things."

"What do you need to remember?" asked Mycroft.

Bunny sighed and replied, "Times tables. It takes *forever* for me to do my maths work. I'll bet you do yours in ten minutes." Bunny stuck out her tongue at Mycroft whose eyes opened wide in shock. Then she smiled at him, "Where do you want to go first?"

Mycroft thought it best not to mention that he actually did Algebra now and that, yes, he often finished his assignments in ten minutes. "I've got something to get here."

"Why are you buying Christmas gifts? I thought Santa brought them," Sherlock asked.

Mycroft opened his mouth to reply and then shut it, a puzzled expression on his face. Bunny explained, "Because Santa brings some gifts, but we give gifts too. It shows people that we care about them. You should get gifts for your parents."

"And Nanny and Cook," added Mycroft.

Sherlock gave a dramatic sigh and then brightened. “I don’t have any money.”

“Here,” Mycroft replied shoving the wad Mummy had given him at his little brother.

Sherlock stared at it and said, “Is that a lot?”

“Sherlock, we’ve discussed money.”

Sherlock made a face. “I forgot. Money’s boring.”

“Really?” asked Bunny. “But I thought pirates liked loot. Money is loot.”

Sherlock peered at the notes in his hand. “Is this a lot of loot?”

“Yes,” said Bunny. “So you’d better hide it in your pocket to keep any other pirates from stealing it.”

Sherlock promptly shoved the fistful of notes into his pocket and held it there. “Can I get Mummy the treasure chest?”

“I have something better in mind. Something Mummy really wants.”

Mycroft led the other two back to a case containing a necklace Mummy loved. Bunny whispered, “Sherlock doesn’t have *that* much money! Do *you*?”

“Not on me, but I do in my bank account.”

Bunny stared at him.

He said, “Remember my telling you I was testing my theories on economics and social science?” Bunny nodded. “Well, I’ve been right rather often lately.”

It took a few moments to get the attention of the clerk. It took even longer to persuade the clerk that they were serious. This required a department manager, but Harrod’s was not entirely unfamiliar with rich children and believed strongly in the capitalist principle that money is money. Mycroft handed over the credit card that his parents didn’t know he had, his passport to

prove it really was his credit card, and waited patiently while they confirmed that the card was valid and could cover the price of the necklace.

Sherlock was not patient. First, he occupied himself by naming all the stones and metals he could see, hopping up and down beside Mycroft. After a couple of minutes, Mycroft said, “Stop it.” This led to Sherlock’s spinning until he was dizzy and falling down. “Sherlock Holmes, be still,” Mycroft ordered.

“I’m bored,” he answered as Bunny helped him stand.

Bunny pointed to the stack of small jewelry boxes on display as stocking stuffers. She picked one up and said, “These are like little treasure chests. Let’s guess what’s inside.” She shook it and said, “A ring.”

Taking the proffered box, Mycroft said, “No, it’s diamond studded earrings.” He opened it and showed Bunny and Sherlock.

“How?” Sherlock asked.

Mycroft stooped down, closed the box and put it in Sherlock’s hand. “It’s small and square, so Bunny’s guess was reasonable. But feel the weight. Feel how it isn’t centered but distributed on both sides of the box. That let’s you know there are two items inside. It doesn’t rattle, but it does shift slightly, so it’s two things that don’t have anything dangling and are pretty solid. It’s heavier in the front of the box than the back, so it can’t be clips.”

“Clips?” Sherlock asked.

“You know, clip on earrings. The kind that pinch like those...” Here Mycroft pointed to the display case opposite them before continuing, “...as opposed to pierced earrings like those.” Here he pointed to another display containing large, gold hoops.

“Pirate earrings!” Sherlock pulled out his fistful of notes and took a step towards the case, but was stopped by his brother.

“Sherlock, men do not wear earrings!”

“Pirates do!” Sherlock face assumed a determined fierceness.

“Oh, but they only wear one and they have to pierce their ears with a needle before they can wear it,” said Bunny.

Sherlock eyes swiveled towards the case again. It took Mycroft exactly one-second to read his little brother’s mind. “Don’t even think about piercing your ear.” Sherlock looked back at his brother and crinkled his brow. Mycroft added, “Not only will it hurt, it will look make you stupid for the rest of your life.” Sherlock pinched his lips in a rebellious line. “And Mummy will be *furious* with you and probably take away all of your pirate books and toys.”

This caused Sherlock to pause in thought. Mycroft could see his little brother’s wheels turning rapidly as he ran through options and scenarios. The stubborn expression had passed from his face, but Sherlock was still eyeing the earrings when Bunny shoved a box at Mycroft and said, “What’s this one?”

Mycroft took and immediately said, “A cheap tennis bracelet.” He handed it to his brother and asked, “See the difference in the boxes. Can you feel the difference in the balance? The way the bracelet shifts and rustles?”

Sherlock nodded. For the next few minutes, Bunny made Mycroft identify the contents of a box and Mycroft passed each to Sherlock and explained how he knew what was inside. By the end of the game, they had drawn the attention of a security guard who stood within earshot pretending he wasn’t watching the path of every box they touched. The clerk returned with

Mycroft's credit card and purchase just as Mycroft was instructing Sherlock on the difference between quartz and diamonds. As they started to leave, they overheard the guard say to the clerk, "Those are some really odd kids."

"Tell me. The older boy has a higher credit limit than I do!"

Mycroft pretended he didn't hear and looked at his watch. "We've got a bit of time before Santa. Let's look for a gift for Father."

"A cutlass!"

"No, Sherlock. Father doesn't want a cutlass."

"He might."

Mycroft ignored his brother and steered them towards the Men's department, but as they passed a display of gadgets, he stopped for a moment. He studied a portable recorder, but as the clerk approached he set it down and led the other two children on. In the Men's department, Mycroft taught Sherlock to identify tie clips, tie tacks, and cufflinks in the box. After a brief discussion, Mycroft paid for a tasteful tie clip as a gift for Lord Hamilton with his own cash brought for the purpose.

"But what can I get your mother?" Mycroft asked Bunny.

"Oh, that's easy. Chocolates! She loves chocolates."

"I love chocolates!" declared Sherlock.

They were heading for chocolates when Mycroft suddenly stopped. Sherlock, who was looking in every direction but where he was walking, plowed into his brother. "Ow!"

Mycroft didn't even look down as he said, "Do watch where you're going, Sherlock."

