A Waste of Breath

by Chryse

Summary

John had always assumed Sherlock was uninterested, untouchable, married to his work. He was wrong on all counts. But when Sherlock embarks on a relationship, John worries that he is in over his head...and this time he might be right.

Notes

This is not a WIP--it's totally finished. I'll be posting chapters regularly as I get them polished. This is to reassure you, dear reader, that not only will the whole thing be finished, but that I do in fact know where I'm going with it (which may not be apparent at the beginning). WARNING: This story centers around an unhealthy relationship, and contains references to sexual assault, extremely dubious consent, and intimate partner violence. NONE OF THIS TAKES PLACE BETWEEN SHERLOCK AND JOHN, and most of it takes place off the page (as opposed to the explicit sex, which is all over the page). There is one exception which I have placed in its own chapter and will warn separately, so you can skip it without any problem.

About timing: this picks up from the moment the phone rings at the pool, then takes a left turn and goes off the map. As I see it, in the Johnlock slashverse most of us prefer to live in, Moriarty would have known Sherlock would never have gone for Irene Adler, right?

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Chapter 1

I can’t say any more than I love you

Anything else is a waste of breath.

“I want you”, Elvis Costello

Prologue

He locked it in the cellar of his memory palace, but sometimes he saw it anyway: the pool. Light flickering off walls, Moriarty’s anger shivering the air, *I will burn the heart out of you.*

John’s eyes, steady on his.

And then the phone, the male voice just barely audible. Moriarty listening, his interest shifting, sharpening. “I might have a use for you,” he said.

He held the phone away, looked at Sherlock with something like regret. “Bad day to die.”

Then sauntering out, snapping his fingers to stand down the snipers, phone to his ear. “But if you’re calling, then you want something from me.”

The question of who or what had intrigued Moriarty enough to divert him from a chlorine-soaked holocaust was one Sherlock turned over in his mind frequently in the days that followed. But the paucity of data was daunting and in the end, he stopped wondering. He had other things on his mind.

Chapter 1

Sherlock stood in the middle of the social services waiting room, flicked his eyes rapidly over the weary clientele drooped over the hard plastic chairs, considered what he already knew about the case, and whirled. The whirl was meant to scoop John into his orbit and on a trajectory toward the door, but John was not standing where Sherlock expected. He had sat down on a hard plastic chair of his own.

“Come on, John, we’re going,” Sherlock announced in a peremptory tone.

“What?” John looked up, startled. “But we haven’t—“

“Waste of time,” Sherlock snapped just as John’s eyes slid past him and widened. Oh, no.

“No it’s not,” John said under his breath, standing up. He put on his most charming smile. Sherlock, scowling, spun around to see a hideously dull woman *long pale hair no styling product peasant skirt—hemp?—oh God, clogs* leaning into the waiting room from what was evidently an office.

“Mr. Holmes?”

“No, Mr. Holmes.” John gripped Sherlock’s arm above the elbow and tugged
him forward. Sherlock set his jaw and planted his heels.

“Actually, we won’t—“

“—be a minute,” John finished, turning his smile on Sherlock with a gleam of teeth that made the expression much more like a snarl. “Right behind you.”

The woman smiled, stepping back into the office. John glowered. “Sherlock, this woman has gone to the trouble to put together a list that you requested; the least you can do is take five minutes to look it over. Politely.”

Sherlock let himself be towed, sulking, to the small office. He immediately deleted the social worker’s name.

“The details weren’t entirely clear on the message—are you with the police?”

“No, although we do work with them on occasion,” John said, smiling. “I can give you the name of someone at the Met if you’d like to contact him. But in this case the client hired us directly, after the police and a regular private detective failed to make any headway on finding her stolen property.”

Sherlock sniffed. He had not wanted to take the case at all, initially. Rich old ladies missing jewels? It epitomized tedium. But although cases had been plentiful since the pool, Sherlock’s preference for the interesting over the lucrative had begun to cause worry lines to appear on John’s forehead. After Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis’ third attempt to contact him, John gave Sherlock a choice between taking the case and losing John to the surgery to cover someone’s lengthy leave. He took the case.

“The three women who suffered thefts all frequented the same salon,” John was saying. “They thought the girls that were recently hired for the shampoo station were acting suspiciously. We understand that these young ladies came through your job placement program, so we were hoping you could provide us with some background.”

Boring Hemp’s pleasant smile metamorphosed into a frown. “I’m well aware of the salon in question and its clientele. These women all have exemplary records with no history of criminal activity. Are you sure they aren’t being scapegoated? I seriously doubt the three victims have no other parts of their lives that intersect.”

“You’re absolutely correct. So sorry to take up your time,” Sherlock said brightly. “I’m fairly certain the activity that so concerned our client was no more ‘suspicious’ than an East End accent. We shall certainly be looking into those other areas you mentioned—thank you so much for your assistance. John?”

John, blushing furiously, cast a worried glance at Self-Righteous Clogs before allowing himself to be swept along. Once in the waiting area, however, he stopped, turned back toward the office, then back to Sherlock, licked his lips, turned back again, muttered, “I’ll catch you up—just a minute—don’t want her thinking—“ and pushed his way back through the door.

Sherlock sighed, stalked through the waiting area’s haze of lethargy to the hallway, and slumped. In the past, John’s girlfriends had been a minor and usually brief annoyance, but things were different now. Sherlock didn’t know what the actual catalyst had been, that night at the pool. It could have been Moriarty’s words, or John’s actions, or possibly the realization—seeing John in the vest—that this could all end in a way that would actually hurt terribly. In the immediate adrenaline soaked aftermath, everything had been relief and giddy confusion. They had returned to the flat, John had poured them both whiskeys, and they sat pressed side by side on the sofa while Sherlock sipped his drink and babbled on frantically as John downed three in steady succession. Finally John stood
unsteadily and dropped his had to rest on Sherlock’s hair, in the closest approximation of a caress Sherlock had ever received from him. “You’ll work it out,” he had said. “I’m off to bed. Try and get some rest.” And then he had stumbled upstairs, leaving Sherlock to contemplate the vast, John-shaped emptiness beside him.

Sherlock was terrible at understanding emotions, including his own, but this was not wholly unfamiliar ground. He had had crushes at school, of course, and then at university there had been Victor. In that lonely moment his own heart was as clear to him as the chemical composition of the alcohol he had stopped drinking. He had fallen passionately, completely, overwhelmingly, stupidly in love with his straight, calm, normal, STRAIGHT best friend, his best friend who would never fall for Sherlock even if her weren’t a man, because John—despite not being an ordinary person—wanted ordinary things. A family, a house in the country, a normal person to love. He had shown no sign whatsoever of being attracted to lunatic geniuses who would get him blown up. There was nothing to be done, except ignore his feelings in the hope that they would go away, which had not been very successful, and sabotage John’s relationships, which had. Annoyingly, John had caught on and was now setting rules regarding Sherlock’s behavior around his dates. This was making things more difficult.

John came bounding out of the office, clearly relishing his success. “Ready?” he asked cheerfully.

“Got her number then?” Sherlock asked, as snidely as possible. “You do realize she’s a vegan.”

“Yeah, she knows a great—Sherlock! Remember what we agreed? No deducing except for criminal activity and STDs.”

Sherlock privately thought that John would have been a lot better off knowing ahead of time that the one with the spots was going to cry after sex and call him “daddy”, but he knew enough to keep this observation to himself. “You hadn’t said you were interested. I’m still allowed to deduce about people you aren’t dating, correct?”

“Yes, but you deduced I was going to ask her out, so…” John frowned. “So you shouldn’t have—wait…”

Sherlock smirked.

“Oh, shut up. Since for you this was a colossal waste of time, where next?”

“The vegan was right,” Sherlock said, striding toward the doors. “The victims are part of a tight and insular social network. The obvious culprit was always an insider, but no one in the families or households of the three victims seemed a viable possibility. The idea of any of those women back there,” he tossed his head toward the social services office, “planning and executing a robbery of this complexity is laughable; they don’t have the energy, let alone the intimate knowledge that would be required to locate the jewels. We need to widen our investigation to their immediate circle.”

“Her name is Sylvie, Sherlock.”

Sherlock sniffed dismissively. “We need to go back to Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis and get a list of her friends. I’ll ask for ones who use the same hairdresser, that’s a good pretext.”

“Are you going on from there?”

“No, likely home…why?”

“We’re out of tea. And if I’m going to Tesco I might as well cook something for dinner. Anything you would eat?”
“No,” Sherlock said automatically.

“I was thinking Welsh rarebit,” John said in an oh-so-casual way.

Sherlock loved Welsh rarebit, and John knew it. So far the case, while moderately intriguing, had not required great intensity of focus. “Maybe,” he conceded.

“All right, let’s get a cab and drop you at her ladyship’s. If you decide to go anywhere else you’ll text, yeah?”

“Mmmm.” Sherlock was thinking about Sylvie. John had not introduced himself as a doctor, which was probably why she had given him her number; she was obviously a devoted homeopath. Would this issue naturally arise on the first date? He hoped so. If not maybe her opposition to deodorant would do the trick. Sherlock felt better. The smelly vegan was clearly doomed; John was making Welsh rarebit; he had an interesting case. What more did he really need?

When John arrived back at the flat, Sherlock had both laptops open and was flying over the keyboards like Franz Liszt on crystal meth.

“Are you on Facebook?” John asked.

“Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis,” Sherlock announced, “is godmother to one Philomena Flyte-Finchley, mother to Emma, sixth former at one of our less rigorous and more exclusive public schools.”

What this had to do with the case John had no idea. “Do these people seriously give their kids names like Philomena Flyte-Finchley?”

“These people seriously give their kids names like Mycroft and Sherlock, so yes,” Sherlock said, “but in this case it’s clearly her married name, John, do keep up.”

John peered at the computer on which Sherlock was typing furiously. “You’re a seventeen year old boy who attends Harrow and plays the alto sax?”

Sherlock shuddered at the words “alto sax”. “I can’t attempt to friend her as a girl, she’ll know immediately I don’t go to her school. She was happy to friend Derek St. Andrew, however, since he’s well-off, handsome for an adolescent, and claims to share her deplorable affection for vampire fiction.”

John looked at the profile picture on displayed on the screen. Derek was handsome. “How did you get into his Facebook page?”

“What are you talking about? It’s my page.”

John wished, as he often did, that Sherlock came with a remote that controlled his processing speed. “You set up a Facebook page for a seventeen year old and managed to friend—” He looked at the screen again. “—243 people since I saw you an hour ago?”

“Of course not. I set up this page months ago. Most teenagers will accept practically any friend request they get, since a high number of friends is a status marker for young people. Once you have established a certain number of mutual friends, it’s even easier to friend the more selective.”
“Right,” John said, still feeling a step behind. “But how did you know you might need to friend a dim posh sixth former when you set this up?”

“John, make tea. Your lack of caffeine is the only explanation for why you are more abysmally slow than usual.”

John carried the bags to the kitchen and flicked on the kettle. He began putting the shopping away. It had not escaped John’s notice that in all the moping about he had been doing since the pool, Sherlock had lost nearly all the weight he had put on since coming under the influence of people who ate regular meals (and in the case of Mrs. Hudson, frequently set regular meals directly in front of him). John was never going to equal Mrs. Hudson, but he did his part to stem the damage by stocking up on the sorts of biscuits and sweets Sherlock would sometimes absently eat if they accompanied his tea. John was also making a bit more effort with dinner. If faced with John’s usual bachelor fallback—beans on toast—Sherlock usually skipped the beans and ate the middle out of the toast. If it was soft enough. And had jam. On the other hand, he was reasonably accepting of cheese in most forms.

Light dawned as the kettle clicked off. John carried a mug to Sherlock, feeling unaccountably clever. “You didn’t know you would need it,” he said, “you set up a whole great lot of Facebook accounts and you update them in your spare time.”

“Yes, spot on,” Sherlock said brightly. He tossed back a biscuit and reached for his tea. Then he stole John’s biscuit out of his hand, another technique John cultivated—the only thing Sherlock liked better than a sweet was nicking John’s sweet. “I friended you,” he added as an afterthought.

“Really?” John took his laptop back—Sherlock was currently typing away on his own anyway—and logged into his Facebook account. He had set it up ages ago with the vague idea of keeping up with his now-scattered Army mates, but rarely remembered to check it. “Ben’s honeymoon snaps…Ben got married? Maybe I should check this more often.” He clicked over to his friends list. “Roopa Kartan? Hold on, I think I remember Roopa from training, she went into obstetrics…Rob Phelps? No, wait, he was in Afghanistan with me, just looks different with his hair long.”

“Most adults are at least somewhat selective with their acceptances, John, although apparently that is not true in your case. Research shows that attractive people are viewed as more likeable, so I generally chose profile pictures accordingly. See if that helps you.”


“Divorced, no kids, likes Adele,” Sherlock intoned, not looking up from his screen.

John looked sadly at Daphne Forbes. He had known she was out of his league, but thought they must have met at a crime scene and she had wanted to get to know him better. He should have known. “She wrote on my wall for my birthday,” he said mournfully.

Sherlock ignored him.

Six hours, three cups of tea, a few bites of dinner, and a diagram spanning half a wall later, Sherlock had cracked the case. Unfortunately he had no one to witness his moment of triumph, as John had long since gone to bed and Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis was unlikely to appreciate being awakened in the
middle of the night, no matter how attached to her hideous jewels she claimed to be.

Sherlock considered. Perhaps this was for the best. The case had not required his top work, but it had been moderately diverting, and the denouement had potential to be quite dramatic. He pictured the gasps of shock, the dramatic outcries, John’s face shining at him in admiration…yes. Best to use the time to plan. He left the collage on the wall: cleanup was dull, and John could use it when he got around to the inevitable write-up for his blog.

When John eventually came downstairs in the morning (late for the time he went up, had a lie-in masturbating to thoughts about the skinny vegan, ugh), Sherlock was on his phone arguing, for the second time, with Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis’ secretary. Ordinarily he would have refused on principle to speak to anyone but Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis herself, but this time the whole thing would be much more fun if she were kept in the dark as much as possible.

“Call Miss Flyte-Finchley directly, on her mobile,” Sherlock was saying impatiently. “If she is still reluctant, ensure she is aware the authorities will be much less accommodating of her busy schedule.” He clicked off feeling smug.

“Are we going somewhere?” John inquired as he poked at the coffee pot. His hair was sticking up. It was oddly endearing.

“This afternoon, tea with Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis and a few of her friends,” Sherlock said. “You’ve plenty of time to” he waved a disdainful hand, “make yourself presentable.”

“Thanks,” John said cheerfully, not one whit insulted. “Breakfast? We’ve all manner of food, for once.”

“Just coffee,” Sherlock said, and went back to his room to select a suit for the afternoon.

Sherlock made sure they were the last to arrive at Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis’ house. He paused outside the drawing room door—to the annoyance of the secretary who had already stepped in to announce them—drew himself up so that he could look superciliously down his nose, and swept through the door in full majestic hauteur. He heard John stifle a giggle.

“Ah, Mr. Holmes,” Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis said, rising. “You have met Mrs. Walden and Mrs. Marsden already, of course. My dear goddaughter Mrs. Flyte-Finchley and her daughter Emma; my dear friend Lady Alice Margate and her granddaughter Emma; and this young lady is a friend of Emma’s, Miss Ema Anstruther. “

Sherlock did not dare look at John, who was probably barely keeping a straight face. He halted abruptly in front of the three girls, flicking his eyes over them in assessment. All were styled, straightened, adorned and attired in an interchangeably expensive manner that he supposed represented the height of upscale adolescent fashion; all were ignoring him in favor of their phones. This would not do. He whipped to the tallest girl, hoping he had chosen the one he wanted. “Where are the stolen jewels?” he demanded.

Right on cue, Mrs. Marsden dropped her teacup. Excellent! Sherlock bit back a smile.

And then Emma Flyte-Finchley surprised him. Instead of turning ashen or bolting, she sagged into her chair with a dramatic flinch to match Sherlock’s own. “Oh Gawd, finally! We were starting to think we’d been too clever for anyone to work it out!”

“Small chance of that,” Sherlock said more acidly than he intended. He quickly schooled his face
back to haughty scorn. “Where are they? You haven’t sold them, the previous detective was at least able to determine that much. In any case you don’t need money, you’ve ample allowances and none of you has a drug habit or credit card debt.”

“We’ve been wearing them at school,” Ema Anstruther explained. “We’re the most popular girls in our year, so we’ve started a whole trend wearing ugly vintage jewelry.”

“Lucy Roper wore a set that belonged to Wallis Simpson,” the fair-haired Emma said enviously.

“I even dropped my school scarf in your dressing room,” Emma Flyte-Finchley said to Mrs. Marsden. “But the police never even came out!”

“That was your scarf?” Mrs. Marsden was shocked. “But my daughter just left that school a few years ago. I thought it was hers! I scolded the maid!”

“Which one of you worked out how to circumvent the alarm systems?” Sherlock asked, trying to wrest back control of the conversation. It was really the only clever part of the whole affair.

“Emma St. Clair,” Emma Flyte-Finchley said, pointing. The fair-haired girl raised a hand.

Sherlock handed her a card. “That was rather well done,” he told her. “Contact this number before you obtain legal representation. You might be able to avoid prison if he thinks he can use you.”

“We’re not going to prison!” Emma Flyte-Finchley exclaimed.

“The scandal,” moaned Lady Alice Margate.

“Can this Mycroft Holmes,” said Emma St. Clair, tilting her head as she studied the card, “get us a television deal?”


“We filmed the whole thing.” Ema Anstruther held up her phone, which showed a still of the three girls ridiculously kitted out in black cat suits, complete with fetching masks and red lipstick. “We got the idea from that movie…the one with Emma Watson.”

“We want our own reality show,” Emma Flyte-Finchley explained.

“Like, what, the Kardashians?” John asked.

The girls were disdainful. “We’re far better looking than the Kardashians,” Emma St. Clair informed him.

“Or they could make a movie about us. Emma Watson could play me,” Ema Anstruther said. “Everyone says I look like her.”

Sherlock pointed an accusing finger at her. “Your name isn’t even Emma,” he said. “It’s Elspeth.”

“Elspeth Margaret Anstruther,” Ema explained, “I use my initials.”

Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis seemed suddenly recover, if not her few wits, at least her sense of command. “Are you saying that you have my jewels? My mother’s necklace?”

“Well, they’re in my room at school,” Emma Flyte-Finchley said. Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis blanched.

“Unsecured?”
“No one would steal from us,” Emma St. Clair said. Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis rose to her feet abruptly. Sherlock decided that she had the situation well in hand, and turned to go.

“I believe you have no further need of my services,” he said, “your secretary can post the check. Ladies, good afternoon,” he added to the stunned women still frozen over their petit fours, “Felons,” to the girls, and exited in a blaze of coat.

John maintained his polite poker face until they reached the street, where he collapsed against the railing in a fit of helpless giggles. Sherlock, still feeling as though the event had not quite gone as planned, scowled for a few minutes before giving in and joining him.

“Oh, that was one for the ages,” John gasped finally, wiping his eyes. “A criminal gang of posh sixth formers, all with the same name.”

“I’m rather relieved to hear the one was using her initials,” Sherlock said. “When I first saw her Facebook page I assumed her parents were the sort of high society illiterates who couldn’t spell one of the most common names in the UK. Thank God the population hasn’t grown quite as stupid as I’d feared.”

“If the rest of us weren’t stupid, how would you ever have any fun?” John asked. He pulled out his phone and checked the time. “And you wrapped it up by midafternoon too, well done, you. I can ask Sylvie to dinner and I won’t even have to change.”

Sherlock deflated. “Oh,” he said, furiously trying to think of something that would keep John with him for the evening. “But I’m starving! I’ve been working on this case for two days!”

“Should have had breakfast then, shouldn’t you?” John said, pecking out a text. He pocketed his phone and turned toward the road. “All right, come on, I’ll take you to tea someplace posh with loads of those little cakes you like. We didn’t get so much as a scone back there. With what Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis said she’d pay you if you got that awful necklace back, we can afford it.”
John sat at the desk tapping away at his laptop, listening to the soft patter of spring rain out the window and enjoying the quiet afternoon. It was the sort of quiet he rarely got to enjoy with Sherlock at home, because Sherlock thought “quiet” was a euphemism for “tragically bored”. At the moment, however, Sherlock was the quietest thing in the flat. He was sprawled bonelessly on the sofa, eyes shut and earbuds in; he hadn’t moved for hours. Several weeks earlier, listening to music for a case—the reason for this had never been very clear to John—Sherlock had had some sort of lightning revelation about the similarity of...some kind of music to...some other kind of music. John had no idea what he was on about, and Sherlock had dropped the project when another case came along, but had dived enthusiastically back in over the last few days’ downtime. John rather enjoyed this. Sherlock detecting was dazzling and mind-blowing; Sherlock with chemistry equipment was dazzling and rather scary, but Sherlock obsessing about music was just...cute. Like a little kid going on about superheroes.

John considered his blog entry, trying to think of a way to wrap it up. Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis had been as generous with her praise as her payment, and they had been inundated with all manner of emails regarding missing jewels, unreliable servants, and philandering husbands. Sherlock had deleted almost all of them, but his interest had been obscurely piqued by a misbehaving cat. The case had ended up taking less than half a day—five minutes in the client’s flat and Sherlock had deduced that her flatmate was sleeping with her boyfriend, with the cat urinating all over the flatmate’s things in some sort of weird feline revenge—but it had paid well, and they had had a nice lunch with Molly detailing the finer points of cat psychology, which had nearly driven Sherlock round the twist. That was always good value.

Sherlock’s phone chirped while John was typing up the last few sentences of the cat case. It chirped again. Then it rang. John looked to see that his own phone was lying on the desk. Lestrade had a pattern: two texts and a call unanswered by Sherlock and he rang John. That way he at least ensured they weren’t both in the Thames. Sure enough, John’s phone rang.

“Is Sherlock with you?” Lestrade asked.

“Yeah, we’re at the flat. He’s got earbuds in; he’s listening to music.”

“Okay, can you—he’s what?”

“Really old music,” John clarified, “don’t ask him.”

“Right. Will he stop? I’ve got a crime scene here that’s none too fresh; I’d rather him here sooner than later, if you follow.”

“Give me the information and I’ll get him moving. How far away are you?”

“Why, you have a date? Is what’s her name back, the social worker?”

“Sylvie, yeah, she’s cooking for me tomorrow night.” John and Sylvie had gone on one date before she had left for a weeklong camping holiday in the Lake District.

“Oh, well, loads of time then. Just don’t let Sherlock keep you up all night.”

John got the details from Lestrade and then went to make tea. He perched on the edge of the coffee table. Sherlock’s eyes were closed, his face delicate and otherworldly in its abstraction, oddly vulnerable in a way John rarely glimpsed. He could be asleep but for his long fingers, which were
moving in the air at waist level. John had no idea what he was doing. Conducting? Placing notes on a page? Arranging the music wing of his mind palace? John felt a surge of protective tenderness, which had been happening off and on since the pool, and a spike of arousal, which had been going on for much longer. He pushed that one down as he always did. Sherlock was married to his work, fine; John was content to be best man. It was all fine. Mostly.

John reached out and threaded his fingers into Sherlock’s hair, jostling his head slightly. “Sherlock. Hey.” He shook his head a little harder. Sherlock’s cloudy eyes opened slowly. In the dim light they were the same colorless grey as the sky, and a million miles away. He languidly tipped his head, rubbing it into John’s palm, like a cat demanding to be rubbed. John obligingly scratched.

“Sherlock,” he said again, louder.

Sherlock’s eyes gradually focused. He blinked and pulled out the earbuds, making no effort to move away from John’s hand. “I’m not hungry.”

“No, that’s—have you eaten at all today? Hang on.” John fetched some biscuits and said, “Lestrade called. He’s got a dead uni student, supposedly quite popular, but apparently nobody noticed him missing until the other kids on the floor complained about the smell.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and sipped his tea, ignoring the biscuits. “Lestrade doesn’t need me for this. All the relevant information is in what you just said; surely he can solve it from that.”

“Well, apparently not,” John said. “So this is a really excellent opportunity for you both to show off and to get off this sofa, where you’ve been for three days and which is beginning to take on a permanent indentation in the shape of your arse. I’m worried you’ll get blood clots.”

“I have excellent circulation,” Sherlock said huffily, but he got up. “I suppose I should get dressed.”

“Eat your biscuits first. Wouldn’t want to drop crumbs,” John said helpfully.

“Mmmm,” Sherlock said, but he took a biscuit. Score one for me, John thought, and ate the rest.

The dead university student, Daniel Pearson, was very dead, very bloody, and smelled very unpleasant. John peered at the slashes to his face and hands, noted the cause of death—diagonal slash across the carotid artery—and backed away with relief.

“Here’s the murder weapon. It was lying right next to him.” Lestrade held up a large evidence bag and Sherlock gave it a cursory glance before returning his piercing gaze to the corpse.

“Chinese. Probably Hong Kong. Could have bought it in London though.”

“So what do you think?” Lestrade asked. “Nothing seems to be missing, and as I told John, he was apparently well liked.”

John had had time to think about that. “He was selling drugs,” he said.

Sherlock grinned at him. “Well done, John. Of course he was selling drugs. You haven’t found his stash, obviously,” he said snidely to Anderson as he turned toward the bedroom. John flashed a smug smirk behind his back at Lestrade, who gave him a two-fingered salute.

“We didn’t find one because there isn’t one to find. We have searched the flat,” Anderson said, in the nasal whine that always got worse when he was being upstaged by the world’s only consulting detective.
“Did you use an actual sniffer dog?” Sherlock somehow managed to make the question sound horribly insulting. John suddenly found himself picturing Anderson as a po-faced Weimeraner. He bit his lip.

“Well, no, you’re the first one to bring it up, although it does sound possible…what are you doing?” Lestrade had followed Sherlock into the bedroom, where he was now crawling under the bed. He emerged with a thick, well-worn textbook.

“What was Daniel Pearson studying?”

“Um…economics.”

Sherlock held up the book: *Advanced Principles of Thermodynamics*. “Bit of bedtime reading? He must have thumbed through it frequently, it’s the only book under the bed without any dust. Let’s see what he was reading, shall we?”

Here it comes, thought John.

Sherlock flourished the book open to reveal a large hole cut into its glued pages, a bag filled with white powder tucked into the cavity.

“Maybe not bedtime reading,” Sherlock said. He opened the bag and pinched up a bit of the powder with gloved fingers. “Lestrade?”

“What?”

“Do you want to check it? I could, but I assume that you would rather I not.”

John, who would very much rather Sherlock not, threw a glance at Lestrade. Lestrade obligingly held out a palm, dipped a finger into the white sprinkling Sherlock deposited, and tasted. “Cocaine,” he said.

“Of course it’s cocaine,” Sherlock said. He took a small baggie out of his pocket and tipped a small amount of powder into it from the bag.

“Oi!” Lestrade protested.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Lestrade, I’m going to analyze it, not snort it in the cab. Here.” He ostentatiously handed the baggie to John, who pocketed it without comment, and strode back to the other room. He frowned down at the blood-covered face of the corpse, crouched down, and began to unfasten the belt buckle.