Mycroft's eyes were focused entirely on a display of globes. There were some of the standard,

gaudy, brightly colored variety, but the one his hand instinctively reached for was a contemporary one done in muted colours. Mycroft spun it gently until he found the United Kingdom. His breathing slowed. The hubbub surrounding him, the jostling of the crowds, the time, all stopped. Mycroft spread his small, slightly pudgy fingers as wide as he could, grasping as much as he could, and let it rest. “It’s beautiful,” he whispered.

Sherlock stared at the globe and then at his brother. Mycroft had a funny expression on his face. “Mycroft?”

Mycroft continued to stroke the globe. As Sherlock tugged on Mycroft’s sleeve, but before he could say anything else, Bunny came up and said, “What about this for your father?” She held up a handsome silver frame. It looked rich and decidedly masculine. “You could put a picture of both of you in it and he could put it on his desk at the office.”

Within a relatively short time the children acquired the frame and the chocolates. Mycroft’s idea of an expensive microwave for Cook was vetoed by Bunny who persuaded the boys to get Cook a foot massager instead. Sherlock’s suggestion of getting Nanny gin was vetoed by Mycroft and Bunny, even though he assured them it was what she said she wanted from Santa. Instead, Mycroft got her a gift certificate from Harrod’s spa and large basket of soothing bath products. By this point, Harrod’s was getting exceedingly crowded. Mycroft glanced at his watch and said, “Damn!”

“Mycroft!” Bunny and Sherlock both admonished together.

“I won’t have time to take all this to gift wrap and get Sherlock to the Christmas Grotto. Besides...” Here he stopped himself and quickly looked at Sherlock. He continued, “I had some other shopping I wanted to do *alone*.”

For Bunny's benefit, Mycroft gave a slight tilt of his head in the direction of his brother who he realized was chewing something. "Sherlock, what are you eating?"

Sherlock held up a chocolate smeared hand and said, "Shawklet." A bit dribbled out of his mouth. Mycroft grabbed the handkerchief he always carried in his pocket, clutched Sherlock's hand to stop him from touching anything, and began scrubbing. "And where did you get the chocolate?"

Sherlock chewed a moment more before swallowing and then answered, "Bought it."

Mycroft rolled his eyes. Bunny snickered. Mycroft finished cleaning his brother's hand and said, "You're suppose to use that money to buy Christmas presents for other people."

"Kay."

"And don't say 'kay.' Mummy told you. And stand up straight. You're slouching."

Sherlock tossed back his head and then lifted it with a dramatic sigh that would have been the envy of Sarah Bernhardt. Mycroft took another look at his watch. Maybe he could leave Sherlock with Mummy for a bit while he finished his shopping. He looked at his brother turning around, looking up again as the crowd of people pressed against them. Maybe...

"Bunny, do you think you could take Sherlock to the Grotto for me?"

Bunny hesitated. Mycroft began running through alternate ideas. "Alright. If Sherlock doesn't mind," she replied.

"K— alright."

Mycroft took off with the assortment of bags. Bunny and Sherlock looked at each other. A man ran into Bunny, knocking her into Sherlock. "We'd better get out of here before we get run over."

“Can I buy Mycroft a Christmas present?”

“Okay.”

Sherlock smiled. “Can I have another chocolate?”

#

Mycroft dashed through the crowds until he came to the gadgets counter where he opted for cash rather than wait for credit card approval. This was followed by backtracking to the jewelry department. Next he moved rapidly to the bookstore determined to find *something* that wasn't pirates that he thought his brother might like. He scooped up *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, hoping that the fact it was by Sherlock's favourite pirate author would persuade him to try it. Then Mycroft grabbed Kipling's *The Jungle Book* in hopes the resemblance to Sherlock's own stuffed menagerie might sway him. On the spur of the moment, he picked up a copy of *Alexander Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday* to instill some economic instruction and *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* because, even at ten, Mycroft liked to keep things orderly and symmetrical. Besides, Mycroft felt Sherlock needed exposure to something more current.

So far so good. Certainly, not from the recommended titles for a three year-old, but then his brother was not your typical three year-old. Mycroft had long ago stopped trying to match Sherlock to the developmental charts in the parenting books he'd collected. Which was the argument he used in his later defense about his next purchases.

As Mycroft quickly skimmed titles, he found himself in the children's science section. Immediately from the Dover Science series Mycroft added *Chemistry Experiments for Children*, *Science Experiments and Amusements for Children*, *Entertaining Science Experiments with*

Everyday Objects, Biology Experiments for Children, Safe and Simple Electrical Experiments, and *Physics Experiments for Children*. As he headed for the counter to pay, he passed a display of anatomy titles and snatched up a copy of *Grey's Anatomy* and an anatomical coloring book for nursing students.

#

Sherlock was trying very hard not to feel nervous about all the bodies pressed around him. He clutched his shopping bag in front of his chest. Bunny was in front breaking a path through the people and sometimes Sherlock could even see a bit of the displays as they passed. He was thinking about the sensation of the chocolate melting in his mouth when he caught sight of something that made him stop. He ignored the cursing of the woman who nearly ran into him and the slap of her bags on his head as stepped towards the flashing display.

#

By now Mycroft's collection of bags were getting both heavy and cumbersome, but feeling the pressure of time, he pushed on to the Toy department where he ordered a clerk to gather ten Action Man figures for him. There was a small argument about the sailing ship.

The clerk kept trying to sell Mycroft an assortment of contemporary ships ranging from remote controlled power boats and submarines to an entire naval fleet of destroyers and aircraft carriers. Finally, Mycroft resorted to his impression of Mummy's firm voice and the clerk went off in search of an old-fashioned sailing ship. He returned with a lovely model and said, "It's not really a toy and it's rather expensive." Mycroft simply stared at the man until it was placed on the counter with the Action Man figures.

"Anything else?" the clerk asked.

“A train set. A good one. Oh, and do you have a stuffed parrot?”

The clerk directed Mycroft to the stuffed toy display while he went off to select a train set. Mycroft found a parrot, a monkey, a panther, a tiger, and an orangutang to go with *The Jungle Book*. Then he snapped up a fox, a hedgehog and an otter, feeling a patriotic need for something a little less exotic. He completely ignored the ponies.

The clerk had not returned with the train, so Mycroft drifted off towards the science and educational toys. He took back to his enormous pile a magnifying lens, an insect collecting kit complete with net, a Lego Technical Series kit, and a toy spy glass knowing Sherlock would use it to play pirate, but also knowing his little brother would love it.

Just as Mycroft was about to stop he looked up and spotted tucked away a skeleton. Not a real skeleton, of course, and not even full-size, but nearly as big as Sherlock. He barely looked at the huge train set box the clerk offered for his inspection and said, “Fine. And I want that skeleton up there.”

The clerk gave Mycroft a once over and asked, “Are your parents coming soon to pay?”

Mycroft pulled out his wallet and took out his credit card, making certain the clerk could see the remaining stack of bills inside. “I’ll pay with this.”

Once again, Mycroft had to produce his passport and wait for the delay in getting his card approved, but the clerk returned smiling as he climbed upon a step stool and took down the collection of fake bones. Mycroft carefully schooled his face to not even blink at the total and then realized he had no way of carrying all of the toys down to gift wrap, let alone home.

Certainly not without sparking his brother’s curiosity.

“I’d like these taken to gift wrap,” Mycroft ordered trying to convey Mummy’s tone of assuming what she stated would happen. Either it was the tone or the size of the purchase, but the clerk simply replied, “Certainly, Mr. Holmes.”

Certainly, Mr. Holmes! Mycroft liked that. It felt right. He adopted the same tone and said, “And I need to use your phone.”

#

Bunny was in the bookstore when she discovered Sherlock was no longer following her. Perhaps if Bunny had been brighter, she would have panicked and run to someone on the staff for help. But Bunny was used to taking things slowly and Mycroft had taught her to get all the information before coming to any conclusions. And, if there was anyone in Harrod’s who could help, it would be Mycroft.

So Bunny turned around and began retracing her steps.

#

Ten minutes later, after a rather difficult conversation with Nanny and a £20 bribe, Mycroft was in the Boys department. He’d found blue slippers, pajamas and a bathrobe and was heading for the counter to pay when he stopped dead.

There in front of him was a mannequin slightly taller than his brother, standing legs apart, arms akimbo wearing — a pirate coat! Of course, it wasn’t really a pirate coat. It was a dressing gown. There was no way anyone would call it a bathrobe. It had a thick flannel lining while the exterior was a rich, deep blue silk brocade edged with gold braiding in a baroque fashion with a wide label, two large pockets with flaps, and two bright, golden buttons across the torso. The sash was tied at the side with gold fringe. It flared out suitably at the waist.

Mycroft was drawn like a moth to the flame. He realized he'd wandered into the designer section of the department, a place he dreaded when he entered with Mummy. He went up to the dressing gown and looked at the label. He sucked in his breath. Spending that much money on a child's robe was absurd. Ridiculous. Nearly criminal, no matter whose name was on the label. Sherlock would outgrow it before the next Christmas. Mycroft dropped the tag and turned away.

He stood at the counter and waited behind a pair of tired, crabby women who complained bitterly to the clerk about the crowds, about the service and about the prices. He turned away from them and his eyes fell upon the dressing gown. The mannequin's pajamas were a deep aubergine purple complementing the richness of the dressing gown. Completely inappropriate for a little boy. And the slippers appeared to be a soft, supple leather with a fleece lining. Mycroft looked down at the garments in his arms. They were far more practical than the outfit on the mannequin.

“Young man, do you want something? May I take those from you?”

Mycroft looked up into the kindly, but suspicious face of one of the clerks. She gave him a questioning smile. His gaze darted once more at the dressing gown and then back to the clothes in his arms.

#

Sherlock waited very patiently until the three adults and two older boys before him finished their turns. It didn't take long. He couldn't understand why they'd stopped. It looked pretty simple to him.

#

Bunny *was* starting to panic a little. She'd gone all the way back to the chocolates counter and still had not found Sherlock in the sea of shoppers. The only thing she could think of now was to return to the Christmas Grotto and hope she could find Mycroft there. Mycroft would know what to do. She turned to start back the way she came and a hand landed on her shoulder. She jumped and swung around.

Mycroft said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. You must not have heard me over all this noise."

Bunny sighed relief. Then she noticed his arms were empty. "Where are all of your packages?"

"Everything's in Gift Wrap and Nanny's going to collect them and smuggle them home for me. Where's Sherlock?"

Bunny's lower lip trembled. She'd been brave as long as she could, but now that Mycroft was here, she could let him carry the burden. "I lost him," she confessed.

"Where was the last place you saw him?"

"Just up there. We came and got some more chocolates..." Here Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "And then Sherlock wanted to go to the bookstore and get you a gift..." This caused the other eyebrow to rise with the first as Mycroft's eyes widened. "But when I got there, he was gone."

"Show me."

They walked slowly back towards the bookstore, Mycroft scanning everything for any sign of his brother. There was a crowd blocking their way at the edge of the Toy department. The

crowd gave out a polite round of applause. People whispered to one another like the audience at a game show. Mycroft stopped when he heard one man say,

“I figure he must be one those savvy idiots.”

“Idiot savants,” said the man next to him as he stretched to peer around a woman’s big hair style and shoulder-padded sweater.

“Whatever,” responded the first man. “I still don’t see how a little kid can do that. It’s not normal. It’s gotta be a trick.”

“Come on. I think we’ve found him,” said Mycroft to Bunny.

Mycroft forced their way to the front of the crowd. When he got a clear view, he saw Sherlock in front of a plastic circle quartered into four over-sized buttons in the primary colors plus green. The buttons were flashing and making musical sounds in a sequence that went on for some time. Then it stopped and Sherlock began hitting the buttons in the same sequence, recreating the sounds. When he finished, there was another round of applause from the crowd. The lights started a new sequence and Mycroft called, “Sherlock!”

The little boy turned around and said, “You found me. Cool! You want to play? It’s fun!”

“No! We have to go. We’re going to be late for Santa.”

The crowd, seeing the show was over, began to break up, some slipping away, others moving towards the display to pick up a game box. Sherlock took another quick look at the toy that the boxes on the display said was called Simon and then picked up two bags.

“I’ll carry those bags?” Mycroft asked.

Sherlock clutched them protectively to his chest. “Can’t. Gifts. No peeking.”

Bunny reached out and said, “I’ll carry them for you and I won’t let Mycroft see.”

Sherlock screwed up his face in thought and then handed them slowly to Bunny. She folded over the tops and help them under her arm. Satisfied, Sherlock moved in between the two older children. A well dressed man stepped forward. It was the man who'd said Sherlock wasn't a "savvy idiot." He addressed Sherlock. "Hello. That was a remarkable performance. How old are you?"

"Three." Mycroft shifted his weight and Sherlock corrected himself. "Almost three."