“Ugh, Freak, leave it at home,” came from Donovan, somewhere behind them.

Sherlock ignored her, carefully pulling the belt free and holding it up. “He’d lost weight,” he said. “Crease in the leather showed he usually wore it on the third notch, now fastened on the fourth. Daniel Pearson was dipping into his product.”

“That would have cut into his bottom line,” John said. “Might have made him a little desperate.”

“Desperate enough to do something stupid that got him killed, maybe,” Lestrade said slowly. “This wasn’t a professional hit. It’s too sloppy, too angry. This wasn’t somebody he owed money or whose turf he invaded.”

“Check his phone,” Sherlock said, standing. “It will be here, if not on the body then plugged into a
charger. You can always crawl around looking for the outlets, Anderson.”

“Got it right here, thanks,” Donovan said.

“There will be a string of unanswered texts since the murder but the last texts he answered will have been to the last people to see him alive. Even if you don’t find the killer it will help you narrow down the time of death. Oh, and bank records, get those as soon as possible.”

“Because we’re looking for…”

“Where he withdrew cash, Lestrade, obvious,” and then he strode out. Lestrade caught John’s eye, raised his eyebrows while simultaneously frowning, and tapped his own pocket. John gave a single nod and turned to follow.

“Cat case is up,” John told Molly. They were sitting companionably in the lab, feet up on the counter, drinking coffee and watching Sherlock faff around with the spectrometer.

“Oh good, I’ll read it tonight,” Molly said. “When’s your friend back then?”

“Got back yesterday; she’s cooking dinner tomorrow.”

“That sounds…serious? Maybe-serious?”

“Could be. She’s a nice girl. And I’m not getting any younger, you know? Now that my army days are done, I’m starting to think I should be settling down. Little place in the country, have some grandkids for Mum…Harry’s sure not going to.” Molly seemed to be hiding a giggle. “What?”

“Nothing, just…Captain Watson, feared by soldiers and criminals across the globe, takes on the crab grass.” John kicked her amiably and she said, “So, is she a good cook?”

“Don’t know yet. Hey, Molly, what do you reckon I should—“ he was cut off by Sherlock stomping over.

“This isn’t pure cocaine,” Sherlock said triumphantly, brandishing the baggie. “It’s been cut with something I can’t identify yet, but it seems to be an analog of phencyclidine.”

“Phencyclidine?” John said, frowning, and Molly said, “PCP.”

“Yes. Phencyclidine cause disinhibition at lower doses and hallucinations, sometimes violent, at higher ones. It’s likely this compound produces somewhat similar effects.” Sherlock had the feral gleam of being on a scent.

“No,” John said so sharply that he stood up, knocking his chair back. “Just no, Sherlock. Absolutely not.”

“No, what?” Sherlock looked genuinely puzzled.

“No, you are not going to take it yourself to see if it makes you want to stab me in the face. Give me that.”

“John, don’t be ridiculous. I would have to use all the sample in order to do that, and then I wouldn’t be able to test it further.”

“Oh,” John said, “Okay.” He sat back down, still clutching the bag, feeling shaky as the adrenaline
faded. He had seen the effects of PCP in his training. The thought of Sherlock like that—
hallucinating, unable to control himself, maybe convulsing—made him feel slightly sick.

“I’ll leave the sample here,” Sherlock was saying with the air of making a great concession. “I
haven’t the equipment to analyze it at home anyway.”

“In your own cupboard, please,” Molly said quickly.

“What’s next, then?” John asked.

“A bit of research, and then we talk to the actual friends of the late unlamented Daniel Pearson.”

“I thought Lestrade was handling that bit?”
Sherlock smiled, the slow grin of a hunter sighting prey. “Oh, I don’t think we’ll run into him,” he
said.

Once Lestrade finally sent the bank records, it took Sherlock less than an hour to identify the
nightclub where he believed Daniel Pearson met his supplier. Now he and John had only to return
there tonight and identify the dealer.

Unfortunately, John had other ideas.

“Sherlock, I have a date,” John said in exasperation, when he finally rang Sherlock in response to the
increasingly testy texts Sherlock had been sending him at the surgery. “I’ve been telling you for
days.”

“You know I don’t pay attention to the details of your transitory interests,” Sherlock snapped. “John,
this is important, we need to—“

“I need to get back to work,” John said, and hung up on him.

Sherlock glared at the phone. John would not be so dismissive if he knew what Sherlock had
planned, which was to go to a nightclub, identify a dealer, and buy drugs. He considered texting this
to John. John would spend the whole night worrying about what Sherlock was up to, which with
any luck would adversely affect his date. On the other hand, John was likely simply alert Lestrade,
which would be disastrous. In the best case scenario Lestrade would accompany him, which would
torpedo the whole thing before it began; any dealer with half a brain would identify Lestrade as
police as soon as he walked through the door.

Sherlock sighed and went to his wardrobe to consider what to wear. His clubbing days were long
behind him, but he had no doubts about his ability to blend in. The nightclub, judging by its location
and external décor, catered to a professional and largely gay crowd. It was no student dive; Daniel
Pearson went there strictly for business. Whoever he met there would be a serious dealer, with
Daniel merely providing access to the university market. Sherlock wondered if Daniel, a student of
economics, fancied himself a franchisee. He pulled out dark jeans and his tightest black shirt. He
didn’t need John for this. Everything would be fine.

As soon as the club’s thudding, propulsive bass hit his ears, Sherlock knew he had miscalculated.
God, how had he ever tolerated this? The noise, the lights, the people—brushing him in passing, jostling his elbow, pressing against him in a constant stream of touch and data and too much. He felt a shameful need to cover his ears and rock, an urge he hadn’t felt in years. He needed John, John who was steady and constant at his side, John who quieted the world just with his presence, John who would…shoot a drug dealer if Sherlock looked at him. Which was, after all, the point of the whole operation. Sherlock edged himself over to the end of the bar, where at least part of him was safe from the crush, and considered his options.

The problem, obviously, was that he was sober. Sherlock had never gone to a place like this unless he was high, or planning to be; he should have anticipated the tediously predictable Pavlovian reaction. He felt the craving now like an itch under his skin. Cocaine made it all so much easier; like using the fine adjustment on his microscope, it clarified the overwhelming chaos into focus. Cocaine however, was definitely out, so Sherlock went for the next best thing. “Vodka and Red Bull,” he shouted to the bartender over the racket.

Sherlock didn’t usually drink—the half whiskey he had sipped the night of the pool was the only alcohol he’d touched in months—so he felt the effects quickly. He ordered another drink. Now that he was no longer hyperventilating, it was easier to evaluate his surroundings. Sherlock took a slow scan of the room, assessing and cataloging: looking for a partner for the night for a long term lover for a hit for a dance when his gaze was arrested by a tall man with spiked blond hair and a single sparkling earring. Artist, moderately successful, marathon runner, thinking about hooking up, but that wasn’t what had caught Sherlock’s attention. The man’s stare had. He was looking straight at Sherlock with the thinking about hooking up right there on his face.

Sherlock flushed hotly and looked at his drink. Had the man thought he was scanning the room for a partner? It was ridiculous for the thought to startle him. In his former life, cocaine had not been the objective of his clubgoing, at least not until things spiraled so badly out of control. It had simply facilitated what he actually wanted, which was sex.

Sherlock had been something of a late bloomer. Public school had been enough of a horror without outing himself, so he’d gone to university without having experienced so much as a kiss. There he’d fallen hard for the graduate student who ran his chemistry tutorial. He’d thought he fact that Victor fucked him over the desk after each tutorial meant that Victor loved him in return; it had been a humiliating debacle. Things did not improve from there. In the end, he had come to prefer the simplicity of anonymous sex. Later, when it all went bad, sex had become a commodity he could use to get cocaine. When he finally finished with the cocaine, he had finished with the sex too.

Sherlock glanced up. The man was still watching, and now he smiled, a slow unfurling that stirred an unexpected warmth in Sherlock’s stomach. He felt his mouth curving up in response and quickly looked away toward the wall. There, in the far corner, sitting alone. Sherlock forgot all about the man on the dance floor. He tossed back the rest of his drink, made his way to the lone man’s table, and slid in. “I’d like to make a purchase,” he said smoothly.

The man’s eyes flicked over Sherlock in rapid evaluation. “Sorry, mate, don’t think I know you.”

“But you know Daniel Pearson,” Sherlock said lazily, watching intently. If the dealer knew about Daniel’s death, he gave no sign.

“Haven’t seen Danny in a bit,” the man said, looking curiously at Sherlock. “He okay?”

Sherlock shrugged noncommittally. He pulled a folded note from his pocket and drew it casually between his fingers. The man considered him for a moment and then bumped his leg against Sherlock’s knee. Sherlock slid languidly lower in his chair and passed the note under the table, receiving a small slick baggie and a folded note in return. Sherlock passed the note back, and the
man’s eyebrows rose.

“I need something else.”

The dealer’s face became guarded. “That’s all I’ve got, mate.”

“Information,” Sherlock said calmly. “Daniel Pearson is dead.” He watched intently, saw the dealer’s eyes narrow very slightly, then relax. “You aren’t surprised.”

“And you aren’t the police.”

Obviously; Sherlock had just tucked a bag of cocaine into his pocket. “A consultant. That’s why I’m here alone. I have no interest in disrupting your business and no intention of involving the official authorities unless absolutely necessary.”

The man was still, weighing the implied threat. His fingers closed around the money. “He overdose?”

“You knew he was dipping into the supply?”

The man gave a one-shoulder shrug. “You learn the signs. He was getting in over his head, our Danny. Not a great loss.”

“He didn’t overdose. He was killed by someone very annoyed with him, someone even more careless and stupid than he was.”

“That rules me out,” the dealer said, but his eyes were wary.

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed.

“Sound like a dissatisfied customer.”

Sherlock tilted his head, all polite inquiry. “And why might a customer have been dissatisfied?”

“Maybe young Danny found himself a bit in the red, so to speak, once he started using his own stuff. He might have thought to make up the difference by, say, diluting it a bit. If he charged the same prices for inferior product, I imagine some people might have had cause to become ‘annoyed’ with him.”

“Do you think he was? Diluting it?”

The man leaned forward. “Look. I sell a pure product. I’ve a stable business here, loyal customers, and I’m not stupid enough to risk that. You’ve got my stuff there in your pocket, you can judge for yourself.”

Sherlock gazed at him levelly. “I think he was cutting his drugs. And not with the usual baby formula or sugar, something else, and he ended up with something a bit more volatile than he intended.”

The man shook his head. “Fool. He asked about it, and I tried to warn him off. I did tell him if he was going to do it, use something like dexedrine, where it wouldn’t be as noticeable.”

“All right,” Sherlock said. He sat back.

The man studied him. “He didn’t use dexedrine, did he.”
Sherlock shook his head.

“And whatever he did use was…”

“…a bad idea. He should have listened to you.”

The man’s mouth twisted a little, wryly. “Yeah, well.” He spread his hands. “Anything else?”

“No. Thank you for your time.” Sherlock knew he’d been dismissed. There was nothing else the man could likely tell him in any case. However, he’d been more helpful that Sherlock had expected, as well as more intelligent. He might prove useful in the future. Sherlock held out his hand politely and said, “Sherlock Holmes.”

The man look briefly startled, then shook it. “Miles,” he said, eyes crinkling slightly. He did not tell Sherlock his last name.

Sherlock stood and turned to go. He was surprised to find himself slightly unsteady. Perhaps the second drink had not been the best idea. Even inebriated, Sherlock was aware that taking a full bag of cocaine back to an empty flat, the need still buzzing in his veins and his mind trying to block thoughts of John in bed with the pallid vegan, was a spectacularly bad idea. He set off across the dance floor, craning his neck to locate the toilets. The dance floor was packed and he was forced to writhe between dancers, but he didn’t really mind. The music, no longer irritating, thrummed in the base of his skull. He looked around again, trying to orient himself in the rapid flash of the strobe.

A pair of hands grasped his waist. Sherlock, startled, tried to turn around, but the crowd was too tightly packed and he could only turn his head. It was the blond marathoner who had been staring at him earlier. He was tall, taller than Sherlock, and he bent his mouth to Sherlock’s ear to murmur low under the music, “I thought you were never going to find me.”

“I’m not—” Sherlock started, uselessly since he couldn’t be heard over the music, but the man slid his hands into Sherlock’s front pockets as far as they would go, stroking the sensitive junction of thigh and groin through the thin fabric. Sherlock’s whole body flared with heat and want. He dropped his head back against the blond’s shoulder as the man slid one arm out of his pocket and around his waist, pulling Sherlock until they were pressed back to front. The man ground his own erection into Sherlock’s arse as he ran his fingers up and down the side of Sherlock’s rapidly hardening cock through his pocket. Sherlock’s breath shuddered, and the man ran his free hand up over Sherlock’s chest and the bared expanse of his neck to touch his lower lip.

“I’ve been thinking about this mouth since I saw you,” the man breathed into Sherlock’s ear. “Just what can you do with it?”

Sherlock had the passing thought that the man really didn’t want to hear the answer to that. He closed his eyes and tried to force his addled brain to coherent thought. He was drunk. He was alone. The object of his desperate unrequited love was out with a vegan who didn’t even drink coffee. He desperately wanted a hit. And of course, he was quite possibly harder than he had been in years. If he couldn’t have what he really wanted—John, cocaine—he could at least have this. He closed his lips around the man’s fingers, sucked them into his mouth, and bit. The man’s hips jerked against him. Sherlock opened his mouth, licked the fingers out, turned to press his lips to the man’s ear and said, “Why don’t you find out?”

They stumbled into the last stall and Sherlock sank down fully clothed on the toilet as the man latched the door. He was certainly not going to his knees on the floor in here. He yanked at the
marathoner’s flies as the man ripped a condom packet open and jerkily pulled it on. Then Sherlock leaned forward and sucked him down.

It had been years, literally, but Sherlock had been good at this once and the technique was uncomplicated. Alcohol made it easier to relax his gag reflex. The man groaned, head falling back, and braced his arms on the wall. Sherlock reached up, took hold of his wrists, and guided the man’s hands to his head as he slid up his cock. The man took the offer, fisting his hands in Sherlock’s hair, gripping him blissfully tight. When Sherlock only sucked harder, the man dropped his remaining inhibitions and slammed into Sherlock’s mouth hard enough to bruise his hard palate and possibly his face. Sherlock felt the tight frantic clatter in his head still under the onslaught as the man fucked his throat in earnest, grunting, harder and harder and harder. The pounding rhythm of the bass matched the snapping of the man’s hips and the pressure in his throat and the throbbing of his own cock and it drowned the rest of the world out, sending Sherlock spiraling into pure, clear sensation.

The man over him groaned, pressing Sherlock’s head into his groin tightly enough to cut off his breath, and Sherlock felt him pulsing through the condom. He sucked more softly, letting the man ride his mouth through it, until finally he pulled out and stripped off the condom. Sherlock tipped his head back, trying to catch his breath, and the man rasped “Up,” and tugged at his sore scalp. Sherlock stood, a little wobbly, and unfastened his own flies as the man tossed the tied-off condom into the toilet and reached for him. Sherlock turned quickly so that the man was behind him and braced his hands on the wall. The man wrapped his arm around Sherlock’s waist, just as he had on the dance floor, and brought his other hand up for Sherlock to lick. Then the slick wet hand was on his cock, jerking hard as Sherlock leaned forward, dropping his head and trying to stay upright. He closed his eyes and tried to remember to breathe, the hand moving faster and harder until the heat building in his groin exploded and he came, shuddering and silent, spattering the walls and toilet seat, leaning all his weight into the wall to keep his knees from buckling. The man behind him wiped his hand with toilet paper, dropped that in the toilet too, gave the back of his neck a quick squeeze, and left.

When he could stand again, Sherlock had just enough presence of mind to tip most of the baggie’s contents into the toilet before he went out to wash his hands.
By the time Lestrade came round late the next morning, John was ready to turn Sherlock over his knee and spank him.

The day had begun beautifully. John had woken early with the comfortable feeling that all was right with the world. The rain had finally stopped and he saw glimpses of blue sky out the window, accompanied by a whiff of new leaves and the glorious birdsong of London traffic. His date had gone well. The quinoa pilaf was, if not something he would want every day, edible: Sylvie had liked the organic pastries John had brought; they had spent a pleasant evening looking over her photos and discussing camping gear and various places they had traveled. They’d finished up with quite a nice snog, and all in all John felt the evening had been a success. Especially since Sherlock hadn’t texted him once.

And now he had a day of running around with Sherlock to look forward to. When he’d gotten back to the flat, somewhat late, Sherlock had been nowhere to be found. John had texted him.

Where are you?

Lab. SH

Everything OK?

Fine. Go to bed. Will need you tomorrow. SH

John had a vague recollection of hearing him come in around dawn, but he’d immediately fallen back to sleep. We he finally woke properly he had gone downstairs in a hurry, expecting to find Sherlock pacing impatiently about, only to find him curled up fast asleep on the sofa.

That was weird, but not completely unprecedented. Sherlock occasionally catnapped during a case. When he finally woke, though, he’d been so sluggish and surly that John retreated to the kitchen just to get out of his way. If it had been anyone else John might have thought he had a bit of a hangover, but that was ridiculous. Perhaps he was coming down with something. John offered tea, breakfast, coffee, water, paracetamol, and tea again, only to be snapped at with increasing fury each time.

Finally Lestrade’s text sent him stumbling off to the shower, from which he emerged slightly more alert and immaculately dressed, as usual, but still a little haggard and loose in his clothes. John peered at him, a bit worried, and was just opening his mouth to ask when Sherlock shot him a glare and snapped, “Tea.”

So, all in all, Lestrade’s timing could not have been better.

“Not much joy with Daniel’s phone,” Lestrade said, blowing on his tea. John had also provided him, rather spitefully, with a plate of Sherlock’s favorite biscuits, since Sherlock didn’t appreciate them anyway. “What did you get from the cocaine?”

Sherlock steepled his fingers. “Daniel Pearson was buying pure—well, reasonably pure—cocaine and cutting it with a cheaper stimulant. I’ve analyzed the stimulant and it’s similar to PCP, but with significant differences. However, whoever synthesized it is an idiot. For one thing, it’s highly unstable. I estimate that the sample we found was synthesized about 10 days ago. As of now, it has
degraded to the point that only about ten percent is still chemically active. The rest is essentially inert. Anyone ingesting the mixture now would be affected only by the cocaine."

“So…not much of a bargain then,” John said.

“Worse than that. While the added chemical remains active, it appears that it would probably produce a heightened version of the negative effects of PCP with far less of the actual high. Whoever synthesized this is either a moron or a sadist. Taking it in conjunction with cocaine would produce mania with intense paranoia and likely hallucinations.”

“So, unpleasant?” Lestrade said.

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t really want to sell it to anybody, unless you hated them?”

“No.”

“Er..does this help us with the case?”

“Maybe. What did you get from the phone?”

“Well, as I said, not much,” Lestrade said, pulling out another notebook and stuffing his biscuit in his mouth. “We’ve interviewed everyone who contacted him going back a few weeks, but word’s got around and everyone’s had time to come up with a reason to have texted him. ‘Wanted to borrow his lecture notes.’ ‘He asked me round for a drink.’ Here’s my favorite: ‘Wanted to get the number of a girl he knew.’ I said, why didn’t you just ask him to text you the number? He didn’t know. Also studying economics, by the way. No wonder we’re in such a mess.”

“So no one admitted buying any drugs, nasty or otherwise,” John said.

“Nope. And no matches for the prints on the knife, either.”

“Of course not, or you would have said earlier,” Sherlock said nastily.

“Right. So, we did find one girl who didn’t attend uni with Danny—she was at the design school—but turns out they did go to secondary school together and anyway, she has an excellent alibi; she threw herself through a third story window last week. I mean literally through it. She broke the glass with her face, apparently.”

“Jesus,” John said, horrified, just as Sherlock leaped to his feet and shouted, “And you didn’t tell me?”

Lestrade and John exchanged a blank look and Lestrade, clearly bracing himself, said, “Tell you what?”

“Ohhhhh.” Sherlock spun in a circle and clutched his hands in his hair. “I just explained to you in terms that even your tiny brain should be able to grasp that there is a drug out there which causes violent, paranoid hallucinations and you tell me that an acquaintance of the dealer of said drug propelled herself through a window AS THOUGH THERE IS NO POSSIBLE CONNECTION AT ALL?”

“Oh,” Lestrade said weakly.

“But Sherlock, it’s not likely she killed Daniel Pearson if she’s dead,” John protested.
Sherlock stopped his dramatic whirling and sat down. He looked a trifle green. “There was a post mortem, wasn’t there? What did the toxicology show?”

“Actually, she’d not dead,” Lestrade said, hurrying on before Sherlock could erupt again. “But she still couldn’t have done it, she’s in intensive care. Massive brain damage.”

“I need to talk to the family. And I need the police report.”

“Yeah, of course. I can pull the police report up right now if you let me use your computer.”

Of course it was John’s computer, which was why John ended up reading out the report when Lestrade had it displayed on the screen.

“Amanda Leighton, fashion design student, had a big project due, working late at the studio. Several other students also working late, report Miss Leighton went for coffee and came back exhibiting odd behavior. Another student tried to approach her and according to witnesses she ‘went mad’ and threw herself through the plate glass window. Massive head trauma, facial injuries leading to delay intubating at the scene, transferred—“

Sherlock got up without a word, leaned over John’s shoulder, and clicked until he brought up the drug screen.

“Positive for cocaine. Well, well, well.” Sherlock had the ridiculous look he got on his face when he was torn between gloating over his own cleverness and berating everyone else for their idiocy.

“Oh, bleeding hell,” muttered Lestrade and pulled out his phone.

“You’ll talk to the devastated mother, I’ll jump in when you leave out anything important,” Sherlock informed John in the cab.

“All right.” John said. Empathy was not Sherlock’s strong suit. He hesitated, then took the plunge. “Are you feeling all right? You’re a bit hoarse.”

“Fine,” Sherlock said and looked out the window.

John watched him for a moment. Sherlock seemed back to his usual self, vibrating with urgency, quicksilver eyes flicking among connections only he could see.

“It’s infuriating I can’t find out if the cocaine she was using was mixed with the same additive,” Sherlock muttered furiously. He leaned forward, glaring at the windshield as though this would propel the cab to go faster. John leaned back and grinned.

Meeting Amanda Leighton’s mother was ever more depressing than John had feared. Mrs. Leighton was a slender woman who looked as though she might have been pretty before her face had collapsed from sorrow and grief. Whether Amanda herself had been pretty John could not tell; the 44 stitches that had only recently been removed from her face left her barely recognizable at all.

Mrs. Leighton did not have much to tell them. Amanda had not been depressed; she had just landed a prestigious internship. Things had been going well in school and she had a lovely boyfriend. Mrs. Leighton recalled Danny Pearson, vaguely, although he had not been one of Amanda’s close friends and her mother was sure they had never dated. She had not used drugs.
“Mrs. Leighton,” John began gently, “How can you be sure—“

Mrs. Leighton smiled sadly. “I know what the drug screen showed, Dr. Watson. I’m not naïve, and I’m not in denial. I know she wasn’t using cocaine before that night because she didn’t have the money. She’d lost her waitressing job a few weeks back and she was cutting every corner she could just to stay afloat. We talked about it all the time, I so wanted to help more, but my husband was made redundant last year, and it’s been hard at home too. She’d even switched to cheap coffee, and Mandy loved her coffee.”

“But she definitely took it that night.” Mrs. Leighton nodded sadly, and John went on, “Is it possible someone gave it to her? You said a boyfriend…?”

“No, Matt would never. He doesn’t even drink. She stopped the smoking because of him.”

“Would you mind if we talked to Matt? What’s his full name?”

“Matthew Lewis. I know he would want to help. He’s here every day.” Mrs. Leighton gazed at the still figure on the bed, indifferent to the slow tears trickling down her cheeks. “She’s a lucky girl.”

John looked over Amanda’s chart before they left. He was not sure that Mrs. Leighton was right about Amanda’s luck. Amanda was breathing on her own, but it was very unlikely she would ever do much else. Whatever else she might have done, Amanda Leighton had not killed Daniel Pearson.

They were quiet walking out, Sherlock focused and John glum. A young man with a ginger goatee and those horrible great holes in his earlobes held the door to Intensive Care for them as he came in. John said “Ta,” and Sherlock whipped around to stare at his back through the glass. “Hong Kong,” he breathed.

“What?”

“Hong Kong. That young man lived in Hong Kong.”

“There’s no way you could—how can you possibly know that?”

“Clothes. Also, the tattoo.”

Trust Sherlock to have noticed a tattoo when all John saw were the giant ear holes. “What, do you have an international tattoo index now, too?”

Sherlock’s eyes lit up. “John, that’s brilliant! It would require some extensive travel though. Maybe Mycroft—“

“Sherlock, seriously, how did you know he got his tattoos in Hong Kong? Have you ever even been in Hong Kong?”

“Of course I have. I lived there.”

“When?” John said, fascinated. Sherlock almost never talked about his past. John had the impression he had deliberately deleted as much as possible.

“Years ago. Mycroft was stationed there when he was starting out. Our father had died the year before and he was my legal guardian, but I was at Harrow, so I suppose he thought I was well looked after. But I loathed Harrow and with everyone gone I couldn’t even leave for home weekends. So I ran away.”
John was still boggling over what seemed to him to be the most problematic aspect of this situation, namely that a fragile orphaned teenager had been left entirely alone in the fucking HEMISPHERE, so he almost missed this last bit.

“Wait, you what? To where?’

“London. I lived on the streets.”

Well, that was even worse. “Was that an improvement over Harrow?”

“A great improvement, but that wasn’t why I did it. I had taken my exams a year early and been accepted at Oxford, but Mycroft refused to let me go. He said I was too young to be on my own.”

“And you thought running away would change his mind?”

“It had a fairly small probability of success,” Sherlock admitted. “The greater likelihood was that he would send me someplace with better security, or possibly have me sectioned. In the end Mycroft agreed to let me go to Hong Kong with him for a sort of gap term and start at university if I stayed out of trouble.”

“How on earth did you and Mycroft survive living together?" 

“Avoided each other entirely, by mutual consent,” Sherlock said cheerfully. “Let’s go home. I need to research everything I can find about Mr. Matthew Lewis, formerly of Hong Kong. “

They went home. Sherlock clattered his laptop, stared into space, clattered some more, and tacked up a series of his incomprehensible diagrams, one of which John thought might be a timeline. He finally sent John off with a list of design students to interview.

“Wait, what about Matthew Lewis?” John asked, looking at it.

“Later,” Sherlock said. “If you’re going to get inconveniently light headed, you can take my card.”

John interpreted this as meaning that Sherlock might be hungry but wouldn’t admit it, so he left tea and biscuits on Sherlock’s desk before he left. Interviewing the students was not fun, although rather less painful than talking to Amanda’s mother. When he finished he was, in fact, ravenous. He stopped for Chinese on the way back. Of course, Sherlock was not in the flat.

Where are you?

Lab. SH

Something interesting to tell you

Text me. SH

There followed a long argument by text in which John refused to either go back out to Bart’s or text Sherlock a detailed description of his findings, and Sherlock refused to actually use his phone to talk like a normal person. Finally John sent I’m going to eat and watch telly now. Need both hands and set down the phone. Thinking he was being ignored would drive Sherlock mad.

The phone promptly shrilled. John muted the television, tried to swallow his mouthful of eggroll, and hit the speaker button so he could keep eating.
“Did you get me hot and sour soup?” Sherlock demanded.

“It’s in the fridge, you git, if you’d told me you were going out I could have—how do you know I’ve got Chinese?”

“You’re eating eggroll.”

“How do you know I’m eating eggroll?”

“John,” Sherlock said in tones of great forbearance.

“Right. The students I talked to were unanimous that Amanda Leighton didn’t use drugs. She was known for her ability to inhale coffee, but that was it. Her mum was right: she didn’t even drink.”

“Hardly precludes her being a drug user,” Sherlock pointed out, with the certainty of experience.

“True, but if she was, she covered it well. However, there’s a bloke in her studio named Toby Hartwell whom everyone agrees does use cocaine, and a few weeks ago he was complaining about his stash running low—something happened to his dealer, apparently.”

“And there was Amanda, conveniently acquainted with another dealer,” Sherlock said thoughtfully.

“What are you doing in the lab anyway? I thought you finished last night.”

“I need to see if the moron drug gives a positive reading for PCP on the toxicology screen.”

John parsed the implications of this until he got the point and then said, “How? You said it degraded.”

“I synthesized more, of course.”

Of course. “You’re not—“

“No, John, I’m not. I’m mixing it with serum. I am using my own blood though, since Molly won’t give me any of hers.” There was an indignant squawk in the background. “She did consent to draw it for me,” Sherlock added fairly.

John thought that Sherlock would likely have no qualms whatsoever about drawing his own blood, but knew he probably couldn’t; the veins on his left arm had been ruined long ago.

“Well, doesn’t sound like you’ll be needing me then,” John said, digging into the bag to pull out his rice.

“You could provide a control specimen. And bring the soup,” Sherlock said hopefully.

“Or I can stay here and watch telly. Mmmm, nope. Soup’s in the fridge,” John said and disconnected.

John ate his rice, flipped through the various channels in a desultory way, and let recent events percolate through his mind. He thought about Sherlock sleeping during a case and his thin shoulders, his shadowed eyes and scratched voice, and he worried, a little. He felt Moriarty behind it somehow, but the thing about Moriarty was that he was a bit like global warming: you knew the threat of catastrophe was there, but after you changed out the light bulbs, there was only so much worrying you could do. So he thought instead about Sylvie. Actively. On occasion, there were definite advantages to having the flat to himself.
The next morning Sherlock sounded almost back to normal and he filched John’s toast, although John later found it abandoned with one bite gone. Whether this meant Sherlock had forgotten about the toast or forgotten he was hungry or just realized that the jam was strawberry instead of raspberry, John had no idea. The soup was still in the refrigerator.

Sherlock downed three cups of tea so sweet it was practically solid and said, “Let’s go.”

“Oh, okay,” John said agreeably. He might be just the tail to Sherlock’s kite, but he had a fair idea of where the kite was heading. In the cab he asked, “Matthew Lewis?”

“Yes.” Sherlock was now so overcaffeinated he was vibrating.

“Do you want me to—”

“No.”

Matthew Lewis’ flat was in a dark, narrow building of tiny bedsits. John wondered if he would be home at this time of day during term, but Sherlock swept up the steps with complete assurance. He knocked on the door of Matthew’s flat, and the young man from the hospital opened it. He seemed wan and tired. The flat, in contrast, was covered with wildly colorful prints on every wall.

“Is this your work?” John asked politely as Matthew stood silently aside to let them in.

“Yeah.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

“Did it help?” Sherlock asked abruptly

John and Matthew both turned to look at him. “Did what help?” Matthew asked dully.

“Killing Daniel Pearson. Did it help?”

Matthew’s mouth opened and shut once, like a fish, and then he abruptly sat down hard at the edge of the bed and dropped his head to his knees. John glanced at Sherlock, read assent, and sat down next to him.

“I didn’t mean to kill him,” Matthew said, muffled. “It was an accident.”

“I know.”

Matthew raised his head. His eyes were glistening, and John saw the relief and misery in his face. “I just wanted to hurt him. I didn’t want him to die. I wasn’t even trying to make him brain-dead, like Mandy...” His voice broke. “But her face. Her face was beautiful, before. I just wanted to make him pay for that much. I thought that was fair.”

“You thought that you would take him by surprise and slash his face,” Sherlock said. His voice was low and very level. “He didn’t even know who you were, did he? He’d never seen you before. Maybe he didn’t even know you existed. He and Mandy weren’t in regular contact, at least not until she contacted him when she thought she could earn a little extra money by procuring cocaine for Toby Hartwell. She didn’t have any intention of using it herself, did she? What happened?”
“Toby found another dealer,” Matthew said. “She talked to Danny and he said he had a special blend he’d sell her at cost, so she could take all the profit selling it to Toby. So she picked it up and took it to the studio that night. But Toby said he didn’t need it, he’d found some more. So she had it there and I guess—she was so tired, she’d been working so hard and she’d cut back on coffee to save money, and I guess she thought if she just took a little—a lot of people use here and there, they always say it doesn’t hurt to just take a bit, but it did hurt. It did.”

Matthew put his head back down. Sherlock opened his mouth, but John gave him a quick shake of his head and he subsided. John put a hand on Matthew’s shoulder.

Matthew breathed deeply a few times and dragged his sleeve across his face. He sniffed and drew himself up to face Sherlock. His eyes were brittle with despair.

“You had the address,” Sherlock said flatly. “She called Daniel from your flat, didn’t she? She lived at home. She wouldn’t have called where her family could overhear. She wrote down the address. You still had it. You didn’t text first, because you never had his number, did you. When you arrived at his flat, he had no idea who you were.”

“He didn’t know,” Matthew said. “He didn’t know anything had happened to Mandy at all.”

John felt his tension now, the anger rising off Matthew like heat, but Sherlock’s gaze was relentless.

“So you slashed at his face, but you’d never done anything like that before. It shocked you and you froze, and Daniel grabbed for the knife. You panicked and slashed out, cutting his throat.”

Matthew collapsed inward again and John felt him shudder as though trying not to retch. “There was so much blood,” he whispered.

“You must have been covered in it. How were you not seen?”

Matthew’s mouth twisted humorlessly. He gestured to his black jeans and shirt. “I’m an art student,” he said. “Everything I own is black. It didn’t show. There was a hoody, or something, on the chair, so I dropped the knife and used it to wipe my face and hands and then I got out of there. I didn’t even think about the knife until I got home.”

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“Matthew,” John said gently, “you need to turn yourself in. If you turn yourself in voluntarily, it will go much better for you.”

Matthew was already nodding. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “There’s nothing left for me now. Mandy’s never going to be the same, and even my work—it doesn’t mean anything anymore.”

John looked at Sherlock, who said, “Ring Lestrade.”

John raised his eyebrows at Sherlock, who looked at him neutrally. John stood and moved a little away. As he pulled up Lestrade’s number he heard Sherlock’s quiet voice behind him.

“You never answered my question.”

“What question?”

“Did it help? To kill Daniel Pearson. Did it help to kill him, after he hurt the person you cared for most?”

“No,” Matthew said after a moment. “It didn’t help at all.”

“No,” Matthew said after a moment. “It didn’t help at all.”
Sherlock remained a little subdued throughout the ensuing flurry. Even after the crushed and miserable Matthew Lewis had been taken away—not unkindly—his explanations to Lestrade lacked their usual dazzle. John wondered if Sherlock was skipping his usual post-case euphoria and going straight to the crash. Not without lunch, he decided. “Bombay Palace,” he told the cabbie.

Sherlock peered at him. “You’re not hungry.”

“No, but you are,” John said and Sherlock’s mouth quirked.

Sherlock perked up considerably over lunch. The food was quite good—Bombay Palace used enough ghee to cause coronary artery disease on sight, John could feel his triglycerides rising—and he shoveled it down with enthusiasm. John kept asking him questions; Sherlock ate more when he talked.

“So the Hong Kong thing—you didn’t even need that, did you? You would have fingered Matthew Lewis anyway.”

“Obvious,” Sherlock said with his mouth full.

“Too bad about Matthew,” John said, musing.

Sherlock waved a chunk of naan dismissively. “Oh, he’ll be fine. He’ll serve very little jail time, and that will only enhance his marketability as an artist. Professionally, this was probably the best thing that could have happened to him.”

John thought about arguing that this was unlikely to be much consolation, but deep down he knew Sherlock was probably right. Matthew was, after all, very young.

“I was thinking Danny sold the drugs to someone who took it in his flat, and then went mad and killed him.”

“The knife, John. University students don’t generally make a habit of wandering about with large knives. Even to buy drugs.”

“I guess it was lucky he didn’t sell the batch to anyone else before it degraded. At least he won’t be selling anymore.”

“Lucky indeed,” Sherlock said, and then paused. He seemed to have just put something together, although John couldn’t imagine what it might be.

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock came back with a slight start. His gaze sharpened. “You aren’t eating that samosa,” he said. ”You want it, but you’re hoping the vegan will have your shirt off next time and you’re feeling insecure about your physique. You needn’t. Your body mass index is completely appropriate for a man of your age and she finds your level of fitness attractive. She probably showed you pictures of her companions on the camping expedition and you’re thinking about her fit vegan friends, but you shouldn’t, she prefers men with a sturdier build; ultra fit types like long distance runners lack the body fat to—“ He stopped abruptly, bright red flooding his face.

John burst out laughing and took the samosa. “It’s okay,” he said. “You’re allowed to deduce about Sylvie if it’s going to be all about how hot she finds me.”
Sherlock smiled a little, the blush receding and leaving him faintly pink. It was frankly adorable. John resisted the urge to tousle his hair. “I could deduce what she would like you to do—“

“No! That was good enough, Sherlock, don’t push it.”

John had expected Sherlock to sleep until the next afternoon, so it was something of a shock when he emerged that evening dressed unexpectedly in a tight dark shirt and jeans. “I’m going out. It’s for the case,” he added in response to John’s startled look.

“Oh, should I get my coat then?” John asked. Sherlock’s horrified expression was priceless; John filed it away to tell Lestrade. John was wearing his rattiest old jumper over flannel pajama bottoms. He wasn’t even up to Sherlock’s usual sartorial standard, let alone Sherlock apparently in disguise as someone on the prowl. “Hey, attractive physique! Remember?”

Sherlock caught the joke. His face smoothed out. “I think I’ll be best on my own this time.”

“You’re sure? Not going someplace dangerous without me, are you?”

Sherlock smiled, his genuine smile that crinkled his eyes, and John felt his heart warm. “Never.”

“Wait, what case? I thought this one was tied up.”

“Just a loose end.”

“Well, okay. Just…be careful?”

“Always,” Sherlock promised, his smile this time so obviously fake that John couldn’t help laughing. Sherlock held up his phone and said, “See? You’re number one, Lestrade is number two.”

“Who’s number three?”

“Who else would I call?”

“Fair enough.”

Sherlock left and John settled back. He wondered idly what the loose end was. John couldn’t shake the feeling, again, that there was something he was overlooking, something beyond Sherlock’s usual obfuscations and carefully cultivated air of mystery. If Sherlock didn’t want him to know, though, he wasn’t finding out.

Sherlock was prepared this time for the inferno of noise that met him at the club. He worked his way through the crowd to the bar, ordered a plain Red Bull, and turned to check for Miles. He had company: a too-thin woman without the means to pay him, hoping to broker a different sort of deal. She was wasting her time. Miles wasn’t gay, despite his place of business, but he wasn’t the type to trade for sex with a junkie. She’d have to look much farther down the food chain, to a far less pleasant specimen than Miles.

The woman left, telegraphing fury and anxiety with her bony shoulders, and Sherlock realized abruptly that he was unconsciously gripping the nape of his own neck. He dropped his hand, feeling a flush of shame as hot as the one he had experienced earlier. Talking to John about sex with marathon runners! What was happening to him? He had gone years without thinking about sex. His
body’s demands were merely distractions he had trained himself to ignore. But now his transport was not only refusing to be ignored, it was kicking up all kinds of memories he had tried to delete long ago. This was intolerable.

Sherlock got up quickly before someone else could take the empty seat at Miles’ table. He slid into place and waited for the feel of Miles’ fingers closing around the fold of money. “The same again?” Miles asked.

“Just information this time,” Sherlock answered and watched wariness flicker in Miles’ eyes.

“I told you all I knew.”

“Daniel Pearson bought good quality cocaine from you, I verified that myself. He then cut it with a highly unstable analog of PCP, which produced unpredictable but largely destructive effects. He didn’t synthesize the additive, he had neither the equipment nor the expertise. He purchased it. Therefore, the person from whom he purchased it is likely still manufacturing it, and selling it to the unwary. I plan to stop it.”

“Why?”

“Daniel Pearson is dead. Two other lives are ruined.”

“Not my business,” Miles said. His eyes were cold.

“Ah, but your business is your business. So to speak. And if I have no way to narrow the field, the police are going to employ their usual blunt force methods, and that is going to have an extremely dampening effect on the local market.”

Miles was silent a moment. “Okay,” he said finally. “You’re right, this has to stop, or eventually the police are going to get involved anyway. But you didn’t hear it from me. I’m fairly sure I know who Danny was buying that from.”

Sherlock waited, patiently, as Miles looked off, turning his drink in his hands. Finally he looked back and said, “Boffin Bill.”

“Boffin Bill?”

“He’s a bit of a madman, used to be some kind of chemist apparently. He’s got a basement flat not far from here. He did pretty well when he was just making meth, but that got a lot more difficult a year or so back and he got into making hallucinogens, LSD, that kind of thing. He’s always thinking he’s made the next big thing, but it’s mostly crap.”

Sherlock nodded. He was already mentally composing his text to Lestrade.

“Listen,” Miles said. His gaze was flat and entirely empty. “You had better make sure that when your friends come round they don’t just go on and raid the whole neighborhood for good measure.”

“They won’t,” Sherlock said. He drained his drink and stood.

Miles suddenly grinned. “There’s a guy at the bar who’s had his eye on you since you came over,” he said. “Is he with you?”

Sherlock’s heart gave a crazy, stuttering leap. “Description?”

“Big guy, Paki. Can’t be police, his clothes are too good.”
Not John, then. No one could ever describe John’s clothes as good. “No. He’s not with me.”

“I think he’d like to be,” Miles said, still grinning. “He’s checking out your arse right now.”

Sherlock blinked and then, at a loss, said, “Thank you,” and blundered onto the dance floor to give himself time to think. He’d known this was a possibility—known and, if he were honest, hoped—from the moment he considered going back to the club. He caught sight of the man immediately: dark skin, black hair, a bit shorter than Sherlock but broader, muscular; city job successful, in the closet because of his conservative family, one night stands, selective, confident bordering on arrogant—oh, he would do very well. Sherlock had always sought out the hardest, roughest sex available. Partly it was his aversion to light touch, partly a need to surrender, to just let go. The morning after his last encounter, he’d looked at John hovering solicitously and knew with despair that it was also because he would never have anything more. No one was going to want Sherlock for anything but his body; he’d established that at university. If he couldn’t have what he really wanted, then he would take the farthest thing from it.

Sherlock turned and caught the dark man’s eye. The man grinned, not in the least embarrassed to be caught staring. Sherlock gave a haughty toss of his head and looked away, counted to ten, and then glanced back over his shoulder. The man grinned again, raised his eyebrows, and held up his glass. Drink? He mouthed.

Sherlock looked away again as though considering and then finally turned, making his way through the crowd to where the man leaned at the bar. Up close he seemed less cocky and more boyishly charming, a persona Sherlock could see easily was as false as his own posh-princess act.

“Buy you a drink?” the man said, raising his voice slightly to be heard. Sherlock immediately read his whole story in the four words--middle-class upbringing in Birmingham, grammar school, five years in London—and let his own accent go ripe and languid on his tongue as he answered, “Just the one, I think.”

The man smiled at him, all even white teeth. “Malik.”

“Sherrinford,” Sherlock said, dripping each syllable like thick honey.


Oh, perfect, perfect, he couldn’t have set it up better. Sherlock leaned closer, canting his hip downward so he had to tilt his head up to speak. “I like it rough.”

Malik’s eyes darkened, amused and aroused, and he hooked two fingers into the belt loops at Sherlock’s hip and pulled him closer. He leaned to brush his lips to Sherlock’s ear. “I meant to drink,” he breathed.

Sherlock smirked, letting himself be pulled closer, and put his own mouth to Malik’s ear. “How about we skip the drink?”

Sex with Malik turned out as Sherlock had expected, more or less, although his expectations were probably skewed by the fact that he couldn’t remember the last time he had sex sober. There was rather more kissing and stroking than he remembered or wanted, but at least Malik’s hands were firm and he did not tease or tickle. He pulled Sherlock’s head back to mouth down the long column of his neck, which Sherlock quite liked.

“No marking,” he gasped as Malik bit at the base of his throat.
Malik paid no attention; he had slid his hands under Sherlock’s shirt to span his narrow abdomen. “God, your waist,” he groaned.

So not a posh kink, a size kink, Sherlock noted with amusement. He obligingly arched his back to make himself slimmer. Malik moaned and slid his hand down the back of Sherlock’s trousers. Now it was Sherlock who moaned, arching harder to grind himself into the hard bulge in Malik’s trousers. Malik’s hand slid lower. “Bed,” he growled.

The bed was huge dark wooden thing with burgundy satin covers (satin!) that felt cool under Sherlock’s heated skin. Malik wanted to take him on his back, which Sherlock flatly refused. That had happened only once, and that was the time things had gone horribly, horribly wrong, so bad that he couldn’t bear even to contemplate the position. Malik had clearly spent too much time watching internet porn. Since Sherlock felt no need to provide a full view money shot, he finally flipped over and spread his legs as wide as they would go, grinding his aching cock into the slippery satin. That sent Malik scrambling for the lube.

That part also took a lot longer than Sherlock remembered, but he was grudgingly grateful for the preparation when Malik finally pushed inside him. It had been a very long time, and the intensity of the burn bordered on outright pain. “Oh God,” Malik panted, thick cock only a few inches in. “You’re so tight, so fucking tight, are you okay?”

“Get on with it,” Sherlock ground out through his gritted teeth. He pushed back and Malik groaned, slid an arm around his chest and thrust. Sherlock worked an arm under himself and gripped his own cock as Malik shoved all the way in. The fiery stretch was easing a little and he closed his eyes as Malik’s weight bore down on him. In a few minutes Sherlock was pinned to the mattress, Malik’s other hand clenched in his hair, breath and teeth hot on his shoulder blade, Malik pounding at him in pure animalistic frenzy. The weight seemed to press him down and fill him, blocking everything else. Sherlock tried to suck in air and got a mouthful of satin; he had to turn his head against Malik’s clenched fist to breathe. Malik tightened his grip around Sherlock’s shoulders—“Okay?”—and Sherlock bit back “Harder, fuck me harder,” and Malik lifted his hips to drive down with more force and now he was hitting Sherlock’s prostate on each thrust. It was fantastic. Malik slammed the full force of his weight into Sherlock’s arse, driving Sherlock’s cock against his curled hand. Sherlock felt the pleasure rising like a wave, building and building until it broke over him, sending him tumbling into pure white noise.

He came back to himself when Malik pulled out and rolled off, fumbling with the condom, leaving Sherlock’s sweat-drenched back abruptly cold and exposed. Sherlock blinked into the bedclothes and carefully rolled to curl onto his side. Malik reached for him and said, “Do you want—oh! I didn’t even hear you! You’re very quiet!”

Sherlock didn’t explain that the majority of orgasms he had achieved during intercourse had occurred in semi-public locations, usually with a hand pressed to his mouth. He was desperate to get away before Malik felt some sort of obligation to kiss or touch. “I’ll just…,” he gestured vaguely toward the en suite and Malik leaped to his feet, all gracious host. He even handed Sherlock his clothes.

Sherlock cleaned himself, then sank down to the bath mat and gave himself sixty seconds to get his head together. The beautiful floaty feeling was gone, leaving him feeling flayed and exposed, his whole body one raw nerve. His backside was throbbing in a way that promised to ache for days, and he was suddenly overwhelmingly tired. He hadn’t actually slept earlier, mind buzzing with thoughts of tracking down the source of the moron drug and the possibilities of going back to the club. He wanted desperately to be in his own bed. Sherlock clutched at the thought that if he got home in twenty minutes he might be able to shower before exhaustion pulled him under. It was enough to get him moving.
When he came out, Malik was in the kitchen wearing a T-shirt and pants. He was a perfect gentleman, calling Sherlock a cab and offering drinks, and it all set Sherlock’s teeth on edge. Finally, \textit{finally} the cab arrived and he was able to stumble into the dark quiet interior, seat soft against his back, the empty space surrounding him as comforting as a cocoon. He closed his eyes and thought longingly of his flat.
“Sherlock? Sherlock, are you awake? I’m coming in.”

John cracked the door open and peered into Sherlock’s dark, slightly musty bedroom. Sherlock was fast asleep in the middle of the bed, curled into a surprisingly small ball. John perched on the edge of the bed and tousled his hair affectionately. “Sherlock, wake up, I need to talk to you.”

“Mmmph.” Sherlock tried to burrow further into the bed. John knotted his fingers in his curls and tugged him back.

“Ow. What day is it?”

“It’s Thursday afternoon. You’ve been asleep for a day and a half.”

“All right,” Sherlock said agreeably, and pulled the covers over his head.

John pulled them off. “I’m going into the surgery for a bit. There’s another norovirus outbreak going through the child care centres, and Olennu’s still out with her gall bladder. It’s a bit grisly over there, apparently. Do you want anything before I go?”

“Mmmm.”

“Have you had anything to drink?”

“When I went to the loo.”

“Here.”

Whatever Sherlock had slurped from the sink was not likely to be enough for 36 hours. Sherlock took the water bottle obediently, drank about a third, and handed it back without ever opening his eyes.

“I’ll be back by seven, and I’ll pick up some dinner, so text me if you think of anything you want.”

“All right.”

“Oh, and Lestrade phoned this morning. He’s sent you an e-mail. I told him you were sleeping, and he said for you to take a look whenever you could be arsed to get up. No rush. Okay, you can go back to sleep now.” He smoothed Sherlock’s curls. Sherlock made a soft fuzzy hum, breathing already gone slow and even. John resisted an absurd urge to tuck him in, checked Sherlock’s clock, and grimaced: he was going to have to hurry.

Sherlock didn’t properly emerge from hibernation until the next day. John celebrated by frying an enormous breakfast, of which Sherlock devoured everything but the toast, since John still hadn’t remembered to replace the raspberry jam.

“You could always buy it yourself, you lazy git,” John said.

Sherlock just blinked at him. He was only on his first cup of coffee and was not all the way awake, glassy eyed and with his hair sticking out wildly. In the morning sunlight his slightly unfocused eyes were almost all translucent gray iris, making him look even more otherworldly than usual. “Why
would I do that?"

“So you could—“ John gave up. Sherlock’s relationship with food—like all his relationships—was skewed and more than a bit unhealthy. If food was there and he liked it, he ate; if not, he didn’t. The concept of nourishment didn’t seem to register. John gave it up as a bad job. “I’ll make more coffee,” he said instead.

They passed the rest of the meal in a peaceful silence, Sherlock reading the papers and John scratching desultorily at the crossword puzzle. Afterwards John did the washing up while Sherlock wandered off to shower, and then they settled down to their respective laptops.

“Did you read that e-mail from Lestrade?” John said, glancing up. “He texted me again this morning.”

Sherlock clicked around for a minute and then passed the computer to John, who read the e-mail through twice.

“Let me see if I have this straight,” he said. “You managed to identify the source of the moron drug as one William Carew—“

“Boffin Bill,” Sherlock interjected, disdainfully over-enunciating.

“—Boffin Bill—I suppose this is what you were doing the other night? Then, in a totally unprecedented, uncharacteristic burst of common sense, you sent the information to Lestrade instead of breaking into a drugs lab on your own in the middle of the night.”

“I would never break into a drugs den in the middle of the night on my own. I would take you,” Sherlock protested, affronted.

“Good thing I wasn’t available then.”

“John, the whole point of identifying the perpetrator of the moron drug was to get him off the street. That could only happen if Lestrade conducted a legal search. I’m a consulting detective, not Batman.”

“I can’t believe you haven’t deleted Batman,” John said. “Okay, anyway. Boffin Bill is now in custody, and the police have his lab notebooks, half of which are in code and the other half of which are in chemical formulae no one at the Yard can make out. Happily they know a consulting detective who moonlights as a chemistry genius, namely you. Lestrade wants you to look at them, because he thinks they can potentially tie Boffin Bill to all kinds of terrible stuff, which will endear them to the drugs squad and keep Boffin Bill off the street for years to come. So? Are we going?”

“Dull. Boffin Bill is an idiot. His lab notebooks are going to be incoherent ramblings and delusions of alchemy.”

“Lestrade doesn’t think so. He thinks they can connect him to a big meth ring from a few years back. Maybe he used to be a chemical genius and he’s just been inhaling his own fumes too long. Anyway, what else have you got on?”

“The polyphonic motets of Lassus,” Sherlock said promptly.

“The polyphonic motets of whatsis are five hundred years old. They’ll keep a few more days.”

“The polyphonic motets of Lassus are interesting.”
“Ten minutes,” John said. “Just look at the books for ten minutes. See if you can at least break the code for them. If it’s not interesting, we’ll stop at the shops on the way back and buy jam and you can listen to your music all afternoon while I make you tea and toast.”

In the end it didn’t take ten minutes. It barely took three. John and Lestrade had barely started in on dissecting the weekend’s match when Sherlock leaped to his feet and shouted, “Lestrade! I need all the case files for unsolved deadly poisonings since 2003!”

Lestrade gaped first at Sherlock, then at John, and finally at his small office. “We’re going to need a bigger room,” he said.

Going through the lab notebooks was, as John had suspected, a lot of fun. Lestrade obtained a conference room and a constable, who was supposed to assist and run errands and keep Sherlock from filching evidence. He also shut everything down at seven o’clock sharp, on strict orders from Lestrade. Sherlock was told there was no money in the budget for overtime, but the real reason (negotiated privately by John with Lestrade) was that Sherlock would have to go home every night to eat and sleep. He rarely did either, but it made John feel better if he had the opportunity.

Sherlock cracked the code in half a day and set John to deciphering the notes—which turned out to be mostly business transactions, to the delight of the drugs team—while he worked out the chemical formulae. The poisoning case was tracked down the first day and the methamphetamine ring on the third. On the fifth, John was puzzling through what he was almost sure was a shopping list when Sherlock, who had been pacing, suddenly stopped stock still and said very softly, “Oh.”

John looked up. Sherlock was staring at the notebook in his hand, eyes flickering frantically. “Oh. *Oh!*” He dropped the notebook, whirled around, clutched his hair, and pointed wildly at John. “Get Lestrade! Tell him to fetch out Gregson from whatever administrative hellhole she inhabits now. Tell him *Devil’s Foot*!”