"We aren't suppose to talk with strangers," said Bunny.

"I understand. Where are your parents?"

Mycroft made a vague gesture down the hall. The man pulled out a business card and offered it to Sherlock. "Well, please give your parents my card. I'm doing a study on extraordinary children like yourself and I would like to talk with them."

Mycroft took the card and put it in his pocket before Sherlock could accept it. He then took Sherlock by the hand and the three of them moved off towards the Grotto. Mycroft looked over his shoulder and saw the man watching them until the crowd blocked the view.

"Who was that?" asked Bunny.

Mycroft looked at the business card. He tucked it back into his coat pocket as he said, "A scientist."

"I like science," Sherlock stated.

The caused Mycroft to smile. "Why are you smiling?" asked Sherlock.

"I'm enjoying the holiday spirit."

Bunny looked at Mycroft and blinked. Sherlock peered up at his brother with slitted eyes, then the Grotto came into sight and he forgot all of his questions in an entirely new set. "Where

are the reindeer? Aren't elves suppose to be short? How come the elves looks like girls with fake ears? If that's what Santa wears at the North Pole, isn't he hot? Can I have a candy cane?"

Sherlock had started to race forward when he spotted the Grotto, but Mycroft had grabbed ahold of his brother's sleeve and now was being pulled along like one of those dog walkers being dragged down the street. "Sherlock, slow down! Behave yourself or you won't see anything at all. What would Mummy say if she saw you now?"

For some reason that Mycroft could not fathom, this question did not affect his brother as it did himself. What would Mummy say, and the related What would Mummy do, were the guiding forces in young Mycroft's life. Sherlock merely gave his Mycroft a look of disdain, but did slow so that an occasional hop or skip was the only sign of his excitement.

The three children joined the queue with Mycroft deftly fielding the elf's questions regarding the whereabouts of their parents. Sherlock chattered away as they inched forward, asking the elf a slew of questions regarding the physics of Santa's trip that she couldn't answer. Finally, in an exasperated tone, she said, "It's magic!" Whereupon Sherlock carefully explained to her that there was no such thing and calling something magic was merely a primitive method of explaining away ignorance — which, of course, was exactly how Mycroft had defined the concept to his little brother.

The elf regarded Sherlock with a chary expression and backed away. A woman leaned forward from behind them and asked, "What's wrong with the child?"

Bunny gave a small gasp. Mycroft pulled himself up as tall as possible and grew rigid. Very slowly he turned to face the woman and replied in glacial tones, "Given that my brother can read at a secondary level as well as identify all the bones in the body in correct anatomical terms,

while your son is staring vacuously and incomprehensibly at the snot on his finger as he pees his pants, I assume you are referring to some *other* child.”

The woman looked down and discovered Mycroft was absolutely correct about her son’s activities. She quickly took the child by the hand and headed off for the restroom. Mycroft gazed at each other other mother’s in the line daring them to say anything further about Sherlock.

Completely missing the atmosphere surrounding him, Sherlock turned to the little girl standing behind him and said, “I asked Santa to bring me a skeleton for Christmas. What are you getting?”

“Sally,” called Sally’s mother who hugged her daughter close and watched Sherlock with a wary gaze. Sally made a face at Sherlock. Sherlock looked at all the other mother’s and children in line and realized they were staring at him as if he’d done something wrong.

Sherlock looked up at his brother in puzzlement. Mycroft said stiffly, “Just stand here quietly for a few moments, Sherlock. Our turn is next.” Mycroft watched his brother’s face crumple in silent pain. Sherlock stood looking down at the ground, all excitement drained. Bunny reached out and patted his arm, but Sherlock didn’t look up. Mycroft reached into his pocket and fingered the business card from the scientist.

Fortunately, when we are nearly three, we recover quickly from our wounds, so that when the elf called him, Sherlock’s head popped up, he did a little dance in place for three steps, and started to dash excitedly towards Santa.

“Walk!” ordered Mycroft.

Sherlock slowed, but then he caught sight of the very large strange man in the red suit grinning at him from behind an enormous beard and froze. The elf tried to steer Sherlock forward

with encouraging words, but Sherlock merely shook his head gaping at Santa. Mycroft rolled his eyes and came up saying, “Go on. There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s Santa.”

“You come, too.”

Mycroft sighed and said, “Alright. Come on.” Taking Sherlock by the hand he lead him to the impatiently waiting Santa.

“Ho. Ho. Ho,” boomed Santa. “Have you been a good little girl?”

“Boy,” corrected Mycroft.

“Sorry. The hair fooled me.”

Mycroft resolved to get Sherlock a hair cut the next day.

“Have you been a good little boy?” Santa corrected.

Sherlock stared at Santa with terrified wide eyes. He gave a faint shrug.

“Say, yes,” coached Mycroft.

Sherlock managed a very small, “yes.”

“And what would you like for Christmas?” bellowed Santa playing to the audience of waiting children and parents.

Sherlock simply stared at the huge, round, face surrounded by a mane of white hair.

Mycroft prompted, “Tell him you want a sailing ship, Action Man figures, pajamas, and science books.”

Santa leaned in closer to Sherlock and asked, “Is that what you want?”

“yes.”

“Smile!” called an elf. Both Sherlock and Mycroft looked up with startled expressions as the camera went click.

Sherlock was unceremoniously pushed off and led away by Mycroft. A small package was shoved into his hands and he followed his brother to where another elf asked, “Would you like to purchase the photo?”

Sherlock stood by, dazed, confused and terribly disappointed. It was nothing like he’d imagined. It had not gone as he’d planned. He’d completely forgotten to mention his cutlass or his treasure chest or even his pirate coat. He was going to get pajamas! As he followed Mycroft out to meet Bunny, still gripping his packages, Sherlock’s mouth turned down, his lower lip quivered, and tears leaked from his eyes trailing down his cheeks.

A sob escaped as they stepped out of the Grotto back into the hustle and bustle, the pushing and shoving, the crashing waves of weary shoppers. Bunny turned around. “Oh, Sherlock’s crying!”

Mycroft turned and looked. “Why are you crying?”

Sherlock stared at his brother’s frowning face and tried to control himself, but suddenly the world seemed entirely and horribly wrong. “Santa’s bringing me pajamas!” Sherlock wailed before flinging himself at Mycroft and burying his face into Mycroft’s coat.