John knew Gregson had been the DI working with Lestrade his last year as a DS, when he’d first encountered Sherlock. She turned out to be a steely woman, tall and gray-haired, with an air of commanding intelligence that was fairly intimidating. They all met up in the conference room, with Alberts, the constable, fluttering about offering coffee.

“Mr. Holmes,” Gregson said, looking Sherlock over. “You’re looking well.”

“As are you,” Sherlock answered, looking her over in turn. “You’ve finally chucked your awful marriage, likely when your youngest left for uni, and you’re quite happy in your current relationship—three years? No, four. He wants you to move in with him and you’re considering it but not really very hard, you like having your own flat at last. Oh, and you’ve got a cat.”

Gregson’s smile had genuine warmth. “I understand you’ve a new friend too.”

“John Watson,” John said, fighting the urge to salute and offering his hand. He got a warm smile of his own.

“Oh, I know who you are. Big fan of the blog, ever since Lestrade put me onto it. Well.” She sat down briskly, tapping the thick case file. “Let’s begin.”

The Devil’s Foot turned out to be not a foot at all but a pub. Several years ago, in a back room following an after-hours poker game, two people had been found dead and one permanently brain damaged. The cause of all three turned out to be severe hypertensive crisis.
“We couldn’t make heads or tails of it,” Lestrade said. “And then Sherlock worked out there was something in the air freshener thingy—“

“The diffuser,” Gregson said.

“They’re usually plugged in or placed over a candle, causing a release of volatile oils, generally chosen for their pleasing fragrance as opposed to their toxic qualities,” Sherlock explained to John and Alberts; Donovan was nodding, evidently already acquainted with diffusers.

“We had the substance analyzed, what was left of it, but it was a dead end,” Gregson went on. “No one had ever seen it before or knew where it came from. But now you’re saying that you found a formula in this notebook and just happened to recognize it as the same chemical?”

“Yes.”

“After what, eight years?” Lestrade said, incredulous.

“Yes!” Sherlock was radiant with his own cleverness.

“You,” Gregson said to Sherlock, “are a fucking marvel. I’m glad I didn’t leave you in that holding cell, even if you were a pain in the arse most of the time.”

“He still is,” Lestrade put in.

“So what does it say about the formula in there?”

John flipped to his notes. “He tested it on mice, documented that the effects included insanity and death,” he read out. “Then a few months later, there’s a note—different ink, same handwriting—that says ‘sold to MT for 500 pounds’.”


“Talk to Boffin Bill,” Sherlock said. “I can almost guarantee that he’ll be delighted to tell you everything—it’s probably driven him mad he was never able to use the compound again, since it was too notorious after the Devil’s Foot came to light. That will give you the evidence you need to arrest Tregennis.”

“Well done,” Gregson said, still grinning. She stood up and said, “May I sit in on your chat with Mr. Carew, Detective Inspector Lestrade?”

“Oh no ma’am, this is still your case,” Lestrade said, and they went out arguing companionably.

Donovan rolled her eyes slightly as she gathered up the case files and John gave her a sympathetic look. “Do you have to answer to both of them?”

“Just Lestrade officially, but, well, yeah.” She hesitated a split second and then said “Nice one,” to Sherlock before hurrying out the door.

Sherlock looked startled and then pleased. “I told you,” John said. “I told you this would be better than the polly pocket thing.”

“Oh, shut up,” Sherlock said, but he was smiling.
Three days later, however, the Boffin Bill project had begun to lose its charm. John dropped a particularly illegible notebook to the table, pinched his forehead with his fingers and thumb, and thought wistfully of a surgery full of norovirus. He had the beginnings of a headache, Boffin Bill had become progressively barmier with time, and they hadn’t turned up anything incriminating all day. There had been a brief flurry of excitement when Boffin Bill had appeared to declare that he had concocted a drug which doubled resting metabolism and meant to sell it as an illegal diet aid, but it turned out that he had simply misused his own fucking code and the drug in question only increased the metabolism of alcohol. Supposedly. Sherlock looked at the formula and said most likely it only made the unwary user more likely to salivate excessively. Since there was nothing technically illegal about drinking twice as much alcohol to get half as drunk even if it had worked, the whole thing was a bit of a dead end. John massaged the bridge of his nose and wondered if he could convince Sherlock to knock off a bit early and go for a real meal.

Lestrade poked his head round the door. “Anything new?”

“Oh God, don’t ask,” John said wearily. “I’ve been at this so long today some of these ideas are actually starting to seem sensible.”

“Need to pace yourself,” Lestrade said sagely. “You’ll end up next to Bill, else.”

Boffin Bill had decided that he, like Galileo, was being persecuted for his misunderstood genius. He had been transferred to a secure psychiatric facility after ranting at the judge in Latin.

“Anyway, I think I can help,” Lestrade said. “Sherlock, remember when you were first helping us, and Gregson would give me a tenner after and say to buy you a sandwich and drive you home?”

“I remember.”

“Well, apparently her budget’s increased a bit since she’s got promoted. She’s given me quite a lot more to take you both out for a proper celebration as thanks—Morty Tregennis confessed, the little shit.”

“Greg, that’s brilliant!” John had never met the little shit himself, but anyone Lestrade found that odious deserved to be locked up.

“The thanks will suffice without the celebration,” Sherlock said.

“Oh, come on, Sherlock, I’m starving. We haven’t had a proper dinner in ages.”

“You went on a date two days ago,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Um.” To Greg’s raised eyebrows: “Vegan restaurant. Good company, but…”


“But we still have twenty minutes,” Sherlock protested.

“Alberts, good night. See to the files before you leave. You’re out of excuses, Sherlock, up you get.”

In the cab, Lestrade assured Sherlock that no, the pub was not a police bar, yes, it had decent food, no, it was not going to be crowded this early, and no, he would not be required to drink any beer. “It’s a nice place. It’s over near my new flat,” he explained. “I’m a bit of a regular now, so I called ahead and they’re holding a table for us in a bit of an alcove.”

John gave Lestrade a thumbs up behind Sherlock’s back. He forgot, sometimes, how long Lestrade
had known Sherlock, that he understood what Sherlock could and couldn’t handle almost as well as John did.

John could see why Lestrade liked the pub. It was cozy without being dodgy, the sort of place he might have met up with his army mates, and the food was quite good. Even Sherlock appeared to be enjoying himself: he had deduced the histories of the block, the building, the bartender, and half the patrons before they were halfway through their first round. “And that one fancies you,” he added, gesturing with his untouched pint to a curvaceous woman in an extremely tight skirt.

Lestrade went pink. “Oh, no. No no no no no. I’m not even properly divorced. From now on, I’m following in the footsteps of the great Sherlock Holmes: married to my work. You should try it,” he added to John.

“How would that even work? If I were married to the work, I’d be married to him.” They both looked at Sherlock, who stared back inscrutably, and they burst out laughing.

Lestrade took Sherlock’s undrunk pint and poured it into his and John’s half empty ones. He raised his now-full glass. “To Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective, proper genius…what else…”

“Fucking marvel,” John reminded him.

“Fucking marvel! And chemical mastermind.”

John raised his own glass. “And to Gregson, God bless her.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes but raised his now-empty glass. “I’m thirsty,” he announced as John and Lestrade drank his beer, and left for the bar.

John ate a few of his chips. “So what was he like back then? The same as now, only worse?”

“Oh, God.” Lestrade took a long pull of his beer. “Worse doesn’t begin to cover it. He was like a feral cat, you know? Comes around once in a while if you feed it, purrs a little, but try to pet it and it lights out.”

John could picture this exactly.

Lestrade gave a little snort of laughter. “You know how I met him, right? He got picked up high as a kite and wouldn’t give his name, so they chucked him in the lockup overnight. He nicked a newspaper, read about a case we were working and deduced the whole thing from the paper. He told the officers he had information, and they called Gregson, so she sent me over to talk to him. He told me everything about myself as soon as I walked in.”

“How long until Mycroft turned up?”

“Oh, Christ, Mycroft! We didn’t know he was Sherlock’s brother for ages. Gregson just called him the Umbrella Man. She had a theory that Sherlock had been genetically engineered in a government lab and escaped and that’s why Mycroft kept checking up on him. She actually once told Mycroft he should be looking after him better.” Lestrade shook his head. “He was a right mess: never cut his hair, half starved. Yeah, even worse than now,” he added, intercepting John’s look. “He’s a different person than he was back then. Getting off the drugs was most of it, but you get a lot of credit too. And Mrs. Hudson, of course.”

“So you’re saying he’s domesticated?”

“Well, maybe a bit.”
Sherlock pushed his way back to his seat, carrying a Pellegrino. “You’re talking about me,” he observed.

“We don’t always talk about you, you conceited git,” Lestrade said. “I’m asking John what he thinks about me getting a cat. The wife was allergic, but now I’m on my own…”

“Yes,” Sherlock said.

“You like cats?” John asked, surprised.

Sherlock waved this off as irrelevant. “When you have the children, their clothing will pick up the cat hair. She’ll have to launder everything or suffer horribly. It’s an excellent means of revenge.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that,” Lestrade said, brightening.

John took some more of Sherlock’s chips and settled back comfortably. The pub was beginning to fill up, but it was still possible to talk without shouting. He glimpsed a group of men with close cropped hair coming through the door and wondered idly if they were soldiers home on leave.

“Should I get a fancy long-haired one? Would it shed more?” Lestrade was asking Sherlock.

“John Watson?”

John looked up, surprised, to see he had been addressed by one of the men he had just seen. Up close they were undeniably soldiers, with short haircuts, ramrod spines, and high spirits. They were also familiar. “Henry Conrad!”

John let himself be hauled up into an enthusiastic, back-slapping group embrace before he pulled back slightly. “Greg, Sherlock—these lads were assigned to protect my medical unit in Afghanistan.”

“Didn’t do much of a job for you,” Henry said ruefully.

“Don’t be stupid, if it weren’t for you lot I’d have never got out at all.” John said. “Are you home now then?”

“Just for a bit, then we’re off to Africa.”

“Peacekeeping,” drawled one of the other men; John thought his name was Blanchard. Ethan? Evan?

“We’re supposed to be meeting one of our mates, he’s been reassigned to the government or some such, but he’s late, the bastard. It’s quite crowded here! Can we join you?”

“Always good to hear stories about John,” Lestrade said, grinning.

John leaned over as he slid his chair closer to Sherlock and muttered, “Five minutes, then we’ll go.” Sherlock was looking simultaneously trapped and mutinous.

Henry was shouting introductions. Lestrade’s phone vibrated on the table. He frowned at it, said, “Uh oh,” and flipped it open.

“Hey!” Mick O’Dowd suddenly said, pointing at Sherlock. “You’re the detective. Wait. Oh my God, are you that John Watson? I never put it together! I read your blog all the time!”

“Why do you read his blog if you didn’t know it was him?” Blanchard asked.
“Because he’s famous! Do you live under a rock?”

“Well, recently, yeah,” Blanchard began but Henry cut him off. “Oi, Sebastian!” John couldn’t see where he was waving, but Henry sat down, evidently satisfied. “He’s getting a round.”

“Well, his timing is great,” Lestrade said, pocketing his phone. “I’ve been called back to work, so he can have my seat. Dillon’s picked up a guy on a bust that we’ve been looking for,” he said to John and Sherlock.

“I’ll come with you,” Sherlock said immediately, leaping to his feet.

“No, you won’t. It’s the drugs squad, Sherlock, they’re not going to let you in the room.”

Sherlock let himself be pushed back down, looking disgruntled. Lestrade was dead right about Dillon, and Sherlock knew it.

“So you’re a detective?” Henry asked. “With the police?”

“No, it’s much better, he’s amazing! From what John writes, you can tell everything about someone just by looking at them, isn’t that right?”

“Nice to meet you all,” Lestrade bellowed, evidently trying to provide a distraction, shaking hands all around just as a man appeared and slid into his now-empty seat between John and Sherlock, depositing his armful of beers on the table. “This is John and Sherlock,” Henry called over his head. “John, this is Sebastian Moran. He was with us the last tour, after your time, I think.”

Sebastian Moran was huge. He was an inch or two taller even than Sherlock, and looked to be twice as wide, with the rock-hard musculature John associated with American special forces. He had the same cold, appraising eyes, too, although he smiled broadly when he shook John’s hand. “John Watson, Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers,” John said. “This is my flatmate, Sherlock Holmes.”

“You’re the one who’s famous?” Moran said to Sherlock.

“I can’t believe none of you lot know about this,” O’Dowd said. “Isn’t it true you can tell someone’s entire life story in seconds?”

“Sounds like a useful skill,” Moran said, still smiling, his eyes appraising. There was something slightly predatory in the way he looked at Sherlock that made John’s skin prickle.

“One I’m sure you’ve also learned to employ with MI-6,” Sherlock answered, his own smile showing teeth.

Oh shit, John thought, now we’re in for it.

Moran laughed, however. “That’s pretty good for openers,” he said. “Well, I haven’t been there long, and I’m still learning. How about you show me how you do it?”

“I’ve been told it’s rude to deduce in polite company.”

“This is hardly polite,” one of the soldiers shouted, and there was an outburst of laughter. Glasses clinked.

“Oh, I think I can handle it. Like I said, I need the practice,” Moran said easily. “How about you show me what you can do, and then I’ll try it on you, and you can tell me what I get wrong.”

He had him now, John knew. Sherlock would never be able to resist the opportunity both to show
off and to correct someone this arrogant.

Sherlock hesitated briefly, flicking his eyes to John, but whatever he saw there must not have been sufficiently discouraging because he said, “All right, then.”

The men roared approval and then settled down to watch, as though Moran had challenged Sherlock to some kind of intellectual arm-wrestle. Sherlock steepled his fingers and raked his eyes over Moran, ostentatiously looking him up and down, although John had a feeling he was playing to the audience; surely he had drawn all his conclusions before Moran finished saying hello. “You were born in Kent. Working class town, working class parents, your family still lives there although your father’s been gone for years—probably divorce—and you haven’t seen him since you were a child. One sister, no two, live near your mother, at least one married, ah, both. No brothers. A straight path to the military, one would think, but no, as a child you had a good mind but more importantly a good voice. You were chosen for the choir at Canterbury and went to the cathedral school. You loved music, particularly sacred music since that was your primary exposure, and by the time your voice broke you’d already been studying an instrument for several years, the organ probably. You were good, very good, you could have gone on to conservatory but you chose the military.” Sherlock’s eyes slid sideways and John recognized the signs that he was editing something out; good, John didn’t fancy their chances if Moran got offended. “Manual dexterity, patience, willingness to practice dull repetitive drills: musical training translated well to marksmanship. You became a sniper, a very good one, the government took notice; they’ve plucked you from the military for special training.”

“Detached assignment,” Moran said. He appeared delighted. “Spot on, that’s really quite good.”

There was another round of boisterous cheering. The men drank to Sherlock, Moran, Canterbury Cathedral, the organ, Moran’s personal organ and its reputed prodigious size, and boy choristers, complete with demands for Moran to sing “King Jesus Hath a Garden”, which after another round he did, in an incongruous but surprisingly melodic tenor.

“All right, my turn,” Moran said when they all settled down. “You’re upper class, obviously, went to boarding school quite young—what age do those families outsource their kids, seven? Then public school, Eton or Harrow of course. I’m going to guess Harrow.”

“You can tell that by my accent, anyone can,” Sherlock scoffed.

“Ah, but can they tell by your accent that until you were seven you lived in a household where someone spoke French? Not an au pair. You spoke it at least half the time. Your family could have lived abroad, or perhaps one of your parents was French. Your mother, I think. Holmes isn’t a French name.”

Sherlock’s face had gone still. John realized his own mouth was hanging open and closed it abruptly. In all the time he had known Sherlock, he had learned only that his mother had been an artist who died when Sherlock was eight. He suspected, from the very little Sherlock said, that he had adored her, and her death had been devastating. John had never known she was French.

Moran hesitated a split second and John had the brief impression that he too was holding back. “You went to university but never finished. You play a stringed instrument—almost certainly the violin; you’re a terrible insomniac; you’re trying to quit smoking, again, but it won’t last this time either because your heart’s not really in it. Probably you don’t believe you’ll live long enough to bother about lung cancer. You drink a lot of coffee. You’re in recovery. And you have some kinds of weird marks on your fingers that have me completely stumped. I know you haven’t been making bombs, but I’ve no idea what you have been up to.”

“Chemistry,” Sherlock said. He held up his right hand and pointed with his left finger. “The acid drip
pattern is very—“He stopped when Moran took his wrist, holding Sherlock’s hand still while he touched the old scars.

“This an acid, then?” Moran asked and then, “What about the rest?”

“I’m not in recovery,” Sherlock said disdainfully.

“What do you call it then?”

“I’m an addict,” Sherlock said, his voice flat. “An addict who is currently clean.”

“One day at a time, eh? Well done you,” Moran said and the table erupted on cue. The irony of drinking to Sherlock’s sobriety appeared to be lost on everyone but John.

The conversation broke up into smaller groups and John turned, thinking to extricate Sherlock before he lost interest in behaving himself. He found himself blocked by Moran, who was leaning toward Sherlock and saying, “You were pulling your punches, weren’t you.”

Sherlock cocked his head, never breaking eye contact. “As were you.”

“So, John, tell me about what you’re doing these days!” Henry said on his other side, so close that John almost jumped. He forced himself to turn round and smile. He was surprised at how disconcerted he felt. Surely he was delighted to have the chance to chat with his mates without Sherlock interrupting him like a toddler jealous of his attention? Surely this was a good thing for Sherlock, that he could hold a normal conversation—well, normal for Sherlock—in a social setting? Surely that was something to be celebrated? And yet John felt completely wrong-footed. The whole time he talked with Henry he was conscious of Sherlock and Moran talking in animated low voices behind him, hyperaware of the strangeness of Sherlock’s laser attention focused on someone else.

When Henry left to get another round John turned to his left with a strange feeling of anxiety, only to find Moran and Sherlock arguing heatedly about Saint-Saens, both gesticulating and leaning in closer to be heard. John stared. Was Moran…was he chatting up Sherlock? It certainly looked like it, but if so Sherlock had yet to catch on. Usually any expression of sexual interest caused Sherlock to react with full-body aversion, yet here he was, not just maintaining eye contact but looking at Moran as though he were a musical corpse. Could he possibly…no.

“Hey John,” Blanchard called across the table. Ian! That was his name. “Do you still follow West Ham?”

“Oh, God,” John moaned as he turned back, in relief this time, to lose himself in a conversation he could understand.

John went for the next round of drinks. Standing at the bar, he resisted the temptation as long as he could before turning to look back at the table. From this angle, he could see Moran, rather than Sherlock. Moran was still leaning forward but no longer gesturing; his face was intent as he spoke. Maybe he had just moved on to expressing his feelings about Benjamin Britten, but somehow John doubted it. As John stared, Sherlock suddenly set his glass down so sharply that John saw it slop onto the table. He leaned forward, his back to John, saying something that made Moran’s eyes narrow.

“Mate?” said the bartender behind him and John whipped around, feeling obscurely guilty. He paid and carried the drinks back to the table.

“Last one for me,” Moran said. He raised his pint to John and tipped his head back in a long swallow. “You lucky sods might be on leave, but I actually have to go to work tomorrow.”
“You haven’t even told us about the job yet,” Ian protested.

“I can’t tell you anything about the job, I told you that already,” Moran said patiently. “That’s rather the point of this job.”

“I’m going too,” Sherlock said. He pointed down the table and said, “And so is Mick.”

“What?” Henry said.

“There’s a girl, not someone he’s already seeing or he wouldn’t be so anxious, they just met. He already had plans to meet his friends, but she probably told him to ring when he finished if it wasn’t too late. Right? You’ve been looking at your watch for the last hour. Now Sebastian’s leaving, you won’t be breaking up the party, so you’re going to call her.”

_Sebastian_, John thought.

“Well, she might say—wait, oh my God, did you deduce that? Did you do a deduction on me?”

“Obvious,” Sherlock said, beginning to look cornered; he would be bolting in another minute.

“Just give me minute to say good-bye, I’ll be ready,” John said to him quickly.

“Don’t bother, I’m fine. You stay and talk to your friends,” and then, as Mick opened his starstruck mouth to ask something else, disappeared into the crowd with surprising speed.

Well, that was a bit abrupt, even for Sherlock. John blinked after him, wondering what was up, and turned back to make the usual apology—“he does that”—but was cut off by Mick enthusiastically pumping his hand.

“If she turns me down, I’ll be back,” Mick was saying. “But if I’m lucky I won’t see you again tonight and if I’m really lucky not before we ship out!”

John slapped his back and wished him luck, making insincere promises about keeping in touch. Then it was Moran’s turn. John felt his spine stiffen warily. For God’s sake, what was wrong with him? Guys used to ask him for Harry’s number and he hadn’t reacted like this. But he couldn’t help feeling that if Moran said something smarmy like he hoped they would be seeing a lot more of each other, John might just punch him.

Moran smiled as he gripped John’s hand, but his eyes were like laser sights. “It’s been an interesting evening.”

His grip was just a little too tight, but John was far too experienced to get into a pissing contest with an alpha dick like Sebastian Moran. He had won most of the battles in his life by letting himself be underestimated. “Any friend of Henry’s,” he said, smiling blandly.

Moran’s smile widened just a fraction and John knew that he hadn’t been fooled by the mild-mannered John routine. He let just a glint of his own teeth show and added, “Best of luck in the new job.” Because, after all, the man now presumably worked for Mycroft—if Moran gave Sherlock any trouble, Mycroft would disappear him off the face of the earth. The thought gave John no small satisfaction. My friend’s big brother can beat you up, John thought, giving Moran his most affable smile. He let go Moran’s hand and turned back to Ian as Henry reached around him to say good night to Moran, but he could still feel Moran’s eyes boring between his shoulder blades.

Mick never came back, so they drank to his luck and to luck for all the men on their next assignment. John felt himself relaxing. He had not been particularly close to these men in Afghanistan—they
were younger, and had only been with him a short time—but they were friendly and easy to get on with, and he had always liked Henry. Now that he was no longer worried about Sherlock, he had quite a nice time. When the party broke up, he looked at his watch and was surprised to discover it was far later than he had thought.

“Brilliant seeing you again, John,” Henry said warmly as they walked out. “Here, put your number in my mobile, would you? I’ll text you next time we’re out.”

They exchanged numbers and John set out, pleasantly tipsy and wondering if Sherlock would actually tell him anything if John asked about Moran. Probably not. He’d undoubtedly still be awake, though, so maybe John could find some way to bring it up…without Sherlock noticing…okay, that was unlikely. Well, maybe he could at least convince Sherlock to let him have a bit of a lie-in and tackle barmy old Bill in the afternoon.

When he got home he headed for the sitting room, already saying, “Hey, Sherlock, do you think—“ before he registered the empty room. Had Sherlock actually gone to bed? He turned, but the bedroom door stood open, the room beyond dark and still. He walked around slowly, calling “Sherlock?” double checking the loo, unable to quite believe what he had known from the moment he walked into the silent flat: he was alone. Sherlock had not come home.
Right up until the moment Sebastian gripped his hand, Sherlock thought the whole thing only an intellectual exercise; a mildly interesting diversion from the expected tedium of John’s army friends. When he spread his fingers, the part of his mind not focused on acid burns was wondering, idly, *early voice training conferred an advantage in aural recognition of accents?* And then Sebastian’s large hand grasped his wrist—unexpectedly, unnecessarily tight—and his mind stuttered and skipped like a needle on a record player. He blinked. Sebastian touched the fingers of his other hand to Sherlock’s, said, “This an acid then?” and drew his fingertips straight down Sherlock’s palm and over the thin skin of his wrist, a startlingly intimate gesture unseen by anyone else.

That got Sherlock’s attention. He’s known Sebastian was gay from the outset, of course, although he thought John would be pleased with how he’d avoided mentioning it. Sebastian was clearly in the closet. He had assumed Moran was the sort of man who simply had to assert his top-dog status over anyone who seemed like any sort of challenge, but perhaps Sherlock had overlooked something. Sebastian Moran, it seemed, might just be interesting.

When Sebastian asked him quietly, “Care to go another round then?” Sherlock was ready.

“You went into the military for the same reason you gave up the organ: to prove how much of a real man you were.” Sherlock’s voice dripped disdain. “You probably even had a girlfriend back home, maybe even a wife, although that might have been going to too much trouble. Did she catch on when you never came home on leave?”

“I did love the organ,” Sebastian said. There was no rancor in his voice. “But I knew I wasn’t quite good enough for a concert career, and I was young. I wanted excitement. I couldn’t see becoming that stereotype, the queer church organist, sneaking into the city so the parish biddies wouldn’t cotton on.”

“You were at the organ concert tonight, you still keep up even though you rarely have a chance to play yourself anymore. That’s why you were late. It was Saint-Saens, wasn’t it? Let me guess, the Organ Symphony.”

“Fantasia in E Flat Major.”

“Trite.”

“The Britton rhapsodies are better, but you shouldn’t discount the Fantasia just because it’s popular.”

“I’m discounting the Fantasia because it’s overrated.”

Sebastian, it turned out, new quite a lot about classical organ music. He was wrong on several points, of course, but his positions were intelligent and well argued. Sherlock had meant to stay only long enough to keep John from complaining about him being rude, but the discussion was interesting enough to hold his attention for quite a while. When John tapped his shoulder to see if he wanted anything, Sherlock was startled at how late it had become.

He turned back to Sebastian, opening his mouth to take his leave, but jolted to a halt when he felt Sebastian’s large hand close on his thigh under the table. As before the touch was just the slightest bit too hard, not a caress but a promise. Or a threat.

Sebastian leaned forward and fixed Sherlock with his stare. “You have a gorgeous mind,” he said, in a low, tight, voice.
It should have been ridiculous. It was ridiculous. But Sherlock, pinned by Sebastian’s hand and his gaze, felt no desire to laugh.

“I want to see it undone,” Sebastian said. “I want to be the one to take you apart. I want to feel you under my hands, I want your wrists and your hands and your neck and your arse and your eyes, God, your eyes—I want all of it and I want all of that incredible brain fixed on me, just me and what I’m going to do to you. I want to pin you down and feel you fight me, I want you to fight when I take you, I want to feel your teeth in my hand when I—“

The glass slipped through Sherlock’s fingers and banged down, hard, on the table.

Sherlock felt strangely light-headed. He saw Sebastian’s mouth tilt in a tiny smirk, but he did not blush or look away. He breathed in slowly through his nose, weighed Sebastian’s words and the feel of the iron hand squeezing Sherlock’s quadriceps hard enough to hurt, and made a decision.

“When John comes, back, say you have to leave,” Sherlock said evenly. “I’ll manage from there.”

Sebastian was on Sherlock as soon as they stepped into his flat. His big hands gripped Sherlock’s upper arms and pushed him against the wall, pinning Sherlock with his weight as he brought his mouth down. Sherlock tilted his head back and let Sebastian take his mouth, rough and plunging. He was effectively trapped like this, arms immobilized and Sebastian’s much greater weight bearing down on him. He struggled for a minute, experimentally, but he had no hope of getting free. A cold trickle of actual fear sharpened his arousal and he arched his body into Sebastian’s.

Sebastian growled into his mouth. Sherlock’s struggle seemed to have made him fully hard and he pressed back into Sherlock, forcing Sherlock to turn his head to gasp for air. Sebastian let go of one arm and gripped Sherlock’s jaw, turning his head back to crush his mouth against his own. Sherlock tasted blood.

Sebastian let him go, stepped back, and pushed at Sherlock’s jacket. “Off.”

Sherlock dropped his jacket to the side and began unbuttoning his shirt. Sebastian yanked off his own shirt and reached to push Sherlock’s down his arms. When it dropped to the floor, he slid his hands down to Sherlock’s wrists and gripped them with one hand behind Sherlock’s back so that Sherlock felt the bones of his wrists grinding together. He grimaced, and Sebastian yanked him closer, sliding his free hand up to clench in the curls at the base of Sherlock’s head and jerk his head back. Sherlock’s breath shuddered out.

“Open your eyes,” Sebastian whispered harshly. He licked blood from Sherlock’s mouth, almost tenderly, and Sherlock shuddered again. “Tell me what you see.”

Sherlock opened his eyes obediently and looked into Moran’s darkened ones. “I see your eyes—they’re hazel, your pupils are dilated, the light is dim, you’re aroused, you want me. You shaved this morning but not again before the concert, you weren’t planning on pulling anyone. Your skin tans easily, you don’t freckle in the sun, you try to remember to use sunscreen in sunny climates but you’re careless and you always miss your temples. You keep your own hair very short but you like longer hair. It excites you to restrain me, it excites you to pull my hair, you didn’t mention my hair earlier but you looked at it, you wanted to—ohhhh.”

Sebastian had released Sherlock’s hair to slide his hand forward and down Sherlock’s bare chest to palm his cock through his trousers. Sherlock’s head fell back as he struggled to keep his unfocused eyes open. He heard Sebastian chuckle as he massaged him. Sherlock’s knees were trembling.
“God, that was beautiful, just look at you,” Sebastian’s voice came in his ear, rough and aroused. “I could make you come like this, couldn’t I? So clever, so brilliant, but that great brain’s no good to you now, is it? Pin you to the wall and all I have to do is touch you. You’d come in your pants.” Sherlock felt a hot flush stain his cheeks, but it wasn’t enough to stop him from rocking up into Sebastian’s hand. Sebastian caressed his bollocks through the fine fabric and Sherlock felt a moan rising in his throat.

Moran slid his hand around to cup Sherlock’s arse and pull him close enough to grind into him again. Sherlock’s arms and wrists throbbed with the added strain, but he braced his shoulders into the wall and pushed back. Moran grunted and thrust, making sparks fly at the edges of Sherlock’s vision.

Moran thrust again, once, then let go and snapped Sherlock’s waistband with a finger. “Get these off,” he said and released Sherlock’s wrists, disappearing briefly into the darkness of the flat. Sherlock caught himself against the wall, arms numb, hands screaming with the restored blood flow, and awkwardly unfastened his trousers. He pushed everything down and off as Moran returned, setting something—lube and condoms, presumably—onto the edge of a small table.

Sherlock straightened and Moran took his wrists again, in front this time, a bit gentler, and turned him around. “Hands on the wall,” he ordered, unfastening his own trousers. Sherlock braced his forearms against the wall and rested his forehead between them. The plaster felt cool on his hot skin. Moran’s hand gripped the back of his neck.

Sherlock stopped breathing.

And then Moran’s other hand slid slickly over his hard cock and suddenly Sherlock’s lungs found air. His body jolted with pleasure and Moran stroked him again, lazily, before sliding his hand around and into the cleft of his arse. Sherlock spread his legs and Moran let go of his neck to grip his hip hard, holding him in place as one thick finger slid inside. Sherlock groaned. Moran was quick and efficient, opening Sherlock with inexorable fingers. When he finally took hold of Sherlock’s hips with both hands and pushed in, Sherlock had to scrabble for purchase against the wall, trying to brace most of his weight on his arms as Moran held his hips in place and thrust hard. Moran was big, and thick, and ruthless, and the sensation—coupled with the persistent sense of being on the verge of falling—was so overwhelming that Sherlock’s vision sparkled and blurred. He was dimly aware of Moran snapping into him, again, again, again, arse burning, the intermittent electric shock of his prostate being hit, bruising pressure from the fingers digging into the tender skin below his iliac crests. Oh, God, it was good. Moran jerked his body harder and faster, banging Sherlock’s head into the wall, and then finally lurched forward and braced his own hands on the wall, groaning, Sherlock still impaled on his cock and barely upright.

“Touch yourself,” Moran rasped in his ear. When Sherlock didn’t move, he straightened enough to wrap an arm around Sherlock’s waist. “Do it. I’ve got you. Make yourself come with my cock in you.”

Sherlock lifted his right hand from the wall and wrapped it shakily around himself. He was rock hard and throbbing and realized dimly that Moran was supporting most of his weight. He braced his left hand and stroked himself quickly, still slick with the lube Moran had coated him with earlier. Moran’s breath was hot on his neck and he shuddered at the feel of it, dropping his head back to rest on Moran’s thick shoulder, feeling the pleasure rise in his groin. “You’re almost there already, aren’t you?” Moran asked almost solicitously, his voice vibrating against Sherlock’s jaw. Moran made a small sound, tightening, and suddenly Moran’s other hand clamped down over his mouth, cutting off his breath, and Sherlock bit down hard as he came, body convulsing forward and semen splattering the wall in front of him. There was, of course, no need for the hand. Sherlock made no noise at all
when he came. He never did.

Moran held him up for a moment and then pulled out and away, stepping into the kitchen as Sherlock folded to the floor and tried to catch his breath. It was a few minutes before his hands were steady enough to reach for his clothes.

A damp kitchen towel thumped beside him and Sherlock wiped both himself and the wall before folding it neatly and setting it on the table. He pulled on his clothes and was just beginning to button his shirt when Moran’s hands came from behind and stilled his wrists. It was a possessive gesture, not a tender one. “I’m going to want you again,” Moran said.

Sherlock considered. The sane thing to do, the thing a person who listened to John Watson would do, would be to leave and not come back. Moran was ruthless and controlling and slightly violent, and his idea of a first date was to leave Sherlock black and blue from being fucked against a wall. This had the potential to end very badly. Which, of course, meant that Sherlock could no more let it go than he could fly.

“I’m not available when I’m working,” he said finally, knowing it sounded like a pathetic attempt to assert control.

“I’m not in the country when I’m working.” Moran said. “I’ll text you when I want you. If you’re free, you’ll come. If not, the next time.”

“All right.” Sherlock remained perfectly still. Finally Moran let go. He moved around and leaned against the wall, watching Sherlock finish putting himself back together. He was smiling slightly.

“Not staying then?” Sherlock couldn’t read his tone—he so often couldn’t—but irony was a safe bet.

“I don’t sleep over.”

“I don’t either,” Moran said. He stepped forward to open the door for Sherlock—they’d never made it farther than a few feet into the flat—and reached a possessive hand, but Sherlock was quicker and slipped past into the hall.

“And I don’t kiss good night,” he said and strode off down the hallway. The sound of Moran’s quiet chuckling followed him all the way to the stairs.
Chapter 6

John woke up unable to remember the cause of his vague feeling of unease. He lay there a few minutes, feeling sluggish, before the memory hit him: Sherlock; or rather, not Sherlock. Sherlock not in the flat where he belonged but instead apparently gone home with some unknown choirboy assassin who was not only twice John’s size but who fucking outranked him. Fuck. How had that happened? Where the fuck was Mycroft? Of all the times for him not to be intrusive…John sat up quickly with the intention of going downstairs, but flopped back down when his head gave a painful throb. He wished for some paracetamol, or at least some water, but apparently the hangover fairy was off duty today. In truth, he wasn’t even that hung over. He was mostly just tired, since he’d lain awake half the night listening for Sherlock’s feet on the stairs.

Just as he had earlier that evening, John had spent far too long trying to persuade himself that this was a good thing for Sherlock. After all, John was always trying to convince him that sex was something normal people did as a matter of course, so surely he should be pleased that Sherlock was giving it a go? But there was the problem right there. John had no idea how much experience Sherlock had—until ten hours ago, he’d have been willing to bet none—but even if he was wrong about that, surely there couldn’t have been much? John could just about picture some awkward teenage snogging, but certainly if it had gone well, he wouldn’t have given it up. Had Sebastian Fucking MI-6 Moran deduced that? Had he recognized Sherlock’s inexperience? Was he gentle and careful, or had he pushed, made Sherlock overwhelmed and edgy? Sherlock didn’t even like most people to touch him. John tried to picture Moran kissing Sherlock, touching him—for the first time? He would do it wrong. He would touch Sherlock too lightly, or more likely too roughly. Sherlock would get tense and hyperventilate and John wouldn’t be there to calm him down and what the fuck was thinking, telling himself that Sherlock needed him to hold his hand through his first sexual encounter? Sherlock was an adult. And if there was one thing he was quite capable of, it was walking out of a situation he didn’t like. Time to face facts. All this time he’d never made a move, assuming Sherlock simply wouldn’t be interested, and now he was interested—in somebody else. He was jealous, pure and simple. And he needed to get over it right now, or he had no right to call himself Sherlock’s friend. Fuck.

John set his jaw and got up—a bit more slowly this time—and took himself downstairs. Sherlock was in the kitchen, fully dressed, the entire table covered with chemical apparatus. He appeared to be distilling something, which meant he’d already been at it for hours. The whole thing seemed so completely normal that John felt some of his worry seep away.

“Are we not going to the Yard then?”

“Day off,” Sherlock answered. “I want to try to replicate a few of Bill’s more inexplicable projects, and you’ve been saying you could do with a break.”

John noticed without surprise that one of Boffin Bill’s notebooks was propped against the gas burner.

“Please don’t tell Lestrade you took that book. He’ll have poor Alberts sacked.”

“Why would I?” Sherlock did not look up. “Tea?”

John filled the kettle and got down the mugs, watching Sherlock out of the corner of his eye. He looked just the same as always. In the face of his utter self-possession, John felt a bit embarrassed over his earlier fears. “So,” he said in a would-be casual voice. “Going to see him again?”
Sherlock froze in the act of turning a page.

Well, that confirmed that. John watched, a little amused in spite of himself, as Sherlock carefully smoothed the page down and looked up with a studiedly bland expression. “Who?”

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“Sebastian Moran! Oh, come on, Sherlock. I may not be a deductive genius, but I’ve lived with enough people to know when my flatmate’s gone home with someone.”

Sherlock’s eyes faltered away from John. When he looked back, the bland hauteur was gone. “You can’t tell anyone. He’s not—they don’t know he likes men. You mustn’t put anything—”

“Sherlock, I’m not going to gossip about your personal life. And I’m certainly not going to write about it in my blog. I’ve got my own love life to talk about, thanks.”

Sherlock somehow managed to look simultaneously relieved and irritated. “Yes. Of course.” He looked back down at the table and peered intently at the notebook, clearly hoping the conversation was over.

John pulled down the sugar bowl. All right, Sherlock didn’t feel like sharing the details. This was hardly surprising; Sherlock was intensely private. John didn’t really want to know anyway. Of course, he could always have another go later, after Sherlock had a chance to adjust to the idea of John knowing…he was surprised when Sherlock said suddenly, “I might.”

“Sorry?”

“I might. See him again.” Sherlock was studiously avoiding John’s eye. Was he blushing?

“Oh. Well, okay.” John lifted the mugs. “All right to put this on the table? That’s not poisonous, is it?”

“No, it’s fine.” Sherlock was still staring down, his cheekbones faintly pink. John felt a rush of protective tenderness and put a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder as he turned toward his armchair. And then he stopped in his tracks.

Clearly visible on the back of Sherlock’s neck was the livid, black-and-blue print of a large hand. Sherlock probably had no idea it was there—he wouldn’t have been able to see it in the mirror. With his head bent forward and the weight of John’s hand pulling down his jacket, it stood out shockingly dark against the white skin: four fingers and a thumb, the lateral edge of a palm print cutting across the vulnerable knob of his spine.

John’s stomach dropped then went cold. His fingers clenched involuntarily and he felt Sherlock twitch and start to turn his head, quizzically looking up at John, who squeezed his shoulder numbly, said, “Good on you, pulling a colonel,” and quickly escaped to his chair where he huddled, feeling sick. Thank God Sherlock’s back was turned.

What had Moran done? How hard would he have had had to grip Sherlock’s neck to make those marks? John tried to envision some scenario that would involve Moran clenching his hand around the nape of Sherlock’s neck hard enough to bruise that badly. He supposed in an excess of passion it could be possible, although it looked more like an act of violence. But Sherlock was otherwise fine, there weren’t any other marks on him, and besides he said he might…

John suddenly went cold all over again. Because he knew: Sherlock was not otherwise fine. Sherlock never wore his suit jacket to mess with chemicals; he always wore his oldest dressing gown, with his shirt sleeves rolled up underneath.
John got up. He ambled carefully back into the kitchen and pulled out the bread, desperately thankful he’d been to the shops earlier that week. “Toast?”

“Why bother? There’s no jam.”

“Yes, there is, I got some Tuesday.”

Sherlock looked up hopefully. “Raspberry?”

“Yes.” John kept his back turned as he worked, turning only to carry the plate to the table. Stopping just out of Sherlock’s reach, he said, “What the hell is that?”

Sherlock looked at a small curl of black smoke collecting in a stoppered flask. “Oh, that’s just a byproduct. I’ll vent it in a bit.”

“Outside please,” John said and sure enough Sherlock reached absently for the toast, still frowning at the flask.

“Actually that’s not exactly what I was expecting…” Sherlock muttered, biting into the toast and flipping pages in the notebook. John was no longer listening. He forced himself to turn away and walk casually to his seat where he sat, feeling slightly ill, his mind filled with the image of Sherlock’s delicate wrist ringed with dark bruises.

It made no sense. John could not imagine Sherlock letting anyone hurt him, yet he was clearly not angry or upset. Had someone convinced Sherlock that being hurt was something he should expect during sex? If so, John was going to hunt them down, castrate them, and possibly kill them. Right after he killed Moran, of course. He had absolutely no idea how even to begin to approach this topic with Sherlock.

John’s train of thought was abruptly derailed when Sherlock suddenly shot to his feet and said in a voice tinged with alarm, “John. I’ve just identified Boffin Bill’s critical error but unfortunately I replicated it and—”

There was a small pop and the rubber stopper to the flask John had noticed flew up and bounced off the ceiling. John had only time to think, well, that could have been worse before the smell hit him. Gagging, he flung himself at the small bin by the desk—thank God he hadn’t gotten around to eating his toast—and clutched it to his chest as he staggered frantically to the window and flung it open. Passersby beneath scurried to the other side of the street as he hung out the window, gagging and clutching the bin. Behind him he could hear Sherlock retching into the kitchen sink.

A door banged somewhere and Mrs. Hudson’s voice called, “Have you boys—Sherlock!”

I need a hit list, John thought fuzzily, heaving again. Before I start on Moran, I’m going to break into that hospital, find Boffin Bill, and fucking throttle him.

A week later, Sherlock slammed the last of the lab notebooks shut and declared them finished.

“Thank God,” John said fervently, snapping his own notebook closed. “Alberts, pop over to Dillon and see what he wants us to do with all this. I’ll start boxing it up. “ He stood, stretching the kinks out of his back. “Think I’ll ring Sylvie and—wait, does this count as the end of a case? Do you want to go out?”

“It’s fine. Go on and ring her,” Sherlock said.
John hesitated, wanting to ask but not sure what to say. Neither of them had mentioned Sebastian Moran since the morning of Sherlock’s disastrous chemistry experiment. The immediate aftermath had been so chaotic—Sherlock had taken the full brunt of the gas in the unventilated kitchen, which meant he spent the next several hours dry heaving in Mrs. Hudson’s toilet, leaving John to deal with the fire brigade—and by the time the dust had settled John had mostly convinced himself he had overreacted. The bruises had faded quite quickly, and men could be rough with each other, as John knew perfectly well. He’d once received a blow job in Afghanistan so enthusiastically he’d had blood under his nails after from digging them in the other man’s scalp. They’d laughed about it later—the guy’s head looked as though birds had been pecking at it.

“What about you?” He finally asked.

Sherlock looked up, his eyes narrowed. “What about me?”

“How’s your flat?” she asked.

“Still a bit nasty,” John lied with a straight face. He’d begged Sylvie’s sofa when the flat was uninhabitable, and ended up in her bed instead. It had been very nice. Sherlock, meanwhile, had to camp out in 221C, which served him right.

“Well, as it might be a late night and as it’s the weekend, maybe we can find someplace more pleasant for you,” Sylvie said seriously, and John laughed and said maybe he’d just bring a toothbrush then, if she didn’t mind.

He was still smiling when he went back into the conference room and saw Sherlock slipping his phone back into his jacket. John was almost positive Moran had texted Sherlock over the last few days—there had been a different text alert—but Sherlock hadn’t volunteered any information and John hadn’t asked. Now it looked as though they were both sorted for the night: John with his pleasant girlfriend and some folk music and, hopefully, some nice if not terribly exciting sex, and Sherlock with his…what? Bit of rough? Mountain of rough, more like. John let the anticipation and the pleasure of being finally quit of Boffin Fucking Bill buoy him. Sherlock was fine. Everything was fine.

The happy feeling lasted through the evening and into the next morning. He and Sylvie went out for a nice leisurely breakfast and John bought an extra chocolate croissant for Sherlock, who loved them. He brought it back to the flat, whistling, and made them both coffee, and brought the coffee and croissant to where Sherlock was sprawled in his chair with a pile of music and his laptop. Sherlock grunted at him—an appreciative grunt to John’s discerning ear—and John took himself off to his own laptop, still determinedly cheerful, ignoring the fact that Sherlock was lounging around fully dressed on a Saturday morning, right down to his socks and shoes.

It went like that for a while. John would see Sylvie once or twice a week, and Sherlock would see
Moran—at least, John assumed that’s what he was doing—somewhat less. They did not always coincide. A few days after wrapping up Boffin Bill for good, they got into a case involving an internet dating service for gingers called the Red-Headed League. It was fantastic fun, culminating in a group of enraged would-be bank robbers being hauled away in handcuffs while Sherlock expounded on his own deductive genius to anyone who would listen, and John enjoyed himself tremendously. After, they went for late night Chinese and ate everything in sight, giggling the entire time.

“I can’t wait to start writing this up,” John said as they collected their fortune cookies. “I’d do it tonight, but I’m just too knackered. Try to keep the playing down, would you?” Sherlock was still strung tighter than a bowstring; John could tell he was nowhere close to settling down.

“Well, actually,” Sherlock started, then stopped, put his hands in his pockets, and looked away. “I’m, er. I’m not going straight home. I’ll be quiet when I come in.”

John stared at Sherlock—animated, fidgeting, still burning so brightly John could see it—and the penny dropped. Sherlock was not going to spend the rest of the night unwinding with his violin. He was going to burn off his massive post case adrenaline high having sex with Sebastian Moran. John had to fight down a spike of jealousy. God, what would it be like to have that restless energy in his bed, to be the focus of that white-hot intensity? It would be like staring into the sun.

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“Okay,” he said, a little blankly. “You, uh…don’t stay out too late?”

Sherlock smiled a quick, relieved smile, his cheekbones pink in the glow of the streetlights. “I won’t,” he promised, and for a moment John thought he hesitated, but then he was gone in a swirl of coat, leaving John feeling strangely restless and alone.
At the end of the month, another of Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis’ friends arrived with an upper-class crisis. Sherlock had turned down any number of missing spouses, pets, heirlooms, and offspring, but apparently a missing racehorse was unusual enough to catch his attention, so off they went to Dartmoor.

John hadn’t had so much fun since the Red-Headed League. It was June; everything was blue sky and green fields and puffy clouds. Their inn was charming. He was with Sherlock, who was apparently having a marvelous time: stalking about stables swirling his coat, making cryptic pronouncements about dogs in the night time, prowling about on the moor. No one texted them. John actually found himself disappointed when Sherlock wrapped the whole thing up in a fireworks burst of show-offy brilliance and he realized that now they would have to go home.

Back at the inn, John stared disconsolately at his suitcase before impulsively slamming it shut and heading for Sherlock’s room. “Let’s stay over until tomorrow. We could have dinner at that place in the village, relax a little bit…”

Sherlock looked up in surprise. “But you have to be back in London tonight. You were very insistent.”

“I have to…oh, fuck.” John flopped himself backward across Sherlock’s untouched bed and pulled a pillow over his face. “I can’t believe I forgot. Actually, I can’t believe you remembered. Especially after you told me not to go.”

“I did nothing of the sort.”

“You said, quote, that’s not going to go well, unquote.”

“Not the same as telling you not to go,” Sherlock said virtuously. He was never particularly circumspect in his efforts to drive off John’s girlfriends, but always denied it when confronted.

John scowled into the pillow. He liked Sylvie. Sylvie was nice, and kind, and caring, and…well, he wasn’t sure what else, they didn’t really spend a lot of time talking. Vegan. She would probably love to move to the country with him and raise their children on organic veggies that she grew herself. He indulged a moment’s idle fantasy of how fit he would be, living with Sylvie, with her morning yoga and herbal tea. Much more fit than he was now, living with a flatmate who thought caffeine was a food group. Sylvie was quite fit, and pretty in her wholesome way. John was looking forward to this birthday dinner with all her old friends tonight—it seemed a bit of a formal step, this presentation of John as her official boyfriend. Hardly any of his previous relationships had gotten this far, though to be fair this probably had less to do with Sylvie’s patience than with Sherlock pestering him less than usual. He briefly considered saying something snarky about how since Sherlock was now getting off regularly himself he might give John a break, but that would just make Sherlock go stiff and withdrawn.

“John, you’re lying on my pants,” Sherlock said.

John rolled to the side and pulled the pillow off his face. “If I didn’t have to go back, would you have stayed?” He caught a flash of something unguarded in Sherlock’s face before Sherlock turned back to the wardrobe.

“Of course,” he said, shrugging. “Why not?”
On the train, Sherlock immediately wrapped himself in his coat, leaned against the window, and fell asleep. John sat for a while with his notebook unopened on his knees, watching him. Sherlock looked drawn and tired, and John had the uncomfortable suspicion that it was not entirely due to the three days of running about on the moors. Sherlock had been hardly sleeping at all lately. Even between cases he was staying up all hours, working on his polyphonic whatever-it-was, which had apparently morphed into a colossal composition project. On the other hand, the crashes were getting more frequent. Every time Sherlock came back from Moran’s…

John rubbed a hand over his forehead. He supposed that expecting Sherlock to act like anyone else would in the throes of a new relationship was ridiculous—when had Sherlock ever behaved like anyone else? But there was no getting around the fact that Sherlock did not seem infatuated or in love. He seemed, rather, as though something were weighing heavily upon him. John had no idea what was going on, but the fact remained that the only way Sherlock seemed to be able to sleep these days was after being worn out by Moran, so John supposed he should be grateful. He wasn’t. Whatever it was that Sherlock and Moran did together left far too many marks for John’s taste.

John rubbed his temples with both hands now. He’d been over this so many times the arguments sounded worn even in his head: Sherlock was an adult, he’d never shown signs of serious injury, Moran did not seem interested in increasing the amount of time they spent together—John had, to his shame, looked at Sherlock’s e-mail and even his texts. And yet. For the first and only time John actually found himself wishing for Mycroft’s interference, but Mycroft had been compelled to go to the Middle East (to Sherlock’s unconcealed delight).

The train jostled and Sherlock slid slightly, his head now canted at an uncomfortable angle. John pulled off his jumper, lifted Sherlock’s head, and gently slid the makeshift pillow to prop his head more comfortably. He stroked Sherlock’s hair back and laid his palm against his cheek. Up close, he could smell Sherlock’s unique fragrance: overpriced shampoo, coffee, illicit tobacco, unscented soap. Sherlock turned his head slightly, seeking John’s hand, and John stroked his face softly. It felt a bit risky—he would never have done this if Sherlock had been awake—but Sherlock nestled his cheek into John’s palm and sighed out one soft breath before going limp and boneless again.

John carefully removed his hand, still warm from Sherlock’s breath, and returned to his seat. He thought for a minute and then texted Mrs. Hudson. En route from Dartmoor, have date tonight, any chance of some food for Sherlock? Mrs. Hudson, bless her, texted back promptly that he was not 2 worry, she had everything she needed for a shepherd’s pie and a nice pudding and maybe they would watch the quiz shows, DWAAT. DWAAT? John had no idea. Either Mrs. Hudson was more in touch with texting slang than he was or the elderly had their own abbreviations. John spent a few more minutes watching Sherlock, now drooling onto John’s jumper, and then decisively flipped open his notebook to start his notes on the case.

Sherlock lay sprawled on the sofa, ostensibly checking messages on his website but in reality
fighting the persistent fog that had hung over him since his long nap on the train. He probably ought to just go to bed, but was afraid if he did that sleep would elude him again and he would be left staring into the dark, far too many thoughts crowding his brain.

John came in, smartly dressed and bearing a wrapped gift. Something dull and practical, obviously; Sherlock couldn’t be bothered to deduce further. He tousled Sherlock’s curls. “Mrs. Hudson will be up in a minute. She’s made too much shepherd’s pie and says she would really love a bit of company, so try to eat some, okay? It will make her so happy.”

“Mmmm,” Sherlock said. He arched his neck a little so John could reach the other side of his head.

“You’re just like a little kitten,” John said, smiling, and Sherlock jerked as though he’d been burned. He clutched the edges of his laptop so hard his hands hurt and tried to force his breathing to slow. John could not possibly know about that; nobody knew about that, not anymore.

John was staring at him, perplexed. “Sherlock?”

Sherlock twisted out of reach, trying to look bored and haughty and as though he were only trying to find a more comfortable position. “What.”

“I just…I just meant, the way you turn your head, it’s like a cat being petted. Haven’t you ever stroked a cat? It’s not…I’m not calling you names, Sherlock.” John was using the careful voice that meant Sherlock was being wrong, a freak, and John was afraid he might make it worse.

“I’ve never had a cat. Sentiment,” Sherlock said shortly. What he had had was a dealer. Sherlock had been a careful user—clean needles, no trading sex for drugs—until Mycroft cut him off and careful was suddenly something he could no longer afford. For a while his usual dealer had let him pay on his knees. The man had been callous but not cruel and he liked to grip Sherlock hard on the back of the neck, amused by Sherlock’s submission. They were unpleasant memories, impossible to delete, although nothing compared to what came after.

The dealer had called him that. “Kitten.” The shame of it still burned him.

John just nodded thoughtfully. “Would you rather I not?” He made a tentative gesture with his outstretched hand. Sherlock’s heartbeat sped up.

“No, it’s…” He swallowed. What? The only touch I crave in the world? All I can have of you and never enough? “…good,” Sherlock finished lamely.

John smiled suddenly, bright and warm. “Good. Okay then.” He rubbed Sherlock’s hair again. “Try to get some sleep, okay?” He gave his head a final pat and squeezed his stiff shoulder. Sherlock could hear his quick light footsteps going down the stairs, stopping briefly at Mrs. Hudson’s. The front door shut.