Mycroft looked down on his little brother’s head and between one blink and another Sherlock changed. Mycroft no longer saw his not-quite-as-smart-as-he-was brother, but a not-quite three-year old little boy who’d been dragged around all day in a frenzied department store on nothing but breakfast crepes and chocolate. Mycroft was drowned in a sense of failure and guilt.

He knelt down so that he could look Sherlock in the eyes and said, “Sherlock, we discussed this. This was just one of Santa’s helpers. We mailed Santa a letter with all the things

you wanted, and even though you aren't going to get everything, I'm certain Santa will bring you lots of other things. Okay?" Taking out his handkerchief, he held it to Sherlock's nose and said, "Now blow."

Sherlock did, but when Mycroft removed the handkerchief, a chocolate smear from Sherlock's earlier tidying ran down one side. Mycroft began wiping it away when another thought struck him. "Did you take him to the restroom?" he asked Bunny. She shook her head. He looked back at his brother. "Sherlock, do you need to urinate?"

Sherlock nodded with a snuffle.

"Mycroft, why is your brother standing there crying?"

The voice of Mummy caused Mycroft to pop up like a jack-in-the-box and Sherlock to begin wailing again. Mycroft answered, "He's tired and hungry and he needs to go to the bathroom." Mycroft drew his brother into his side and cradled him with one arm, using his other hand to pat Sherlock on the shoulder. Sherlock's cries died down into a hiccup, a final sob, and a few sniffs. Mummy appraised the children and then said to Lady Hamilton, "Perhaps we should have some tea."

Bunny continued to hug Sherlock's packages to her chest and Mycroft kept one comforting arm around his brother as the children followed to one of Harrod's restaurants. Mycroft took Sherlock directly to the restroom. After they'd finished drying their hands, Mycroft said, "You'll feel better after you eat something."

Sherlock shook his head and said, "No." He said it without any obstinance or his usual energy. It was simply a quiet negation of Mycroft's statement. He still looked lachrymose and small and, even to his ten-year old brother, very young.

Tea went better than Mycroft expected, with Sherlock offering little resistance to sharing a part of Mycroft's sandwich. This earned a smile of approval from Mummy who, along with Lady Hamilton, pushed her salad around her plate while drinking two white wine spritzers. Bunny cast envious glances at Mycroft's sandwich while chewing the salad her mother had ordered her. There was no pudding discussed, leaving Bunny and Mycroft to look longingly at the pastries served to the other tables.

As they said good-byes after lunch, Sherlock stood huddled beside Mycroft. Mummy said to Lady Hamilton, "We are so looking forward to spending the holidays with your family."

Lady Hamilton replied, "Yes. We're delighted to have Mycroft to keep Bunny company this year. Babs' friends are so much older. It's amazing what a difference a couple of years can make at that age." Lady Hamilton glanced at Sherlock and the corner of her mouth twitched down for a moment. "I assume you're bringing Sherlock's nanny with you. I'll have the old nursery prepared for them."

Mummy now studied the boys for a moment before saying, "Actually, I was thinking we might leave Sherlock home with Nanny. He's a bit young for travel."

Mycroft's gaze swiveled towards his mother. He unconsciously reached out and took Sherlock's hand. Lady Hamilton beamed her approval at Mummy and said, "Oh, well, if you think it best. I'm sure he'd prefer Christmas at home. Say good-bye to Mycroft, Beatrice, and let's go find your brother and sister."

Bunny handed Sherlock his packages and said good-bye with a questioning expression. Mycroft gave a small shake of his head and Sherlock merely mumbled, "Bye." Once Lady Hamilton and Bunny were out of earshot, Mummy said, "Well, I suppose we'd better go and get

you both some decent clothes that fit.” She peered at the boys and asked, “Mycroft, where are your packages?”

“Nanny was suppose to get them at Gift Wrap and take them home for me. It’s been a long day. Maybe we should just go home and Nanny can bring us back for clothes another day.” He shot his gaze towards Sherlock .

“What an excellent idea. I’ll call Nanny to pick up Sherlock and we’ll concentrate on you.”

That was not what Mycroft meant and he was certain Nanny would not be happy about two trips to Harrod’s when she had so much to do already. Fortunately, it did solve the problem of keeping Sherlock from seeing his presents or risk a rare tantrum from exhaustion.

#

As Mycroft stood waiting for the clerk to fetch him a different suit for Mummy to consider, he asked, “You aren’t really planning to leave Sherlock home at Christmas, are you?”

“Yes, dear. There’s no point in putting the Hamilton’s out and it will make things much easier during our visit.”

“But Mummy, it’s Christmas!”

Mummy stopped holding up shirts by Mycroft’s face and stared hard at him. It was The Look. Mycroft felt his insides turn to jelly, but he held onto the image of his baby brother looking hurt and rejected and added, “He’s only three. He doesn’t understand.”

“Precisely. Christmas doesn’t really mean anything to Sherlock. He’ll be excited and distracted by all the presents and probably won’t even notice we aren’t there. This is an excellent

opportunity for you, Mycroft. Focus on your goals. I think the light blue, narrow stripe looks nice, don't you?"

#

It was the night before Christmas and all through the house not a creature was stirring — except young Sherlock. The house seemed even bigger than usual and utterly quiet inside, barring for Nanny's snores. In fact, the lack of traffic outside made the house seem more spooky than festive.

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, but since there was no one home but Nanny and Sherlock, it hadn't taken that much care or time. Sherlock looked at the mantelpiece and frowned. He pushed a chair to the fireplace and clambered up onto it.

Sherlock had pitched a rare fit when Nanny had tried to light a fire, pointing out that Santa would burn. In the end, even the firedogs were removed and a door mat was placed in the bottom for Santa to wipe his boots so Mummy wouldn't get upset about the dirt. Nanny didn't see the final addition of an almost invisible string stretched across the front and attached to small bells "borrowed" from the Christmas tree.

With intense concentration, Sherlock added three more stockings to the mantle. They weren't spaced quite as evenly or as neatly as the first two, but they had definitely been hung with care — and quite a lot of tape — since Mummy told Nanny not to damage the wood before she left. Then Sherlock climbed back down, put the chair by the table with the Christmas card, the cookies, and the glass of sherry for Santa.

After a final inspection pass through the empty house with his emergency torch and Paddington Bear (who was his second in command owing to the fact that Horton the Elephant

tended to dribble stuffing after his encounter with the poker and was upstairs under the covers pretending to be Sherlock in bed), Sherlock returned to his blanket and pillow behind a Georgian wingback chair. The chair gave a good view of the fireplace, the Christmas tree, and the table of treats, but kept Sherlock and his motley pirate crew of stuffed animals hidden. Well, mostly hidden. As Sherlock sat down and pulled the blanket close, Peter the Rabbit fell over. Sherlock picked the toy up, braced it against the back of the chair, put his fingers to his lips and said, “Shhhh!”