Sherlock twisted around to bury his face in the sofa back. He felt—he didn’t know what he felt. He so often wasn’t sure; he was just too tired to puzzle over it. He really ought to text Sebastian. It would go badly if Sebastian learned he was already back, but he was so, so tired, and he didn’t want to go to Sebastian’s. He told himself it was too dangerous like this, he might forget to be careful, but the truth was that he couldn’t face seeing Sebastian tonight. He didn’t want to have to hide away in his room tomorrow, surreptitiously fetching ice, waiting for the swelling to go down. Sebastian never left marks on his face, but he was careless everywhere else. After that first time when he realized John had seen the bruises, Sherlock had bought concealer at a makeup shop that catered to film artists, but even that wouldn’t stand up to close scrutiny. God, he was tired. He wished he were back in the soothing cocoon of the train; he wished John would come back and stroke his hair until his mind
went quiet and he could sleep.

“Woo hoo,” Mrs. Hudson called from the doorway, carrying a large tray laden with dishes. There was a beautiful smell of beef and potatoes, and Sherlock was suddenly so hungry he felt light headed.

He pulled himself upright to help, but Mrs. Hudson was already waving him back as she set the tray down. “I’ve got this, dear. Why don’t you see to the telly? Maybe with a bit of food you can win back that five quid you lost last week.”

“The so-called knowledge required for these shows is absolute trivial ephemera,” Sherlock said, but he found the remote anyway. It made Mrs. Hudson ridiculously happy to beat him.

Some time later Sherlock woke with a jolt, utterly disoriented. It took him a minute to realize he was still on the sofa, now covered with a blanket. Evidently the combination of starchy food and moronic television had lulled him to sleep after all. Ugh, had he fallen asleep without brushing his teeth? Sherlock never went to be without brushing; he was obsessive about the feel of his teeth.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs; he must have been awakened by the downstairs door closing. The steps paused in the darkened doorway. “Sherlock?” John’s voice said, quietly.

“Um. Yes,” Sherlock managed. He sat up. “It’s dark. It’s not morning yet. Why are you home?”

John sighed. He crossed the room, sat down next to Sherlock, and dropped his head heavily onto the sofa back. Sherlock could see barely enough to tell he had closed his eyes. “You were right, it didn’t go well. How do you always know?”

“Oh,” Sherlock said, still trying to catch up—oh, the boring vegan’s birthday dinner. “Her closest friends would undoubtedly share her alternative sympathies—you must have noticed the acupuncture marks at our first meeting?—with the usual reflexive pacifistic—” Was he making any sense? He was getting tangled up in his own train of thought. “You wouldn’t fit in. One of them was going to pick a fight after a few drinks, either psychopharmacology or the evils of the military, unless any of them were parents, in which case probably vaccines.”

“Vaccines,” John said and then with horror, “Thank God none of those little shits brought up the military, I might have punched one.”

Sherlock had no idea what to do next. He vaguely understood that something was required of him, some gesture of sympathy, but could not come up with anything both sincere and appropriate. What would John do? Awkwardly, he reached out and spidered his long fingers over John’s head. He flexed a little, rubbing at John’s short, bristly-soft hair. This did not seem quite right. How did John do it? Was the technique different with shorter hair? Sherlock liked John’s hair. He was reminded of a plush hedgehog he had when he was small, the fur that was simultaneously soft and stiff. He relaxed his hand a bit, letting the pads of his fingers brush over John’s hair, liking the texture.

“Mmm.” John said drowsily, tipping his head. “Feels nice.”

Sherlock felt pleased. He had done it right. He shifted a little to make the angle less uncomfortable and rested his own head against the sofa back. John’s eyes were closed, and he was smiling slightly. Sherlock stroked carefully and let his own eyes drift closed. Touching John’s hair was oddly soothing.

“I almost hate to admit this, but…it’s actually a relief. I’d been trying to convince myself that Sylvie
was right for me but…” John sighed. “I should have known when I realized that I’d rather stay in Dartmoor with you than come back to see her.”

Sherlock cracked his eyes at that, but John still had his eyes closed, head lolled back.

“It’s just…” John’s voice trailed off, and Sherlock closed his eyes again. “I’m not getting any younger, you know? It’s time to really think about what I’m doing with the rest of my life. My poor old mum’s about given up on grandchildren; she’s moving house to be nearer her sister’s family. I think…” John sighed again. “I’m starting to think that maybe it’s like with Sylvie. Maybe I want to want to settle down, more than I really want to settle down.”

Sherlock turned this over in his head, but he knew it was beyond him. He could barely understand his own feelings half the time, let alone sort out John’s. It did seem as though John were not heartbroken, though, and that was good. And Sherlock was apparently doing rather well at the comforting thing, and that was good too. It would seem that not talking was actually quite a good tactic; Sherlock filed this away for future reference.

John heaved yet another sigh and hitched himself a bit closer, so Sherlock’s arm was not so stretched, and Sherlock obligingly stroked the far side of his head. He liked the feel of running his fingers upward, disarranging the short hairs and feeling them brush his fingertips. He thought of his hedgehog again. He remembered being small, curled under his heavy blanket, running his fingers over the fur, calculating number sequences until he could fall asleep. The Fibonacci sequence, that was the best for falling asleep. If the Fibonacci sequence were music, Sherlock thought, it would sound like the opening of the Ninth Symphony.

John’s arms were around him. “Bed,” John said.

“Not asleep,” Sherlock slurred.

“Of course not. Come on, up you get. Don’t you want to brush your teeth?”

Sherlock grimaced; he definitely did.

At the washbasin John pulled the floss away and said “You’ll be fine for just one—oh, all right.” He gave it back and Sherlock flossed, brushed for exactly three minutes, and stumbled into his bedroom to find his pajamas.

John appeared in the doorway. “Just wanted to make sure you didn’t fall asleep in the shower again,” he said. “All right?”

Sherlock turned out the lamp and collapsed across his bed. “You could stay if you like. I could rub your head,” he mumbled.

“Love to, but I’d probably best not.” John was smiling. He didn’t think Sherlock was thinking clearly; probably true.

“I’m not being altruistic, John. I won’t sleep else.”

John hesitated a little, surprised, and then Sherlock heard him come over and settle on the floor with his back to the bed. “Just for a bit, then. This okay?”

Of course John would not be comfortable climbing into his bed. Sherlock’s face felt hot and he was glad of the dark. Actually, John’s head was in the perfect position now. Sherlock curled onto his side on the edge of the bed, rested his hand lightly on John’s hair, drew his fingertips back, slowly, and then did it again. John relaxed under him. Sherlock let his mind drift back to his hedgehog, to
mathematics, to music, to the Ninth Symphony, to the chorus, to choral music, to motets. He thought of the motet he wanted to find at the museum the next day. He thought of the piece he was composing inspired by Lassus’ motets, transposing the voice parts for string quartet. There was a part that dissatisfied him. He heard it in his mind, the piercing sweetness of the sopranos, then the high notes of the violin, high, high, high, edging up the fingerboard…he saw the notes as sound waves now, the frequencies changing like bright colors; then finally, as he began to slip under, they became stars, cold and pure in the descending darkness, their edges a soft prickle under his fingers.
“Sherlock,” John said, walking in. “Would—where on earth did that come from?”

“The British Museum.”

“Did you steal it?”

“Of course not. I have every intention of returning it; we don’t have adequate preservation conditions in the flat.”

“What is it? It looks really old.”

“It is old. It’s an unattributed work from the 16th century, which I have just definitively established to be one of the unknown works of Lassus.”

“That’s—wow.” It certainly sounded impressive. “Is that a big discovery then?”

Sherlock’s mouth quirked. “Enormous…to about five people in the world, one being myself, and at least two of whom won’t agree with my findings.” Sherlock didn’t sound at all unhappy about this. It was one of his more endearing qualities, that he found his greatest pleasure in the puzzle itself rather than in any acclaim or recognition.

“Will you tell me about it?” Just because John wouldn’t understand a word didn’t mean Sherlock shouldn’t get some fun out of sharing his discovery.

“When I finish copying. I have to do it by hand, any electronic method would be harmful.” Sherlock looked up at John, did his familiar eye flick, and then turned back to his work, saying, “No.”

“No, what?”

“No, I don’t want to go to Clara’s birthday party. You’re holding the invitation, it came weeks ago, you responded when you still had a girlfriend, now you’ve realized that the party is tomorrow and you’ve no time to procure a date, so you’re about to ask if I’d like to go. I wouldn’t. I’d be bored and behave badly and make you angry. Ask Molly; she’s sure to be free, and she’ll be flattered, which will be helpful next time we need her for something.”

“I’m not asking Molly just so she’ll owe you a favor,” John protested, although actually it wasn’t a bad idea. Molly had an unfortunate tendency to bring up dead bodies, but then so did Sherlock, and at least Molly wasn’t likely to insult anyone at the same time. He turned to look for his phone, adding over his shoulder, “Don’t get caught if you take that back tomorrow, I’m not leaving the party to bail you.”

“So tell me about this party,” Molly said, settling into the cab.

“Well, Clara is my sister in law,” John began, “but she and I were actually friends first—we did our medical training together. Then Harry came to London for uni and there ended up being a whole group of us who were friends.”
“Mike Stamford too? Will he be there?”

“No, different crowd, although we were friends too. You know how it is.”

“Were you the only straight man in the group?”

“Ah. Um, I’m not entirely straight…especially back then, I was rather, ah, experimental, I suppose you could say.”

Molly’s mouth went round with delighted astonishment. “No!”

John shrugged, grinning. “And anyway, no, we were rather a mixed bunch. And a lot of Clara and Harry’s friends now are straight, of course. So there should be plenty of eligible men for you to look over. And lesbians, if you’d like to experiment yourself. I quite recommend it.”

“Lesbians?” she asked, teasing.

“Experimenting.” John waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Molly shook her head sadly. “What you really mean is that there will be a lot of gay men for me to make a fool of myself over.”

“Tell you what. If you like the look of anyone, point him out to me and I’ll find out. All I ask in return is that you tell me if you see my sister going near the drinks table. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Harry met them at the door. She was clear-eyed and smiling, but John thought he detected a slightly desperate edge to her voice. “Oh my God, you must be Molly! Are you really as nice as John makes you sound? Stay here, I’ve someone I want you to meet.” She kissed John’s cheek.

“Doing okay?” he asked softly.

“So far. I’ve got Lucy here, she’s my sober companion for the night.” A visibly pregnant woman behind Harry lifted a bottle of mineral water and gave John a thumbs up. “So you and Clara can relax and enjoy yourselves.”

“Brilliant,” John said sincerely. “I don’t know Lucy, do I?”

“No, she’s recent. The university crowd is in the study if you want to join them—they’re looking at the Facebook pages of everyone who isn’t here, talking about who got bald or fat.”

“Oh hell. I’d better go so they can tell me I’m gray to my face.”

“I’m taking Molly to meet Ciaran Heaney. Clara found him in a lab someplace. He’s an utter nerd, does some kind of nasty urogenital research, so no one wants to hear him talk about his job either. I think they’ll get on like a house on fire.”

John’s arrival in the study was greeted with squeals and embraces. “Oh my God,” Juliet said, hugging him tightly. “We’ve all got older, of course, but your smile—it takes me right back.”

“That’s the most sincere thing I’ve heard yet,” John said, smiling down at her. “Everyone else keeps telling me I haven’t changed a bit, so then I have to tell them the same thing, and I end up thinking we’re a right group of liars.”

“Thank goodness we have changed. Would you really want to be 25 again? Not to mention I would
still have that angry-dyke hair.”

John laughed; he remembered the hair. “This way suits you better. It’s easier for men; our hairstyles
don’t change as fast as yours. Although I think my flatmate’s had the same haircut since primary
school, and it does look a bit silly.”

“Ah,” Juliet said, her warm eyes knowing. “Is that how it worked out then? I’d wondered.”

“It’s not like that. We’re just friends. I don’t suppose I’ll know how it works out until I settle down
for good with someone, if I ever do.” He hesitated briefly. “Are you still, er…”

“A sex therapist? You can say it, John, there’s a bloke here who’s apparently designing a new type
of penile implant. I’m quite proper company compared to him.”

“I think Harry’s introducing him to my date,” John said drily and they both burst into giggles.

“So. Ask,” Juliet said when they had settled down and got drinks. “You’ve got something, I can
tell.”

“Well…okay…it’s about my friend, actually—no, really, it is, my flatmate. He’s quite bright, but
extremely awkward with people—“

“On the spectrum, you mean?”

“I think so, yeah. So the first year or so we lived together I never saw him show any interest in
anyone; he told me he was married to his work. To be honest, I rather thought he was asexual. It was
a bit annoying, because he never seemed to understand why I should want to go on dates or have a
relationship with anyone. But then a couple months ago he started seeing this guy, which should be
great, yeah? But it’s not. It’s not great.” John realized he was speaking rather more vehemently than
he had intended.

“Tell me,” Juliet said gently.

“Well, for one thing, he never talks about him. At all. A couple of times I’ve asked—not prying, you
understand, just, like, how’s it going with Sebastian? And he just…stiffens up. It isn’t like they’re
even in a relationship as far as I can tell. They don’t ever seem to talk. He just goes over once in a
while.”

“Hooking up? Friends with benefits?”

“I don’t even think they’re friends! And then he always comes back the same night, really late, and
then sleeps for a day and a half. Which, actually, isn’t all that weird for him. He tends to stay up for
days and then crash anyway, so that’s not—that doesn’t bother me, it’s that—“ John hesitated, it felt
like a betrayal, but, but, “He has bruises.”

Juliet’s gaze sharpened. “On his face?”

“No, never. On his wrists and neck, at least once on his arms. I came back for my phone one day and
he was going from the shower to his room; he didn’t see me. And that’s the other thing. Before, you
know, we’d go about in towels, he was in his dressing gown half the time. Now he’s always
completely dressed with long sleeves, so matter how warm it is.”

“So—are you worried that it’s more than just rough sex? That he’s being abused, and for whatever
reason feels he can’t tell you or get out of the relationship? Or are you worried that he mightn’t
understand that he’s being abused?”
“Maybe. Yes. Both. I don’t know!” John had been avoiding these thoughts for so long it was a painful relief to speak them aloud. “It’s not just bruises either. I’ve seen lig—rope marks on his wrists.”

“Ohhh.” Juliet’s face suddenly lightened. The smile she turned on him was fond and a little indulgent. “I think it might not be that bad, actually.”

“You don’t?” John said, bewildered.

“Do you know anything about BDSM?”

“What, that—that ‘Shades of Grey’ stuff? Only what the women all reading it at work—oh. OH. You think that’s what’s going on? But that’s mad! Sherlock, my friend, he’s so…”

“Controlling? Uptight?”

“Yes, and arrogant, rude, particular, bossy…I can’t imagine him letting someone tie him up and flog him. It’s easier to picture him getting smacked around for running his mouth, honestly.”

“But that’s exactly it—control freaks are often the ones who want to sub, because it’s the only way they can let go. You wouldn’t believe how many City types I see who want to know how to get their wives to spank them. And it’s popular among people with Asperger’s; they like rules. You get a lot of doms, of course, but a surprising number find it easier to handle sexual stimulation if they’re tied up or blindfolded. Minimizes the sensory overload. You can Google it,” she added kindly.

John felt as though his mouth were opening and closing like a beached fish. His brain seemed to be flopping as uselessly as a fish too, still struggling to catch up. This possibility had never occurred to him. “Wow, this is—wow. So you’re saying this could be fully consensual? He wants to be hurt?”

“He keeps going back, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, he does.”

“It could explain why he doesn’t want to talk too much about the relationship, too. He might think that you wouldn’t understand.”

“Can’t imagine why, look how well I’m reacting,” John said wryly.

Juliet patted his arm soothingly. “It’s okay. The bankers’ wives usually take a while to get their heads around it too.”

John just shook his head, at a loss. “Wow,” he said again, inanely.

John spent the rest of the party in a bit of a daze. He was enjoying seeing his old friends, but was distracted by thoughts of Sherlock. He hated looking like a barely-bisexual vanilla ice cream cone before Juliet, but he wasn’t even entirely sure what “BDSM” stood for. Was it the same thing as S&M? There had been a dominatrix in the news lately, Irene something—the photo always seemed to show her holding a riding crop, which reinforced John’s vague stereotype of men in dungeons and women with whips. He couldn’t imagine Sherlock in such a situation, let alone the hulking Moran… weren’t stiletto heels required?

John decided he’d spent enough time at the party to be polite and went looking for Molly. She was chatting animatedly with a tall man with wild dark hair, narrow glasses, and a truly atrocious jumper.
He caught her eye, raised his eyebrows, and mimed waving good-bye; she beamed and nodded. John caught her meaning: John leaving early would give her a lovely excuse to be escorted home. Excellent. He went in search of Harry, who was on the sofa with Lucy and another woman, all sharing a container of ice cream.

“None for you, non-drinkers only,” Harry shouted at him.

“What if I’m the designated driver?”

“Doesn’t count. And anyway you’re not, you don’t drive. Oh, that reminds me, are you going? I have something for you.”

“What, party favors?”

“No, you git, it’s from Mum.” Harry heaved herself up. “No, stay there, Lucy, I know your back’s hurting.” She led John toward the laundry. “I was home a couple of weeks ago helping her pack—you do know she’s moving house?”

“Yeah, I thought about going up to see the old place before it goes, but it’s been twenty years since I lived there, you know? I’m going to wait until she gets settled and then go up for a proper housewarming visit, maybe take a potted plant or something.”

“Oh, she’ll like that. Here you are.” Harry pulled a basket of towels off a large box. “It’s stuff Mum thought you might want—old things of yours, some that belonged to Dad, like that. She said you can just throw out whatever you don’t want.”

“Thanks,” John said, hefting the box. “Oh, and well done on that guy you found for Molly—they really seem to be getting on. Couldn’t find someone for me?”

“I would never introduce you to anyone I liked, John. Your mad flatmate runs everyone off. Walk me back to Lucy? People feel better when I’m visibly chaperoned.”

“Absolutely, I’ll see myself out.” John kissed her cheek awkwardly, arms full of box. “You’re doing great, Harry. It’s really good to see you.”

Harry ducked, blushing. “Stop it, you flatterer, I’m still not introducing you to any of my friends.”

John could not remember the last time he had been relieved to find Sherlock out of the flat. He had spent most of the ride home trying to think of a strategy to sneak his laptop upstairs without Sherlock noticing, a hopeless endeavor. Alone, he dropped the box and went directly to his computer, not even stopping to put on the kettle. It was entirely possible that Sherlock had just popped out for patches or something, so John didn’t want to lose any time. He carried the laptop straight to his room. Sherlock would notice it was gone, of course, but with any luck he would just assume John wanted to look at porn in private, which was not far from the truth.

An hour later, John closed his laptop and lay back on his bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. He thought he had probably learned enough—maybe more than enough; he was disconcertingly hard. He understood now what Juliet had been trying to explain earlier about the attraction of submission. For Sherlock, who found it so hard to quiet his frantic mind, subspace would surely have a powerful appeal. He could understand that, even if it was not something that he felt any desire to try himself. No, it wasn’t the concept of Sherlock relinquishing control of his body to someone else that upset him; it was the thought of him giving it to Sebastian Moran. Contemplating Sebastian using Sherlock for casual (maybe cruel?) sex had been bad enough, but the idea that Sherlock trusted him like this—
trusted anyone but John himself, if he were honest—filled him with a sad, bewildered sort of ache. Did they have a safeword, a secret code between just the two of them? Would Sebastian give him aftercare? (He fucking well better, John thought grimly.) Did he hold Sherlock while he came down, the way the website advised, stroke his hair the way he liked, tell him he was safe? Did Sherlock give Sebastian the smile that had only ever been for John?

Okay, that hurt. And the worst of it was that he wasn’t just jealous of the emotional implications. He hadn’t spent much time imagining what Sherlock was like in bed…well, perhaps a little…okay, a lot…but that was partly because he could only visualize a less-clothed version of regular Sherlock: impatient and verbose. The idea of Sherlock—arrogant, untouchable Sherlock—being submissive was pushing all kinds of buttons John never knew he had. He’d always been a top, sure, but had never thought of himself as the dominant type. And, of course, the thought of hurting Sherlock—hurting anyone—in any real way made him shy away in revulsion. But taking control…he did like that, he realized. And the idea of Sherlock bound, Sherlock kneeling…John had found a whole page devoted to hair pulling. It was the thought of pulling Sherlock’s head back to expose his throat that had finally made John shut his laptop. Time to face facts. He was not a thoughtful flatmate concerned for a vulnerable friend for whom he might harbor an attraction stronger than friendship. He may as well admit the truth to himself: he wanted Sherlock, was rock hard and desperate thinking about Sherlock, was, in fact, head over heels in love with Sherlock. Who not only had never shown any interest in him, but was at this very moment with another man. John threw his arm over his eyes as though this could block the thought from his brain and considered his aching erection. Could wanking to the thought of Sherlock’s long white neck possibly make him more pathetic than he already was? Because maybe then he could at least get some sleep. Pathetic or not, he knew perfectly well he was going to do it, he thought morosely, so he might as well get on with it before Sherlock turned up and deduced everything.

John was kneeling beside his box the next afternoon when he heard Sherlock’s feet hit the floor for the first time that day. He looked up half expecting to see Sherlock stumbling in with his hair going in all directions, having briefly forgotten that he now lived with Sherlock 2.0, the post-Moran version. His uneven footsteps staggered straight to the shower. John got up and went to fill the kettle. By the time Sherlock appeared—fully dressed, John noted—he had a mug of tea and a plate of scones waiting by his chair. Sherlock arrowed to the tea as though programmed by mission control.

John had spent some time trying to think of a way to let Sherlock know that this new development—or rather John’s comprehension of it—was all fine, but he’d given eventually given up. For one thing, he could not come up with anything to say that did not make him sound like a hopelessly stodgy middle-aged dad trying to sound cool. Also, he was a coward.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock asked. He must not be properly awake yet if he was asking this question, John thought.

“My mum’s selling the old house and moving to a smaller flat near my aunt,” John explained. He was trying to look Sherlock over without being too obvious, but Sherlock was curled in his chair and gave nothing away. “Harry went up to help her pack, and she sent back this load of stuff for me. Here, you can help.”

“Help, how,” Sherlock said suspiciously. He bit into a scone. Then he looked at the scone as though he had just realized it was in his hand and inhaled the whole thing in three bites.

John was used to this. “You can deduce where I should put everything. God knows we have enough of your knick-knacks about.”
“I do not have knick-knacks, I have relics,” Sherlock said with dignity, draining his tea. “What do I get out of this?”

“I’ll make you more tea. And also you can deduce like mad; I’ll let you say whatever you like. I don’t even think I remember half this stuff. I might need you to work it out for me.”

Sherlock ate another scone, more slowly, and held out his empty mug. “All right. Trade.” John passed him a worn leather satchel and took the mug to the kitchen. He could do with a cup himself.

“Your grandfather’s,” Sherlock said immediately on John’s return. “He was an army doctor too, served in London during the Blitz. Then it was your father’s but he was a GP, never served in the military. Does it skip a generation?”

“I think it was more that Dad thought he’d like to see his kids a bit more often. He’d nothing against the military; he was quite chuffed when I joined.”

“This leather is very good quality,” Sherlock observed, turning the bag over with careful fingers. “I could restore it if you like.”

John was surprised, and touched. “That—that’s really nice, Sherlock. How do you know about leather?”

“Case,” Sherlock said dismissively. “Although that was a very different…never mind, you really don’t want to know. “ He set the bag carefully aside and took his tea. “What else is there?” He was quite happy with John’s dad’s old pipe, from which he deduced an astonishing number of things, including the presence of moles in their old garden, and he refused to let John throw it out. “Maybe I’ll take up pipe smoking. Ugh.” This was in response to what John vaguely thought might be his rugby jersey from the year his team won the championship. Sherlock tossed it aside. “What’s this? Has it to do with pirates?” He had picked up a book John recognized as *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

“Er, I don’t think so, but it’s been a long time,” John said, frowning at it. He could recall a sea serpent, but no pirates. “Hang on, you never read the Narnia books?”

“This is fiction!” Sherlock said, offended. He tossed the book toward the jersey. John snatched it back.

“I loved that book! What did you read when you were a kid then?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Chemistry,” he said. He slid down to the floor next to John to poke at the pile of books John had just stacked. “Winnie the Pooh—is this about excrement? Oh, I did like this!” He was holding a copy of *Through the Looking Glass*. “The chess game plays out quite logically, and there are a number of good mathematical puzzles.”


John looked up. Sherlock’s face had gone soft and wistful, and John held the book out to him. “*Peter Pan and Wendy*? You liked this one?”

Sherlock turned the pages reverently. “I was quite young when I discovered it. I’d already attempted unsuccessfully to fly on my own, and it made perfect sense to me that fairy dust would be the necessary ingredient. I thought if I could get myself unattended to Kensington Gardens, I could become one of the Lost Boys. I planned to procure fairy dust and prove Mycroft wrong…” He scowled. “But Mycroft worked out where I’d gone and the police found me just after midnight. I had
gotten rather cold by then,” he added meditatively.

“As if you’d really have come back. You’d have stayed in Neverland,” John teased.

“I quite fancied myself as Peter Pan, when I didn’t want to be Captain Hook,” Sherlock admitted. He thumbed through the pages gently and read aloud, “‘Oh, the cleverness of me!’”

“That’s you, all right,” John said, smiling. “What happened to your copy? Is it back at your old home?”

Sherlock frowned, thinking. “I don’t know, I wasn’t allowed to take it to school, I remember that much…there was an unfortunate fire in my room a few years later, completely unintentional no matter what Mycroft says, and quite a few things were lost then.”

“You keep that one. You said you’d restore the bag, it’s the least I can do.”

Sherlock’s face lit up with the rare, fully happy smile that illuminated his whole being, and John couldn’t help smiling back. He felt a burst of petty triumph. Watching Sherlock curl around his new book, his thin face still bright with happiness, he thought: take that, Moran. Maybe you give him pleasure for an hour, but it’s me he comes back to in the middle of the night, every time.

“Read it to me,” John said on impulse.

Sherlock looked up, taken aback. “What?”

“Read it out loud. I haven’t heard it in years. Come on, you’ve got, ah, a nice voice, and I’ve all these photographs to look through…it’ll pass the time.”

Sherlock eyed him narrowly, but then he turned to the first page and began, “‘All children, except one, grow up.’” He was hesitant at first, but his voice grew stronger as he read. Sherlock had always been a good actor, and after a while John pushed the photographs aside—he could do without so much documentation of his prolonged awkward stage anyway—and just listened, stretched out on the rug.

“‘He thought he had attached the shadow himself. ‘How clever I am,” he crowed rapturously, ‘Oh, the cleverness of me!’ To put it with brutal frankness, there never was a cockier boy.

“‘Wendy was shocked. ‘You conceit,” she exclaimed with frightful sarcasm, ‘of course I did nothing!’”

“‘You did a little,” Peter said carelessly.”