#

Mycroft read a page of his book. He got to the end of the page and realized he didn't remember a single word he'd read. This was unacceptable. He needed better concentration. He needed focus.

Actually, he had focus. It was, unfortunately, not on his book, but on something over which had no control. This was also unacceptable.

The door to the Hamilton library cracked open and Bunny's head appeared. The rest of her soon followed. She was wearing pajamas printed with pink bunnies and fuzzy, pink bunny slippers. Over this was an unfastened cotton chenille robe. Mycroft was suddenly very aware that he was wearing just his brand-new striped pajamas without his new robe and slippers. He checked quickly that his fly was still fastened, covered his lap with his book, and tried to suck in some of his stomach.

“What are you doing down here?” Bunny asked.

“Couldn't sleep. Sorry if I woke you.”

“Oh, I was just putting a few presents under the tree and saw the light. Why can’t you sleep?”

“I’m worried about Sherlock. What if Nanny doesn’t get it right? What if she forgets the stockings? What if he doesn’t like his presents?”

Bunny compressed her lips and then said, “You want to see him open his presents.”

Mycroft sighed. “Yes. He’ll never be three again for Christmas. And I’ll have missed it. This is not the Christmas I had planned.” Hastily, he added, “Not that I’m not happy to spend Christmas with you and your family.”

Bunny reached out and patted Mycroft’s arm. “I know. Daddy’s kind of dull and all anyone talks about are horses and polo. Maybe it’ll work out.”

“It would take a Christmas miracle.”

“Like Dickens,” Bunny said.

“I don’t think Mummy believes in ghosts.” Mycroft slipped out of the high-backed chair and finished, “Come on. I’ll walk back upstairs with you.”

#

Sherlock awoke puzzled about where he was and confused for another moment about why he was sleeping on the floor. Then he remembered and peaked around the chair. The cookies and sherry were gone! And there were stockings stuffed and presents under the tree!

And Santa’s sack sitting in the middle of the floor.

Sherlock crept out from his hiding place, Paddington cradled in his arm, his torch in hand. There were foot prints leading out of the room.

#

Lord and Lady Hamilton liked Christmas morning to start early, so everyone had been roused at what seemed like the break of dawn but was a little after eight. Mycroft stifled another yawn. Mummy had no right to look so perfect this early in the morning and Father was much too cheerful. Babs sat in the sullen flop of a teenager mortified by her parents as Bobbie pretended he was too cool for Christmas while actually taking furtive counts of the number of packages in front of his siblings versus his own stack.

Lady Hamilton was thanking Mummy and Father profusely for the gift of the lovely little 18th Century French botanical watercolour while Lord Hamilton was inspecting a Seto-gura bowl by the window. The Holmes family (meaning Mummy) had elected to leave most of their gifts at home for opening upon return rather than intrude upon the Hamilton's hospitality. There were, however, a few things from the Hamiltons for them.

Bunny brought Mycroft two packages. One was a long, narrow, deep box and the other could only be a book. She handed Mycroft the long box and said, "They're used. I ran out of money. That's for Sherlock. This is for you." She handed Mycroft the obvious book.

Mycroft's thoughts flew to the stack of books Sherlock would be opening. After a moment, Bunny asked, "Aren't you going to open it?"

Mycroft started, set Sherlock's gift at his feet, fumbled at the ribbon on the book, and began carefully peeling back the tape. Bunny rolled her eyes and said, "Just tear it. Here." She took the book and ripped at the paper and handed it back to him.

The book wasn't used so much as old. Very old. With a beautiful, supple, calf leather binding. The title page read: *The Works of the Famous Nicholas Machiavel, Citizen and Secretary of Florence: Written Originally in Italian and From Thence Newly and Faithfully*

Translated into English. The publication date was 1720, London. History seemed to seep into Mycroft's hands as he held it.

“Do you like it?” Bunny asked rising on tip-toe to peek down at the page.

“Bunny,” Mycroft stammered. “I can't accept this.”

She sank to the floor, her expression crestfallen. He continued, “It's much too valuable. Where did you get it?”

“I asked Daddy if I could give you a book from the library because I didn't have any money left and he said I could have any book except the ones in the glass cases. Or anything by Ken Follett. This one wasn't in the glass cases and he said he didn't care about it because it was a third edition and not a first edition. I thought you'd like it because Daddy said it was all about politics and history and war and government and stuff. You can pick a different book if you want.”

This was perhaps the longest speech Mycroft had ever heard Bunny make. It was quite possible the longest speech she'd ever made. He, however, was momentarily speechless.

“No,” Mycroft eventually said as he turned the extremely fine, thick paper. An earlier Wigglesworth had written his name and the date, 1807, in a fine, spidery copperplate on the fly leaf. “No. It's wonderful. It's perfect. I'll cherish it always. Thank you.”

Bunny grinned, crinkling her nose like her namesake, and did a little hop in place. Lady Hamilton came up and handed Bunny two small packages as well. “These are from Mycroft, dear.”

Bunny shook them and tore open the one that rattled. Inside was the charm bracelet from Harrod's with the small bunny, the book charm and the little treasure chest. "The treasure chest is from Sherlock," Mycroft said.

Bunny held out her arm and, after a moment, Mycroft fastened the bracelet on her wrist. She turned around and waggled the wrist at the others. "Look what Mycroft got me!"

Babs and Bobbie, without looking up from their packages, replied, "Yeah. Cool."

"It's lovely, dear," called Lady Hamilton. She and Mummy exchanged another one of those looks that made Mycroft's stomach churn. "What's in the other box?"

Bunny gave a little "Oh!" and tore at the paper making her charms flail. When she opened it, she simply stared and asked, "What is it?"

"It's a pocket calculator," answered Mycroft. "It'll help you with your maths." Bunny looked less than excited. "Look!" He pulled Bunny under the overhead chandelier for better light and showed her how it turned on. "So if you need to calculate two-hundred-ten plus sixty-seven..." Mycroft punched the appropriate button. "It will tell you that the answer is two-hundred-seventy-seven."

"Oooh!" Bunny's eyes had widened. "Can it do times tables?"

"Better! Say you have to multiply three-hundred-forty-two by seven-hundred-fifty-nine. You punch that in, hit equal and in a second you get...two-hundred-fifty-nine-thousand five-hundred-seventy-eight."

"Oh, wow! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" In her excitement Bunny flung herself at Mycroft and hugged him.

"Oh, look," said Mummy. "They're standing under the mistletoe."

Mycroft looked up and turned to stone. Bunny glanced up and kissed him quickly on the cheek before releasing him and jumping back as if he burned. Which he felt he was doing as his face turned a bright Christmas red.

Mycroft was attempting to find his voice when the Hamilton butler entered and said, “There’s a phone call for Mr. Holmes. It’s your nanny. She says it’s very important.”

Mycroft followed his father to the phone.

Picking up the receiver, Father said, “Hello?” Mycroft tried to hear what Nanny was saying but couldn’t. All he could tell was that she was talking very fast and very quietly. After a moment, Father replied, “No, you did the right thing. Keep the door locked. I’ll call and have someone official sent over immediately. We’ll return shortly.” Father hung up and began dialing another number.

“Is it Sherlock?”

“No, now go tell your mother to start packing. We need to head home.”

The ride home seemed to take forever and all Father would say was that there had been a break-in. Everyone was fine, but they needed to go back to deal with it. Mycroft noted his father said “deal” as if it were more complex than a simple thief.

They were let into the house by a uniformed policeman. A distraught Nanny and two men in dark trench coats and another in an expensive, black, hand-tailored overcoat came to meet them.

The taller man in the trench coat said, “I’m Detective Inspector Gregson. It looks like a straightforward break-in of opportunity. Apparently, the burglar thought you would all be away for the holidays.”

The man in the expensive overcoat added, “You were right to call us, but none of your papers have been touched. He didn’t get to your safe or even handle your briefcase.”

Father looked relieved. Normally, Mycroft would have stood quietly and listened, but now his thoughts were on just one thing. “Where’s Sherlock?” he asked.

As if on cue, Sherlock came tearing down the stairs shouting, “I was fingerprinted!” He stopped in front of Mycroft and held his hands up, palms out, but there was nothing left but very faint shadows of ink.

D.I. Gregson reached out and mussed Sherlock’s hair as he said, “Yes, quite an *unusual* boy you have. He had a *lot* of questions.” Sherlock ducked out from under Gregson’s hand and stepped between Mycroft and Mummy. Gregson continued, “He’s been quite helpful. And brave. Seems he’s the one who first found the burglar by following his footprints through the house.”

“He *found* the burglar?” Mycroft asked in a horrified voice.

“Yes. The man was asleep on the sofa in the study. He was so sound asleep, it took us some time to wake him and he was still groggy when we took him away. They’ve got the medics checking him out. We’re guessing he must have taken something or gotten drunk before he broke in and was just overcome. ”

“He drank Santa’s sherry,” said Sherlock.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” replied Gregson. “We recovered the trash bag he was using, so if you could identify the things in it as yours and take a quick look around to establish nothing else is missing, we can let you get on with your Christmas.” The implication left hanging in the air was that the police would prefer to be getting on with their own Christmases.

Sherlock turned to Mycroft and said excitedly, “Santa brought stuff! Lots of stuff!”

Mummy looked at Mycroft and said, “Why don’t you and your brother go see what Santa brought. We’ll be in shortly to open presents.”

Sherlock ran off with Mycroft following at a sedate speed. Sherlock halted in front of the tree, now gleaming with the reflect light of shiny packages and bows. Mycroft stepped into the room, paused, and walked as if in a trance towards one item. He reached out and placed his hand once again on *the* globe. He had no idea how it got there. He’d told no one and the only people with him had been Bunny and... He looked at his brother who was watching intently.

Sherlock reproached him with, “Nanny said I can’t touch until Mummy and Father are here.”

Mycroft smiled at his brother as he traced the muted outlines of the lands with his finger. “I’m sure it will be okay if we touch just *one* of our unwrapped gifts.”

“Kay.”

“Don’t say ‘kay.’”

“All right.”

There was a scrabbling sound behind Mycroft, but as he turned to see what his little brother was doing, Mummy’s voice came from the hall. “My jewelry boxes have been emptied!”

The boys arrived back in hall as D.I. Gregson finished consulting one of the uniformed officers and said, “Mrs. Holmes, we’ve found no jewelry either on the prisoner or in the bag.”

“But it’s all gone!” Mummy stated in an unusually alarmed voice.

Sherlock looked up at his mother and announced, “No, it’s not. I hid it.”

Father asked, “Why?”

“Cause Bunny said we should hide our loot from the pirates.”

The adults began laughing to the confusion of Sherlock. Even Mycroft was smiling. But Mummy was smiling at him, so Sherlock decided he'd done something right, even if he didn't understand why it was funny. Then Gregson said, "An unlucky burglar, that. He falls asleep and your son 'hid the loot.'"

"That's 'cause he drank Santa's sherry."

"What do you mean?" asked Gregson.

"It was suppose to be for Santa, in case I fell asleep before he came, which I did. Santa was *suppose* to sleep."

Father leaned over and placed a hand on Sherlock's shoulder, "Sherlock, did you put something in the sherry?"

Sherlock nodded. "Mummy's sleeping pills."

"You drugged Santa?" Gregson exclaimed.

"No, the stupid burglar. He drank Santa's sherry. Weren't you listening?"

There was a collective pause. Sherlock looked up at his mother and explained, "I did it like you did when—"

"Sherlock Holmes, what are you wearing?" Mummy interrupted.

Sherlock looked down at himself and replied, as if it were obvious, "Pirate coat." He gave a little twirl so that the bottom flew out. "Cool, hunh?"

"Mrs. Holmes, if you could check your medications and see exactly what the boy put in the glass and how much, we'll let the medics know," Gregson said more soberly.

As Mummy went upstairs to check her medicine cabinet, Mycroft took Sherlock's hand and started to lead his brother back to the Christmas tree. Behind them someone said, "I can't wait to tell my wife about the kid who tried to drug Santa."

#

Mummy had loved her necklace and had given him and Sherlock a kiss — well, she'd blown Sherlock a kiss since he'd gotten into his Christmas stocking candy cane and was once again quite sticky. Father had liked his silver picture frame with the photo showing Mycroft and Sherlock with Santa, all wearing rather startled expressions. It sat now on the mantle. And Sherlock...