Sherlock sounded so exactly like himself reading this that John gave up trying to hold back and fell over laughing. Sherlock stopped reading and frowned at where John was literally rolling on the floor, with the look that meant he was unsure if he were being laughed at or not.

“Sorry,” John gasped. “only—forget about Captain Hook, Sherlock you are Peter Pan.”

Sherlock’s face cleared. “I just want it clear that if anyone is putting you in the unappreciated Wendy role, it is not me.”
John’s chest hurt from laughing. He lay back and tried to catch his breath. Later, he would think about how he could have made a joke then—he remembered the rest of the chapter, doubtless Sherlock did too—about thimbles and kisses. Perhaps Sherlock would have made a joke in return, or turned away as he usually did when innuendo eluded him or made him uncomfortable, or, just perhaps, he would turn that look on John that meant that John had intrigued him, was the entire focus of Sherlock’s attention…and things might have gone very differently.

But he didn’t, and the moment passed, and Sherlock went on reading. John finished sorting the photographs and after a while Sherlock said that his throat was getting sore and he needed more tea, and John made sesame noodles because it was so warm, which Sherlock wouldn’t eat because he’d had so many scones.

Later, of course, John would wish that he had. Because the very next day was when it all began to go terribly wrong.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Thanks SO much to everyone who has read, left kudos, and most importantly commented. I never really believed that thing where authors put that comments made them write faster, but it's true! (Well, edit faster, at any rate.) I've tried to respond to everyone personally, so if I missed you I apologize. I think I can safely commit to continuing the twice a week posting, and I'm close to having a final chapter count--there are still a few I might combine or split.

“John.” Lestrade’s voice on the mobile sounded a little harried. “I know you’re at work, and Sherlock said he wouldn’t ring you because you wouldn’t leave and you’d be annoyed at him, so I’m ringing instead. Dimmock’s got a kidnapped baby and he really wants Sherlock in on it, because, you know, kidnapped baby, which means I got called in to wrangle Sherlock, but there are bound to be all kinds of upset family members and so on for Sherlock to be insensitive to, and it would really, really help if you could, you know, be there so…”

“…I can wrangle Sherlock and you can manage everyone else?”

“Right. Is there any possible way?”

“Well, it’s a bit busy here—“

“Kidnapped baby.”

John pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let me talk to Sarah. I think she’ll probably be willing to cover for me—give me the address.”

John was right: the phrase kidnapper baby was quite effective on Sarah—“Oh my God, go, I’ll manage”—so he rang back Lestrade who said, “Brilliant. Sherlock’s going to meet us over there; I’ll be in front of the surgery in five minutes to pick you up.”

The kidnapped baby was Emma Ballinger, ten months old, gone missing from her pram while napping in the back garden that afternoon. “There was some kind of weird photograph left at the scene; that’s about all I know, Dimmock will fill us in when we get there. Sally’s gone to get the baby’s gran. Her mum’s a bit worked up, apparently, so try to keep Sherlock from sending her over the edge.”

“I’m sure the mum’s frantic. Nice of you to lend a hand.”

“Oh, you know. Not much on my plate today. Beats doing paperwork, and it’s a kindness to society to keep Sherlock out of trouble. Um.” Lestrade hesitated briefly. “Is he okay?”

“What do you mean?” John said, surprised. He hadn’t thought Sherlock’s recent odd behavior had been noticeable to anyone but him.

“He seems a bit off, lately. Tired. Skinny.” Lestrade waved a hand around his own face. “Shadows under the eyes, that sort of thing.”
It was John’s turn to hesitate.

“I don’t mean to pry if it’s anything personal,” Lestrade said hastily. “It’s just…you know why I have to ask, right?”

“I know. He’s not using again, I’m pretty sure of that.” John looked out the window for a minute. He suddenly wanted desperately to confide in someone, someone who knew Sherlock almost as well as he did, and he thought he could manage it without violating Sherlock’s privacy. Well, without violating it too much, anyway. “There’s been some stuff going on, but it’s complicated. Would you be up for a pint in a day or so? After we find the baby?”

“Absolutely. Any time, John, you know that. And thanks for putting my mind at ease, you know, about the other thing.”

“I keep an eye out,” John said, and Lestrade nodded, shoulders relaxing.

“Good. Okay, nearly there.”

Emma Ballinger had been taken from a street of narrow and rather dingy houses on the outskirts of London. The presence of police cars had drawn the predictable crowd of inquisitive neighbors, who were being kept at bay by a slim young constable. “Round the back,” she said over her shoulder.

Sherlock turned up about two minutes after they did, excoriated everyone for trampling the evidence, demanded information on all the neighbors, and frowned at a nearby house. “Who lived there?”

“Um…Sparks family, I told you.”

“Not the current occupants, Dimmock, they’re obviously not involved. Who lived there before?”

“Before--?”

“Look at the garden, they’ve only lived there a few weeks at most,” Sherlock said impatiently. “So who were the previous residents?”

Dimmock had enough experience with Sherlock not to balk at this. “Don’t know, but I’ll find out.”

“All right. Show me the picture.”

Dimmock produced a photograph in a plastic sleeve. They all looked, and Lestrade said, “That’s this garden—is that Emma in the pram?”

“What, another one?” Sherlock said.

“What?”

“It’s not important, we had a case a while back, that bling ring thing,” John said and Dimmock and Lestrade both said, “Oh, right.”

“ Heard something about those girls being on the telly,” Lestrade added.

Sherlock glared at him, and Dimmock said hurriedly, “That’s Emma right enough, and that one there is the brother, he’s two. He’s still here, he was watching cartoons. Apparently Emma naps out here when the weather’s fine.”

“Who’s the creepy guy then?” John asked.
“That’s the question—that’s why I called you lot. He, uh, he’s all dark and you can’t make out a face, and he’s a bit…inhuman.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, that’s been photoshopped in. Look at the shadows,” Sherlock said snappishly.

“Yes, but why? Why leave a photograph with some kind of supernatural looking kiddie stalker?”

“Sir,” the forensic officer said, peering over Lestrade’s shoulder, “That’s not a stalker, that’s the Slender Man.”

“Yes, we can see he’s—“ Dimmock began, but Sherlock cut him off.

“Wait, what did you say? Slender Man?”

“It’s a thing on the internet. There are pictures of groups of children with the Slender Man in the background, and then supposedly one of the children vanishes.”

“Wait, wait, are you saying there have been other kidnappings involving this…guy? Thing?” Dimmock’s voice practically squeaked with anxiety.

“No, not really—it’s just a story, like a ghost story, you know? It’s like an urban myth,” she said helpfully.

John was glad to see that Lestrade and Dimmock looked as confused as he felt. Sherlock, however, frowned at the photograph, muttered “Slender Man,” and stomped off, stabbing a number into his phone.

“According to Chris Melas,” Sherlock said in the cab, “the Slender Man—“

“Wait, the Geek Interpreter? You talked to him? How’s he doing?”

“How should I know? Focus, John. According to Chris, the Slender Man is an internet meme. It’s as Patel says: photographs of children with a shadowy figure in the background and then a child allegedly vanishes.”

“But not really? Before now?”

“That’s what you’re going to find out.”

“What about you?”

“Chris is sending me a list of websites. If someone is trying to pose as the Slender Man for whatever reason, presumably they’re going to want to try to draw attention to their actions.”

Back home John fetched his laptop, got comfortable, and went to Google. He had barely started looking when his phone rang. Dimmock: “Previous occupants of the house Sherlock was interested in were a family called McAllister. They moved closer to the city so the oldest could attend a special school; he’s autistic.”

“How high functioning?” John asked.

“Pretty good, I guess; he was at the local comprehensive before. Neighbors thought he was just weird, didn’t realize there was an actual disorder.”
John relayed all this to Sherlock, who said “Current address” without even looking up. “Can you find out where they live now?” John asked.

Dimmock sighed the deep sigh of a man being kept from actual detective work to chase the ephemera of Sherlock Holmes and said, “I’ll get back to you.”

John went back to work. After a long search, he eventually found mention of a kidnapping-turned-involuntary manslaughter in America, where a similar photograph had been found at the scene. He checked his watch: still afternoon in California. He proceeded to spend a lot of time on hold, being transferred to various law enforcement officials bemused to be contacted by a not-quite-official London detective interested in a closed case, and finally spoke at some length to a pleasant woman who said she was a “paralegal”, and who promised to get back to him as quickly as possible.

“I think I’m due a break,” John announced, stretching. “I’m going to get Thai, I’ll bring you some iced coffee. Sherlock? Getting anywhere?”

“These people desperately need to engage in some sort of productive activity and stop cluttering up the internet,” Sherlock said, scowling at the screen.

That would be a no, then. At the restaurant, John had just gathered up his bag and iced coffees when his text alert chirped. John transferred everything to his right hand, precariously, and pulled out his phone to check the text, which turned out to be from Dimmock. John had just read 67 Paxton Mews when the phone rang, startling him so much he nearly dropped the whole pile. He looked at the screen and felt a jolt of adrenaline: California.

Sherlock glanced up when John walked in and then stood quickly enough to send his chair skidding. “Tell me.”

“Okay, okay, just—here, drink your coffee.” John handed a cup to Sherlock and stuffed half a spring roll into his mouth. “All right, I’ve got a name. There was a similar kidnapping a while back in America and the kidnapper, who sounds like a real nutter, is in a psychiatric facility awaiting trial, where she has access to the internet, and she admitted to her attorney that she was recently contacted by somebody calling himself, or herself, Azmodeus. Asking for advice, it sounds like. Ring any bells?”

“Azmodeus,” Sherlock muttered, eyes narrowing. He took a final slurp at his now-empty cup and transferred the straw to his second iced coffee as John handed it to him, turning back to his screen. “Time to dig through comments.”

John blinked awake. It seemed to be morning, but the cloudy light was so diffuse that it was hard to be sure. He was lying on the sofa with a terrific crick in his neck.

Something struck the bottom of his foot, and John blinked again and focused. Sherlock had dragged his chair to the end of the sofa and was flicking John with a rolled up newspaper.

“Wake up, I want coffee,” Sherlock said.

“Ugh.” John stretched, trying to work the kink out of his neck. “What happened? Did you find the demon guy?”

“I found comments by Azmodeus on a website, as well as an exchange with someone I assume is your California criminal. I’ve given all the information to Lestrade and he’s gone for a court order. There’s nothing more to do until he gets back to us.”
That seemed straightforward enough. “So now…”

“…we wait. Lestrade says it might take some time.”

John considered his options: breakfast, shower, coffee? He wasn’t really hungry—he’d eaten late—but coffee was definitely going to be required and some food might be a good idea. Besides, there was always the chance that Sherlock would absently eat some toast. John heaved himself off the sofa and headed toward the kitchen. Sherlock, meanwhile, had gone back to his computer. “What are you doing?” John asked.

“I posted on several different sites last nights under various names, speculating about the kidnapping and, in one case, claiming responsibility. I’d hoped to provoke a response, but nothing yet.” Apparently giving up, Sherlock stomped grumpily off toward the bath, grumbling, “Lestrade better hurry up. Coffee,” before disappearing inside.

John felt his head clearing as he set about the familiar routine of coffee, eggs, toast. He clicked on the telly; nothing new. His phone rang.

“Where’s Sherlock? He’s not answering.” Lestrade said, without bothering to say hello. He sounded as tired as John felt.

“He’s in the shower; do you have something?”

“Bit of a dead end, I’m afraid. We were able to get a name off an email account, Jason Tyler, but the account itself appears to be abandoned. Do you know how many Jason Tylers there are? And the email itself was under a billing account in the name of Stephen Tyler, so Jason is probably a minor, which won’t help. The only other piece of information I’ve got is that most of the recent Azmodeus posts were made from someone using the wifi at a coffee place called the Golden Bean.”

“Do you have the address?” John turned off the bacon and pulled out his pen and notebook.

“52 Roscommon Square. It’s not too far from Emma Ballinger’s neighborhood; a couple of tube stops, though that’s not proof of anything.”

John wrote it all down. “I’ll show it to Sherlock—you never know what he might pull out of it.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Lestrade did not sound hopeful. “If he does, you’ll have him phone me, right? There’s press on this one, better for all of us if he’s not in the middle of it when things heat up.”

“Don’t worry, Sherlock’s got no interest in rescuing a baby. He’d tell me to do it and bugger off, and I’d ring you instead.” John turned the stove back on. Lestrade audibly brightened.

“True enough. Thanks, John.”

When Sherlock came back John was sitting at the desk with his feet up, eating eggs and reading the comments Sherlock had left up about the Slender Man. “I really hope some of these are you,” he said, pushing the plate of raspberry-jam toast invitingly toward Sherlock. “They’re completely mental.”

“Mmmm,” Sherlock said, leaning over John’s shoulder. “Not all of them…nothing new though. I missed a call from Lestrade, did you talk to him?”

“Here.” John got up, vacating his seat by the computer but leaving the toast. He set his notebook down and explained about the Golden Bean.
“Roscommon Square. Near Paxton Road,” Sherlock muttered and tapped at the computer, bringing up Google street view. He frowned at the screen, leaned back, and steepled his fingers, staring intently at nothing.

“I’m off to shower. That’s your coffee,” John said, gathering his empty plate. Sherlock reached unseeingly over the toast and picked up his mug. Oh, well. John went to shower, still feeling a bit foggy. Something Sherlock had said was nagging at him, but he couldn’t think what. It wasn’t as though Sherlock had actually said much: call from Lestrade, Roscommon Square, Paxton Road…he was shampooing his hair, not thinking of much of anything, when the connection suddenly arced through his mind like an electric spark. He could actually feel the jolt. John’s eyes flew open and he gasped “Paxton Road,” felt shampoo run into his eyes, ducked quickly under the spray, and leaped out of the shower, crashed dripping wet into the lounge and shouted, “Paxton Road, I forgot to tell you, there was a text last night right before the solicitor called from California—the kid, the autistic kid, the family that moved, they live on Paxton Mews.” He grabbed for his phone, fumbling to find the right text, and thrust it into Sherlock’s face. “See?”

Sherlock was already switching to maps. He reached out and tapped the screen with one graceful finger. “Right around the corner from the Golden Bean,” he breathed, face filled with a fierce pride that warmed John down to his toes. “Oh, well done, John.”

“Not that well done, you’d have worked it out ten minutes go if I’d given you the address last night,” John said, but he still felt the thrill of that shock of insight, almost as sweet as the praise from Sherlock. “So, now what?”

Sherlock’s face lit up with anticipation. “Now,” he said, “We go have a look.”

“What are we doing here? Supposedly?” John asked as he climbed out of the cab. He was wearing a plaid shirt, jeans, and boots, per Sherlock’s instructions, with a bright yellow vest on top. Sherlock also had a yellow vest over his usual suit. In addition, he was wearing sunglasses. To John’s annoyance, he somehow did not look ridiculous.

“We’re inspecting the storm drains,” Sherlock said, handing him a clipboard, which held incomprehensible printouts of some kind. Sherlock himself was holding what looked like a clunky early-model cordless phone, complete with thick plastic antenna. “Just follow along and take notes.”

“On…?”

“Anything, John, just look busy.”

They strolled along the pavement. Sherlock appeared totally focused on the ground, but John knew his eyes were rapidly cataloging the street from behind his dark glasses. Halfway down Sherlock stopped, crouched, and pointed his phone down into a grating, sweeping it back and forth.

“Sherlock,” John said, biting his cheek to keep from laughing, “What are you doing? Is that a tricorder?”

Sherlock frowned up at him. “What?”

“Never mind. What is that thing doing?”

“Assessing capacity and flow turbulence.” Sherlock punched busily at the buttons. “Really?”
“Of course not. It doesn’t even have a battery.” Sherlock straightened, tipped the blank display toward John, and said briskly, “Write this down. Clearly this grate needs updating. Let’s go back to the Golden Bean.”

They walked back up the road, John scribbling industriously on his clipboard and Sherlock texting away. At the coffee shop Sherlock veered off to commandeer a table while John made his way to the counter. His phone rang.

“Why is Sherlock having me look up occupancy on these addresses?” Lestrade asked. “Is he going to break in?”

“We’re just looking around, I swear,” John said. “Hold on—“ he ordered two coffees and the largest pastry in the case, not really looking at it, and said to Lestrade, “—okay, sorry, I promise I’ll call you if he wants to go inside anywhere.”

“Or knock on a door. Or look in a window. Or break in.”

“Yes.”

“Well, all right,” Lestrade said, sounding unhappy, and rang off.

John carried the coffees and pastry over to the small table and said, “Lestrade is worried you’re going to try and rescue the baby singlehandedly.”

“Why on earth would I do that?” Sherlock asked, looking revolted. He broke a chunk off of John’s pastry.

“Hey, hands off. Get your own pastry.”

“You bought this for me. You don’t like almonds.”

John peered at the pastry. It did have almonds. “Hell. I was on the phone. Fine, you have it.” He went back to the counter. When he returned, a thin young woman with tattoos snaking up both arms was berating Sherlock about the sputtering noise in her pipes.

“Incoming water is a different division altogether,” Sherlock said. “However, I have the number for the district supervisor, and I know he would very much like to help you.” He tore a piece of paper from John’s clipboard, wrote a number on the back, and handed it to her with a smile. It was completely unconvincing.

“Thanks a lot,” the woman said sulkily and left.

“What was that you gave her?” John asked, taking a bite of his almond-free pastry.

“Anderson’s home number,” Sherlock said, stealing the new pastry, and John laughed so hard he choked on his coffee.

Sherlock ate most of both pastries, drank another coffee, and had nearly driven John to distraction fidgeting when Lestrade finally texted back. John looked at his phone.

32 Paxton Mews empty

47 Paxton Mews STEPHEN TYLER

Not a coincidence I take it
Sherlock grinned widely. “I’ve had enough coffee,” he said. “Let’s go have a look around back.”

John texted back *fetch your car* and then grabbed his clipboard and hurried after Sherlock.

The alley was dim enough that Sherlock had to take his sunglasses off. He waved his phone-tricorder around more or less at random, staring at Number 32, and then said, “Listen.”

John heard it too, a faint fretful wailing. “Is that…”

“They’re in the basement. Phone Lestrade.”

John pulled out his phone and had just hit the speed dial for Lestrade when a sudden BANG made him look up. A very thin ginger-haired boy came barreling out the basement door and into the alley, a wailing infant held straight out in front of him like a battering ram. He shoved the baby at Sherlock and said, “I know you’re with the police. Take it. It makes too much noise.”

“What—” John began, forgetting the phone, but then there was another BANG and he looked round to see a second teenager—taller, black clothes, dyed black hair swinging in his face—slam out shouting, “Malcolm, you stupid prick, come back here—“ and then, catching sight of John in his yellow vest, “Oh, fuck,” and he turned to bolt. John brought him down with a flying tackle and sat smartly on his back.

“Um, Greg,” he said into the phone.

“Oh, fuck me,” Lestrade moaned. “John, you promised.”

“We didn’t go in, they came out!” There was a loud wail from behind him. “You might want to step on it,” he added.

“Oh my God. Is that the baby? Tell me Sherlock doesn’t have the baby.”

“Oh, I won’t. Hurry,” John said, and disconnected.

In spite of Lestrade’s panic, it all turned out fairly well. The police arrived before the press and Emma was whisked off by the paramedics, who pronounced her none the worse for wear aside from a sodden nappy. Jason Tyler, the Goth kid, wouldn’t stop yelling about his scraped face—ridiculously, in John’s opinion—but was otherwise unscathed. Malcolm McAllister, who had given the baby to Sherlock, seemed fine until all the police arrived and he was handcuffed. He squeezed his eyes shut and began to rock back and forth making a horrible low moaning sound behind his clenched teeth. John winced. He saw Lestrade’s forehead crease. Sherlock shoved his hands in his pockets and began pacing in tight circles around the alley, tense; he reminded John of a cat lashing its tail.

John and Lestrade glanced at each other at the same time. “Right, let’s get these two out of here,” Lestrade said, raising his voice. “Separate cars; Sergeant Donovan, would you—“

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll find a quiet room, stay with him if it helps.” She was brisk but not unkind, and Malcolm followed her without fuss.

Sherlock laid it out for them on the way back. “Jason Tyler planned the whole thing. He was Azmodeus, obviously. He’d been thinking about staging a kidnapping, and then along came
Malcolm McAllister, another loner who liked computers and just happened to know of a baby who slept unattended every fine afternoon, behind a house that was unoccupied during the week.”

“But if Malcolm didn’t care about the whole Slender Man thing, why get involved in the kidnapping?” Lestrade asked. Sherlock looked out the window and didn’t answer.

“Because Jason was his friend,” John said. He thought of Dimmock saying how Malcolm had left his old school, the neighbors calling him weird, his thin awkward shoulders, his avoiding eyes. “Maybe his only friend, ever.”

Sherlock kept looking out the window.

And then it was chaos.

Jason Tyler’s mother had arrived and was shrieking at everyone in sight about police brutality and her son being injured. Dimmock was trying to calm her down. “The police never laid a finger on your son, that was a concerned citizen when he burst out of the house—”

“He was probably just trying to get help! I’m sure Jason had nothing to do with this, it was that McAllister kid, there’s something wrong with him, he’s not right in the head—”

“Sir,” the slim young woman constable from the kidnapping said, coming up panting to Lestrade, “Sergeant Donovan asked me to tell you, the McAllister boy is banging his head, she thinks maybe—”

At which point Malcolm McAllister’s mother stormed into the room, bellowing even more loudly than Jason’s.

“You can’t lock my son up like this, he has special needs, he doesn’t know right from wrong—”

“That kid is a freak,” one of the other officers muttered to the slim constable. “People like that should be locked up.”

Sherlock snapped. He took one swift step forward, crowding into the man’s space and looming over him, his voice a low icy hiss that cut through the surrounding ruckus as efficiently as a bullhorn. “Malcolm McAllister stayed up alone all night to watch over an infant he had no part in taking, you can tell by his clothes and shoes. It was the normal Jason Tyler who callously staged a kidnapping for his own entertainment.” He whipped around to Mrs. McAllister. “And children with autism, like all children, learn right from wrong when they are taught right from wrong.” He spun on his heel and stomped out. There was a brief, stunned silence.

John looked at Lestrade, who gave a brief jerk of his head—go on—and went after Sherlock. It was no good. Sherlock could vanish in an instant when he wanted to, and there was no sign of him by the time John reached the street.

John sighed and considered his options. He could go back to the flat, but it would probably be empty; Sherlock had likely stormed off to who knows where—Moran’s, possibly. John had mixed feelings about that. If getting tied up and his arse smacked would settle Sherlock down after that debacle, John didn’t have the heart to grudge it to him, no matter how bitter and jealous he might feel. Of course, it was always possible Sherlock had returned home, in which case John would be in for an evening of stormy silence and furious violin. He knew better than to think he could get Sherlock to talk about it, even if John could find a way to bring it up. If he tried, Sherlock would just insult him so violently for presuming to think he had feelings about the subject that John would
probably spend the rest of the night in his room, angry in turn.

John rubbed at his forehead, feeling a headache loom. He was abandoned, hungry, and tired, and might possibly be in trouble for tackling Jason Tyler, whom John was beginning to think was quite the little twat, so he didn’t really regret that. He decided to go back to Lestrade’s office and write out their statement so Lestrade could have it typed up and brought round for Sherlock to sign later. Then he could pick up some takeaway on the way home. Maybe Sherlock would have calmed down by then.

He slipped into Lestrade’s office and found some paper. Since they hadn’t actually bent or broken any laws this time, writing the statement was less of a challenge than usual. A minute or so later Lestrade banged in looking for something and jumped when he saw John.

“Thought you left with Sherlock?”

“He was already gone, so…I reckoned I might as well go ahead and get this out of the way.”

Lestrade looked at him a moment. “Let’s go for that pint.”

“What, tonight?”

“Yeah. This isn’t even my case, remember? Just give me ten minutes. We’re moving the McAllister kid to the psychiatric ward at the children’s hospital.”

“All right then. I should be done when you get finished.”

They ended up at the same pub as before, the one where Sherlock had first met Sebastian Moran. That association aside, John liked the place well enough. The beer and the food were excellent, and as Lestrade pointed out, it was close enough to his place that if they got truly pissed they could simply stagger home.

“Don’t see that happening tonight,” John said.

“I’ll fall asleep first,” Lestrade agreed. “I’m getting too old to stay up all night.” He sighed. “I can’t remember the last time I felt so crap at the end of a successful case.”

“The baby’s home safe, though,” John reminded him, and Lestrade raised his glass in salute. He took a long drink.

“That’s down to you two and we all know it. That’s why, you know…”

“Yeah.”

They ate silently for a bit and then Lestrade pushed his plate away, settled back with his glass, and said, “All right. Tell me what’s going on.”

John had had plenty of time to weigh what he could fairly share and what needed to be kept back. “Sherlock’s seeing someone.” He couldn’t think of any other way to put it: whatever else Moran was, he wasn’t Sherlock’s boyfriend.

Lestrade blinked. “A therapist?”

“No!” John couldn’t help laughing; that might be even more unbelievable. “No, you know, um…” Romantically? sexually? submissively? “…socially.”
Lestrade’s jaw dropped. In other circumstances, the look on his face would have been quite gratifying. “Really? I didn’t think he…”

“Yeah, me either.”

“No, I mean—never mind. Is it, uh…”

“A bloke? Yeah.”

“No, I knew that part. I was going to ask if was going well. But it isn’t, is it? I know what Sherlock looks like when he’s happy. He’s not happy. He looks like what I saw in the mirror before I pulled the plug on my marriage for good.”

John blew out a relieved breath. “Oh thank you. I’ve been thinking the same thing but I can’t—I’m not objective, you know? It’s—I’m glad you feel the same way.”

Lestrade was frowning. “Why can’t you…” he looked at John’s face and the penny dropped. “Oh, bloody hell.”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus.” Lestrade drained his glass.

“Yeah…another round?”

The settled in with fresh drinks and Lestrade said. “Okay. How long?”

“Since the other guy,” John said simply.

“Ah.”

“When I first met him, he said he was married to his work. I thought he just wasn’t interested, in anyone. So I thought, okay, fine, I can live with that. It was like having a crush on a film star, you know? It doesn’t stop you from fancying real people. But all of a sudden he’s off with another guy and it’s like, wait, no, that’s mine. Hit me like a bloody train. Now I’m so jealous I can’t think straight. He could be getting off with, I don’t know, the Dalai Lama, and I’d want to kill him.”

“Okay.” Lestrade set his pint down decisively. “There are some things you need to know. And at least one of them is something I really have no business telling you, but I’m going to, so shut up and listen. First off, Sherlock wasn’t always married to his work. When I first knew him, back when I was a DS, he was just starting out, right? He was using drugs then, but not regularly, it wasn’t a problem—that came later. But he wasn’t focused on the work like he is now. He had plenty of free time, and no shortage of people interested in filling it.”

“So you’re saying…what? He had relationships?”

“He was more obnoxious back then, not less. I’m saying he was young, and awkward and shy and lonely, but good-looking, which is always a bad combination, and he used to get high and pull strangers.”