Sherlock was a whirlwind of happiness, tearing into each perfectly wrapped package like a ferret into a chicken, ribbons, bows, paper flying everywhere like so many plucked feathers. Each opened package producing a squeal of delight and Sherlock rattling off the contents in minute detail at a speed that would break the sound barrier and a pitch only dogs could hear. He was now identifying every bone in his skeleton, despite Mycroft's assurance that it wasn't necessary.

"...metatarsal, proximal phalanges, intermediate phalanges, distal phalanges and that's all." He finished his recitation with a big sigh.

"That's very good, dear," Mummy said distantly while admiring in the mirror once again the *very* expensive Boodles diamond necklace Father had bought her.

"Oh," said Mycroft. "I forgot Bunny's gift for Sherlock." He ran out into the entry and came back with the box. He was curious to see what was inside himself. It seemed about the shape for a short cricket bat, but the feel wasn't right.

Sherlock stripped the wrapping in less than eight seconds, pulled off the box lid, and simply went still for a full three seconds. "What is it?" asked Mycroft.

Sherlock said in an awed whisper, "A cutlass." He reached in and pulled out a sword that was a little more than half his height and raised it above his head.

"Sherlock! Stop!" Mycroft yelled. Mycroft moved faster than most people believed possible for his size and grabbed Sherlock's wrist. Then he drew the sword from his little brother's hand and examined it closely.

"I would have thought even Bunny Wigglesworth would be smart enough not to give a child a weapon," said Mummy.

"She didn't," Mycroft replied. "It's a toy."

It was a toy. A very realistic and old toy, hand-carved from a soft wood and painted to look like the real thing. On the inside of the hilt basket, it read “Edward Wigglesworth.” A line had been struck through and “Sherlock Holmes” had been written underneath in marker. Mycroft stated, “I think it must have belonged to her great-great-grandfather when he was a boy. She said she’d gotten us something used.”

Father looked at it and said, “She must have found it in the attics or some place.”

Mycroft said to his little brother, “Do not run with it. Do not hit things with it. Do not stab things with it. Promise?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, gave an exasperated sigh, and answered, “All right.”

Mycroft handed the cutlass back to Sherlock.

Sherlock tucked the mock cutlass into the sash of his dressing gown, placed the spyglass in one pocket, the parrot in the other, tossed his skeleton over his shoulder, and took off to show Nanny. Mycroft had to admit that with his long, dark, curly locks, the dressing gown and the cutlass, Sherlock made a rather convincing pirate.

#

Mycroft read another paragraph of Machiavelli’s *Discourse’s* in the book Bunny had given him. It required considerable work to understand much of the meaning. Whether this was because of the translation or Machiavelli’s writing, Mycroft didn’t know, but it made him aware that it was not only his body that had gotten flabby. And while he wasn’t prepared to do much about the body, he liked vigorous *mental* exercise and was beginning to think he might like the challenge of influence that Machiavelli presented in his arguments.

Mycroft stirred his cocoa with a candy cane and sipped, savouring the delightful mix of chocolate and peppermint. He set his cup into the saucer and placed both with great precision back on the tray in front of him on the coffee table. The house was unusually still.

Nanny was somewhere, probably recovering from the day with the rest of Mummy and Father’s dinner champagne. Mummy and Father were in Mummy’s room (possibly making another sibling for

Mycroft because Mummy had *really* liked her Christmas present). And Sherlock lay asleep in front of the fire, still clutching his cutlass in one hand and his spyglass in the other.

Mycroft was experiencing a rare emotion. It took several moments of concentration to recognize it. He was content!

The clock struck ten and Mycroft placed a ribbon to mark his place in his book, closed it and set it gingerly onto the table, well away from the tray of cocoa. He went to Sherlock and brushed one of the overlong, curling locks from his brother's face. Sherlock smiled in his sleep. Mycroft studied his brother who no longer looked like a pirate, but what he was — a gangly almost-three-year old little boy playing a romantic version of pirate, one of indestructible confidence and no consequences. Perhaps he was *different*, but Mycroft wished his brother could remain like this forever.

Gently, Mycroft shook his brother's shoulder and said, "It's time for bed." Sherlock muttered something as he blinked and rubbed his eyes with the back of his fist, still clutching his prized possessions, before following Mycroft upstairs to the nursery.

Sherlock asked Mycroft for a hanger, then carefully removed his dressing gown, placed it on the hangar, and hung it up where he could see it. After he put on his new pajamas, Sherlock gathered all of his new books, put them in the basket beside his bed. Next he collected his new stuffed animals and placed them beside the older ones. He yawned widely as he arranged them with sedulous care by size, so that the bunny and the fox sat alertly in front of the tiger (who loomed above all of the others beside Horton the Elephant) and the little hedgehog ended up nestled in front of the otter. It took him some time to work the rest into the tableaux. Finally, Sherlock got his cutlass and placed it ever so meticulously back in the box it came, and set it under his bed.

Meanwhile, Mycroft retrieved Sherlock's discarded clothes and placed them in the hamper. He then came to tuck in his little brother.

Sherlock started to crawl into bed, but turned and said, "I forgot."

He ran out of the room before Mycroft could stop him, but by the time Mycroft made it to top of the stairs, Sherlock was already heading back up with another wrapped box.

He handed it to Mycroft saying, "The burglar dropped it in the study. It's for you."

Mycroft opened the box and then stared at it with a puzzled expression. The box read “Risk” and underneath “The Game of Global Domination.” Sherlock explained, “Bunny said I should get you a game so you could have some fun. And this game has a map like your globe and the man at the store said it was fun.”

“Uh, thank you.”

Sherlock lead Mycroft back to the nursery without any prompting. Mycroft set down the game and smoothed back the covers. Suddenly, Sherlock hugged his brother tightly.

“What’s this about?” Mycroft asked his arms outstretched uncertainly.

“Thank you for my pirate coat.”

“That was from Santa.”

Sherlock pressed tightly against his brother and replied, “I know.”

The nursery was silent, except for the ticking of the clock and the sounds of London outside the house. Mycroft hesitated and then wrapped his arms around Sherlock and squeezed back. He asked a single word, “How?”

“There weren’t any reindeer prints on the roof and no one came down the chimney. I looked.”

After a few more moments passed, footsteps could be heard going into Nanny’s adjoining bedroom and the boys released each other. Mycroft finished tucking his little brother into bed. Sherlock yawned again and shook his head when Mycroft offered to read him a bedtime story. As Mycroft switched off the reading light and turned to leave, Sherlock said, “Merry Christmas, Mycroft.”

“And a Happy New Year.”

The end