John stared. It felt like the time he had learned about the drugs: an initial punch of disbelief followed by the dawning realization that yeah, he could picture that. “And he told you about it?”

“Of course not. It wasn’t like he tried to keep it a secret though, any more than he did the cocaine. Gregson even talked to him once, asked him if he was being careful who he went with, was he using
protection, that kind of thing. I couldn’t have done it, but she had teenage kids then, so, you know.” Lestrade rubbed his face. “This is the part I probably shouldn’t be talking about. Later, after I made DI, he got out of control. You know how it is: he wasn’t an addict, until he was. He was still showing up at crime scenes and he was just as good as ever, but he was just a little too on. He was always clean, always, but his clothes got a bit raggedy, and his hair was too long. I tried to talk to him, but.” He stared into his beer. “I took to ringing him if he didn’t show up for a while. Then one morning I got a call. One of the guys had gone out on an assault the night before and recognized the victim, said he was my informant. Sherlock had been found in an alley. He was unconscious, naked, sexually assaulted, and had been choked half to death.”

“No,” John said, involuntarily.

“I went to the hospital right off, of course. God, I was scared shitless. Part of me was thinking that I had to know this was going to happen eventually, but the same time—he was so sure he was invincible; I guess I started to believe it too. Anyway, he was gone. Mycroft had him moved to a private hospital, but I didn’t know that; I didn’t even know how to contact Mycroft back then. I went to Gregson. I don’t know how she tracked him down, but a few days later she told me that Sherlock pulled through, that he’d had some airway damage but would recover. According to Mycroft, he had agreed to go to rehab. I didn’t see him for months. When he came back, he was a different person. Focused.” Lestrade smiled. “He was still an immature git, there’ve been some rough patches, but overall he’d settled down. Mostly. And as far as I know, he’s stayed clean ever since.”

“And he gave all the rest of it up too? The clubbing and the pulling or whatever?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if it was getting clean or if what happened to him was bad enough that he got scared off, but there’s never been any hint since then.”

They sat in silence for a bit. Lestrade nursed his pint. John mostly turned his around and around with his fingertips. Lestrade’s story had left him feeling sick. Raped and strangled and left for dead in an alley: Jesus. He wondered if it had started as consensual—he had read about breathplay during his recent researches—but damage to the extent Lestrade had described could not have been accidental. No wonder he’d apparently sworn off both drugs and sex after that. John had a disquieting thought: was that was had attracted him to Moran? Was the danger, the risk, a lure that still pulled him, that finally proved too much to resist?

“Last thing.” Lestrade finished his beer, set it down, and leaned forward to emphasize his words. “I’ve known Sherlock a long time. I’ve seen a lot of people look at him, and I’ve never once seen him look back. I’ve seen him look through more people than I can count. Once in a while, sure, somebody clever enough or crazy enough would catch his eye for a minute, but only as long as it took him to work them out. But you.” Lestrade leveled his gaze at John. “Since the very first day, Sherlock’s looked at you like you’re the only person in the world. I don’t know what made him take a fancy to this other bloke after all this time, but I know there is no way it can compare to what he feels for you.”

John was shaking his head. “Oh, come on. This is Sherlock—he’s hardly shy about taking what he wants. If he felt like that, why wouldn’t he just say so?” Actually, why wouldn’t he just shag him first and ask John’s opinion later? That would be more in character.

Lestrade looked at him as though he were being dense. “Because he thinks you’re straight? Because he thinks you’re not interested? Because he thinks he’ll bollocks it up and you’ll leave? Pick one. We both know that he’s the idiot when it comes to this, and so does Sherlock. It’s up to you, John. You’re just going to have to talk to him.”

“Talk to him? I can’t talk to him. A deep conversation for me and Sherlock is where to order
takeaway. I can barely manage this.” He flapped a hand between himself and Lestrade.

“Just tell him what you told me.”

“I didn’t tell you anything, you worked it out.”

“Well, tell him the bit where you fancied him but thought he was off limits, but now that you know he’s all man you can’t sleep for thinking about his big, hot, throbbing…”

“Oh, shut up.” John threw a wadded napkin at him. It landed in his empty glass.

“Lucky that was empty, I’d have taken yours,” Lestrade said cheerfully.

“No, you won’t, I’m going to need this,” John said grimly. “Hey, Greg? Thanks for not being weird about the bi thing.”

“Oh, that’s down to Donovan. She worked it out ages ago; she said you had…’an equal opportunity eye for a nice arse’, that was how she put it.”

John couldn’t help laughing. “She’s right about that.” He drained his glass. “All right, let’s go. You need sleep, and I need to work out what I’m going to say when I get home.”

Lestrade clapped him on the back as they turned. “You’ll be fine. Never seen you have any trouble —“

“Hey! John!”

John looked round, surprised. It was Henry, with the same cheerful soldiers who had been at this pub before. No, not quite the same, he realized; a few were missing, and there was at least one man he didn’t recognize at all.

“I have got to go to sleep, I’ll leave you to top up your courage, all right? Text me tomorrow,” Lestrade said, turning for the door.

John hesitated—he desperately wanted to get home—but he stepped over. Moran was not there, and it was just possible someone would mention something about him.

“Can’t stay too long, late one last night,” he said, smiling. “A bit short, aren’t you? Where’s Blanchard? And Moran?”

Henry said, grinning, “Funny, we were just going to ask you that,” and O’Dowd elbowed him in the ribs. They both guffawed.

John felt the shock on his face but tried to laugh it off. “Me? Why me?”

“Oh, come off it, we know he went home with your mate last time,” Henry said. “O’Dowd saw them get into a cab together.”

O’Dowd nodded. “When I was on the phone.”

“We haven’t seen him since, have we?” Henry said. Heads shook. “I’ve rung him, but he’s never free. We thought maybe Sherlock was keeping him busy.”

“Not at our place he isn’t, I haven’t seen him since then either,” John said. “But hang on, Sherlock said it was to be kept quiet? He said Moran was in the closet.”
O’Dowd groaned. “He is. It’s ridiculous. We all know he’s gay. He’d go sneaking out, come back with beard burn—it was so obvious! But he won’t admit it.”

“Maybe because it’s his business and not ours, you nosy git,” Henry said.

“Not mine either,” John said lightly. “How did it go with that girl anyway?”

O’Dowd buried his face in his hands, and Henry said, “Now there’s a sore subject…”

The details of O’Dowd’s humiliation changed the subject effectively. When the tale finally wound down John said, “Well, for those of us not lucky in love, thank God for beer, eh? But I’ve had about enough for tonight myself. I’ll be seeing you lads.”

He made his way to the front of the pub and out the door, thinking that he would walk the few blocks to the station and take the tube to Baker Street. It would give him time to work out what to say to Sherlock.

“Captain Watson!”

John looked up, startled. It was the unfamiliar man who had been with the soldiers back in the pub. He was about John’s age, unassuming, with a pleasant, open face and round glasses.

“I need to talk to you, but not now,” the man said urgently. “Tomorrow? Will you ring me when you can get free?”

“I—what’s this about?”

“I can’t tell you right now. But it’s very important and very sensitive. Please don’t mention speaking with me to anyone, particularly your flatmate.”

Like that would stop Sherlock knowing. “I don’t even know your name,” John pointed out.

“Owen Davies. Please, will you ring me?”

“All right,” John said, resigned. It wasn’t, after all, the weirdest encounter he’d ever had; Mycroft still held that honor. He held out his phone and said, “Here, put your number in.”

Owen Davies punched in his contact information and handed it back to John, already turning toward the pub. “Hang on, don’t you want mine?” John asked.

“No need,” Owen said, smiling, and vanished back inside.

John gave a mental shrug, already half forgetting about the whole thing. He needed to concentrate on what he was going to say to Sherlock when he got home. It was a daunting task. He was so distracted, he almost missed the Baker Street stop. He took the long way back from there, considering and discarding, firmly resisting the temptation to stall by stopping for one more pint. Finally he marched up the steps to 221B, shoulders back, chin up, more nervous than he’d been since his first firefight.

So, of course, Sherlock wasn’t there. John flopped into his chair, all the adrenaline leaking out of him like a pricked balloon. He was suddenly so exhausted he couldn’t even make tea. He was also, he realized, a bit disquieted. It was unlike Sherlock to disappear when he was upset or angry; that was John’s way. Sherlock sought the safety and familiarity of the flat: violin, tea, John. It was a break in another pattern too. If Sherlock had gone to Moran’s—and where else would he go?—it would be the first time, to John’s knowledge, that he had done so spontaneously. It would certainly be the first
time he had stormed over there in what was no doubt a very difficult mood. John didn’t like it. Whatever went on between Sherlock and Moran, it seemed a dangerous pastime to embark on angry.

Unless…there was always the small possibility he had gone somewhere else? John pulled out his phone.

*Are you coming home soon?*

That was innocuous—something he might have texted before. Maybe Sherlock would text back that he was coming home and wanted tea. Sherlock must be starving by now; John could make him some scrambled eggs, cooked soft and slow the way Sherlock liked them, with toast. There was plenty of raspberry jam. They had eggs. John actually got up to check that there was bread before his tired mind registered that Sherlock had not, in fact, texted him back. John hesitated a moment, rubbing his hand over his face; finally he sent another text.

*Everything OK?*

*I’ll be up for a bit. Text if you’re hungry.*

John waited and waited, but no reply ever came.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So remember back at the beginning where I promised I would post a warning before explicit sexual violence? Well, this is that chapter. However, it is not necessary to read this chapter to understand the rest of the story; I set it up that way on purpose (that's why the chapter is so short). So feel free to skip with my blessing and I'll see you in a few days!

“I told you to shut the fuck up,” Moran whispered.

Moran’s voice was soft, almost tender. His fingers were knotted painfully in Sherlock’s hair, but his thumb stroked gently at the tear tracking down Sherlock’s cheekbone.

Sherlock didn’t answer. He couldn’t. Moran’s thick cock was shoved halfway down his throat. Sherlock had had his throat fucked before, by men rough and gentle, but all had been focused on their own pleasure. Moran was more interested in cutting off Sherlock’s air.

Moran pulled back slowly, just enough to allow Sherlock to suck a desperate half gasp before jerking his head forward hard enough to make Sherlock’s diaphragm convulse in a fruitless attempt at a cry. His jaw ached around the slick latex, his nose was pressed into Moran’s body, into his hair. Sherlock’s guts twisted again. Moran loosened one hand from his curls and stroked down along Sherlock’s face, fitting one hand under his distended jaw and over his throat. Sherlock’s whole body seized in panic. Moran would not kill him, he would not, he was not so stupid, John knew where he went; Sherlock had made sure Moran knew this. It had made Moran furious—that had been a bad night—but he was more careful with the marks he left, after.

“I told you,” Moran whispered again.

He squeezed just a little and Sherlock lost control, twisting and struggling in blind terror. “Unless I want you to talk, your mouth is good for one thing and one thing only.”

He pulled out a little again and Sherlock gasped in relief—oh God, air—and then slammed in again, hand still on Sherlock’s throat, humming a little in satisfaction at the feel of his own cock there.

Sherlock went limp. It was his last defense: Moran preferred him struggling. The tears were running freely now, pooling in his ears. It was awful. It was also effective—Moran pulled slowly, slowly, out, forcing Sherlock to fight to draw breath around his cock. Finally he pulled out and away, leaving Sherlock coughing and gasping in the unbearable relief of being able to breathe freely.

“Let’s just make sure you remember,” Moran crooned and suddenly something else was being crammed into Sherlock’s mouth, something stiff and slightly coarse and tasting of cheap detergent: a handkerchief. At least it was clean. The cloth seemed to suck up all the moisture in his mouth, but he could still breathe.

“Learned your lesson yet?” Moran asked. He pushed Sherlock’s legs apart. Sherlock felt the large hands on his thighs, heard the snick of the lubricant being opened. He tried to relax but he couldn’t bear this, it would kill him, he couldn’t—
Sherlock’s phone chimed from the floor.

Sherlock froze. His heart seemed to stutter in his chest. John never texted him when he came here, why now, why now of all times—

Moran had also stilled. He said in a soft, terrifyingly level voice, “Am I keeping you from something?”

Sherlock began to tremble. The shivering seemed to start in his chest, still frozen, and spread through his exposed body.

Moran leaned over and pulled Sherlock’s phone from his clothes. He held it so Sherlock could see the screen. *Are you coming home soon?*

“Do you need to go home?” Moran asked solicitously. “Am I delaying you?”

Sherlock shook his head quickly.

“Are you sure? Because it sounds like—“ The text alert sounded again, making Sherlock jerk in his bonds. “Because it sounds like John expects you’re going to come running, look, he’s even offering to cook you a little treat.”

Please stop, Sherlock thought desperately. Please, John, please. Just go to bed.

Moran dropped the phone to the floor and stood. He was still fully clothed, though his flies were open and his belt undone. “Sounds like we’ve another lesson first,” he remarked and Sherlock squeezed his eyes tightly shut.
Chapter 11

John woke the next morning feeling unexpectedly cheerful. He had slept long and late—it was past ten—and felt more refreshed than he had in days. He remembered his thwarted plans of the night before and all but bounded out of bed, filled with fresh determination to have a talk with Sherlock before the day was out.

Downstairs John found Sherlock’s door closed: fast asleep then. John hadn’t heard him come home, so he had no idea how long Sherlock had been sleeping. In the bathroom he surreptitiously touched Sherlock’s towel and found it damp, so he must have showered after he came in. Definitely Moran. John was torn between the desire to simply march into Sherlock’s room and have this out and a new wave of anxiety. What the hell was he thinking? Wasn’t it a bit presumptuous to decide that he knew what Sherlock wanted better than Sherlock did himself? Well, maybe, John thought, but it was still true. Moran was no good for Sherlock, even Lestrade could see that. John would be better. He pictured Sherlock as he’d been last night, taut and edgy, and imagined taking him into his arms. What would Sherlock want then? Would he want to be tied up? paddled until the complex chemistry of pain and desire freed him from his agitation? fucked hard and long? Just…cuddled? Okay, John couldn’t quite picture that. Whatever it was, John could do it. He could give Sherlock what he needed, and then afterward he would hold Sherlock and stroke him until he was quiet, tell him how wonderful, marvelous, perfect he was. Sherlock would not flee from him as he did Moran, would not rush to scrub off John’s scent. John abruptly realized he was still clutching Sherlock’s towel and breathing in the faint lingering scent of shampoo. Well, he thought, looking down at his now-straining erection, that settled the shower or breakfast question. God, he was hard. He locked the bathroom door guiltily.

After a highly satisfying wank, John shaved, showered, and dressed with care. If he was presenting himself as a sexual partner upgrade, it would behoove him to look appealing, after all. He made a pot of coffee and checked his email; Sarah had sent excited congratulations on the successful return of baby Emma, and he sent a brief but heartfelt reply thanking her for her help. Then he considered his next move. He really needed to get out of the flat for a while and stop hovering around waiting for Sherlock to wake up; maybe Sarah was free for lunch. He got out his phone and opened it to contacts, then paused as “Owen Davies” came up.

For a minute, John was completely confused before he remembered the weird encounter from the previous night. Well, he’d wanted a distraction. He phoned.

“Owen Davies.”

“Er—“ John realized he had no idea of Owen’s rank or even if he were actually in the military at all. “It’s, ah, John Watson, from last night?”

“Yes of course! Forgive me, I wasn’t aware when we met—do you prefer Captain Watson or Doctor?”

”John is fine. And you…”

“Oh, Owen, please. I’m very glad that you rang. It’s a matter of some urgency that I speak with you. Are you free for lunch?”

“I am, yes. Actually I haven’t had breakfast yet either, so I could meet as soon as you like.”

“Wonderful. Noon? I know a good place near Baker Street.”
Owen had certainly learned a lot about John in a very short time. Feeling genuinely curious now, John replied, “I’ll see you there.”

Owen in daylight was as cheerfully affable as he had been the previous night, but now that John was really looking—observing—he saw the intense focus behind the genial smile. He reminded John a bit of Hugh Grant.

“So,” John said, taking a bite of his sandwich, “Are you with Henry’s unit now? I don’t recall you being there when I knew them.”

“No, I’m not,” Owen said. “Henry and his men believe that I am assigned as a liaison between the military and outside aid agencies. The truth is that I’m a special investigator.”

“Oh?” John said mildly. He chewed and swallowed, not particularly concerned; he’d been out of the army for some time now, so whatever this was, it seemed unlikely to concern him directly. “What are you investigating?”

“Sebastian Moran.”

John stopped with his sandwich halfway to his mouth. He blinked once, feeling himself go calm and still, the way he had in Afghanistan when impending absolute shitstorm flared across his mental radar. “For?”

“I believe Sebastian Moran is responsible for the rape and murder of at least nine men over a period of several years,” Owen answered. “The actual number may be much higher. He’s very clever, and he’s been very, very careful.”

Now John did set the sandwich down, although his hands remained completely steady. He said nothing, waiting for whatever came next.

“Moran has a type,” Owen said. “All of the victims were Afghani or Iraqi natives, but all were relatively fair, slim build, curly hair. Light eyes. I was on your blog last night. I saw the photographs of your flatmate.” He paused. “I’ve been tracking Moran for over a year. I know things about him he doesn’t know. He uses the closet thing as a cover, but it’s a good one—everyone assumes he’s secretive because he’s hiding that he’s gay, when what he’s actually hiding is far worse. If what your friends say is true, Sherlock Holmes is the first person I’ve found to survive a sexual encounter with Sebastian Moran.”

“Are you asking if Sherlock was assaulted?”

Owen met his eyes. “Was he?”

John looked out the window. He took a slow breath, then another. He needed to get back to Sherlock, to make sure he was safe, he needed to, the way he needed to blink or swallow or breathe. But he made himself sit still and think. If Sherlock’s relationship with Moran had been a mystery before, it was now a black hole, a black hole in a fucking minefield. John needed information and he could use an ally. His instincts told him he could trust Owen Davies, and he had been ignoring his instincts far too much lately.

He looked back at Owen. “It’s a bit more complicated than that,” he said.
In the end John told Owen everything: the bruises, the rope burns, his BDSM assumptions, even what he had learned from Lestrade (though not without a pang of guilt). John knew that there were patterns to abuse, for both abuser and victim. It was possible that Sherlock’s troubled history went back farther than even Lestrade knew. The thought made him feel sick. John would never ask, and it was inconceivable that Sherlock would ever tell.

“Were the—were the victims—“ John had almost said “other victims”. He had to close his eyes.

“Strangled,” Owen answered.

“Tell me,” John said.

Owen did, at some length. “He’s been meticulous. There’s absolutely nothing to tie him to any of the bodies. Everything I have is circumstantial—he was in the right places at the right times, and with his particular position…”

“…he had greater freedom of movement. He could come and go without explaining himself,” John said, grimacing.

“Yes. We have almost no physical evidence. As you can imagine, it’s been incredibly difficult to gain access to the crime scenes. Even after we started searching for other victims, I sometimes couldn’t get the local authorities to cooperate. We’ve gotten only one break: we have DNA evidence from one of the earliest cases—skin under the fingernails—and after I began contacting police in the areas where Moran was posted more recently, a body was found in the hills. It had been there for weeks, but they were willing to allow my forensics team in, and they found a drop of semen on the victim’s shoe. It was a match.”

“But can’t you get a warrant for Moran to get a DNA sample?”

“I’m afraid even to try. Right now I’m certain he doesn’t know he’s under suspicion—I’ve been extremely discreet. He probably doesn’t even realize we’ve connected these murders.”

“So you were hoping, what? That Sherlock had been assaulted, that he’d be willing to swear out a complaint on Moran? Two months later? That’s not enough to get you a warrant.”

“I don’t know what I was hoping—I’m desperate,” Owen admitted. “Moran is apparently pretty good at his job. If I accuse him, I have to be absolutely certain that the charges will stick. Otherwise, all he has to do is get out of the country and he could turn mercenary in half a minute.”

John leaned his elbows on the table and rubbed at his temples. He was backing into a corner and he knew it, but could see no way out. “You don’t want me to warn Sherlock about this, do you.”

Owen put his own head into his hands. “John, I promise you, I had no idea I would be putting you in such a terrible position. There was nothing, nothing in Moran’s past that even hinted he’d ever been involved in a relationship.”

“I can’t let him go back there. I can’t.”

“I know, just—can you keep this to yourself until I can talk to my superior?”

“If I told him,” John started and then stopped. If he were honest, he had no idea what Sherlock would do if John told him he was shagging a serial killer. Move in, possibly. “Bloody, sodding hell,” he said miserably.

“Bloody, sodding, fucking hell,” Owen agreed. He seemed nearly as distressed as John. John
understood completely—Owen was in an impossible situation. If anything happened to Sherlock, the fallout would be disastrous, but if Sherlock were to tip off Moran, even inadvertently, Owen could lose his whole case.

“Sherlock was just there last night,” John said slowly, thinking aloud. “If the usual pattern holds, we should have about a week, but he’s going to know there’s something on the minute he claps eyes on me. Maybe—” John’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He took it out, glanced at the screen, and said, “Oh shit, he’s awake.”

“What?”

“It’s complicated, he usually—actually, this could be good, there’s a case.” He read the text again. Lestrade’s dragged me out of bed for what he claims is a locked room murder with a mysterious toxin. Bring coffee. SH. An address followed. “No, forget that, this is better than good, this is salvation. You’ve read the blog—normally he’d know I was hiding something immediately, but this way he’ll be too distracted to notice.”

Owen looked up, a glimmer of hope on his strained face. “You think he’ll stay away from Moran?”

“For as long as the case lasts, definitely. I’ve got to go.”

“Let’s hope it’s a long one. Keep in touch.”

John nodded, stowing his phone as he stood. “I will. You find something, anything, to use on Moran.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I solemnly swear this is the last of the casefic-y chapters. The casefic is here because Sherlock is so vulnerable in the main story that I feel it’s important to balance that with him being brilliant and dazzling solving crimes, but I know it’s not everybody’s thing. Thanks again to everyone who has read and commented!

“How did you even get this case?” John asked. They were standing in a corridor on the second floor of the Delphi Biotech firm, watching through a glass wall as Sherlock prowled about the lab. “You just finished with the missing baby.”

“Missing baby wasn’t my case, remember? I was just helping Dimmock. This one’s all mine.” Lestrade gestured to the lab with his chin. “He’s moving a little slow today, isn’t he? Did you keep him up too late?”

“Not me. He was still out when I got home. I texted, but never heard back. Finally went to bed.” John sighed. “Had my speech all planned out and everything.” A speech he now couldn’t give. If only, if only he had stayed up and waited for Sherlock. Now he was trapped by his knowledge of Sebastian Moran’s dark secret, a secret he was bound not to tell.

“Well, this ought to put him a good mood for you. Aren’t you going to take a look at the body?”

“Yeah, I don’t want to break his momentum, I’ll wait til he comes for the coffee. Fill me in?”

“Alpesh Shah, 36, researcher. Told his wife he’d be working late. They’ve three month old twins, apparently he’d been doing a lot of sleeping in the guest room lately, so she never noticed he hadn’t come home. Found by another researcher when she arrived this morning. Forensics puts time of death around 8 yesterday evening, give or take.”

“How do you know he was murdered?”

“You’ll understand when you see him. Totally creepy.”

Donovan appeared at the end of the corridor. “Sir, Willfen is getting a bit upset. Wants to know how long you’ll be.”

“Head of the company. Arrogant prick,” Lestrade said to John. “I’m almost hoping Sherlock wants to talk to him, show him exactly how clever he really is.”

“I know exactly how clever I really am,” Sherlock said, coming out of the lab.

“You know, there actually are other clever people in the world besides you,” Lestrade said over his shoulder. “Show John the body, I’ll be back in a bit.”

Sherlock took the now-cool coffee from John and sucked half of it down in one go. “I can’t take this inside, it’s a lab and a crime scene,” he said between gulps. “Go on, I’ll be right there.”
John stepped through the door and followed the noise to where a queasy looking constable stood next to a forensics officer John recognized vaguely. Not Anderson, anyway. The body of a slightly pudgy, dark-skinned man lay on the floor near their feet. “Wow,” John said, startled.

“ Weird, isn’t it?” the forensics officer said, crouching next to him. “He looks like something out of a horror film.”

“Yes, very helpful, Reilly.” Sherlock appeared over the lab bench, having apparently finished off his coffee. “What do you think, John?”

“At a guess, something caused a tonic reaction—extension of every muscle in the body. That would account for the facial expression. But I’ve no idea what could cause that. Or how it killed him—it wasn’t respiratory paralysis, that’s clear enough.”

“There’s no toxin I know of that could do this,” Sherlock said. He was still looming over John and frowning at the corpse, not kneeling next to him as he usually did; he must have been over the whole thing already. “And I know every toxin available.”

“Oh God. Don’t tell me Boffin Bill found a new line of work.”

Sherlock waved this away impatiently. “Boffin Bill is still locked up. He keeps sending me mad letters. No, this is beyond anything he could do. On the other hand, this is a pharmaceutical firm. Let’s find out what Dr. Shah was working on, shall we?”

“Parkinson’s,” Paul Willfen said. “Several of us are. This company specializes in neurologic disorders.”

Willfen was an arrogant prick. He was of a particular type John remembered all too well from his medical training: the guy who had always been the smartest one in the room, and had adopted a wearily patronizing manner to ensure everyone realized how tiresomely inferior they were.

“Dr. Shah’s early work was promising, but lately he had been a bit…distracted.” Willfen grimaced slightly. “Now if you—“

“When did you return from Singapore?” Sherlock interrupted.

Willfen blinked. “About ten days—who told you I was in Singapore?”

“Who told you my shirt is blue? Don’t waste my time. Why were you there?”

“Can’t you work that out too?” Willfen recovered quickly, John had to give him that.

“Not the true reason, I’ll need more information first, but the official pretext is obvious: small biotech firm, you haven’t the resources to do your own clinical trials, plus the regulations governing human subject use in the UK are so stringent. You’re looking to partner with a larger firm in Asia.”

Willfen was back to smiling his bored, superior smirk. “We tested our first products in America, but now that we’ve a proven record, we’re looking for more favorable—“

“Oh, no doubt.” Sherlock gave his utterly fake, not-even-trying-to-pretend-it’s-genuine smile. “As I said, the real reason might take a bit more digging, John?” And having gotten the last word, he swept grandly from the room. John just caught Lestrade’s wink as he followed.
“Totally wiped,” Lestrade said an hour later, in the building’s small security office. “All the footage from yesterday is gone, and the equipment was disabled. It’s not back up yet even now. We had our guys check it out, but they said it can’t be recovered.”

“How many people have access? Surely that would narrow the suspect pool a bit?” John asked.

“Theoretically, but you see the setup here—anybody could get in. It’s a simple matter to disable and wipe the security camera system. Any kid who can program a DVR could do it.”

“Well, that leaves me out,” John muttered.

Sherlock’s smile this time was wide and genuine. “Oh, this is fun,” he said. “We’ll need to do some research. Come on, John.”

Sherlock spent the cab ride back to the flat sending a frantic flurry of texts, perched on the edge of his seat as though he could will the cab to go faster. As they pulled up John got an exasperated text of his own from Lestrade: Can’t he just send an email? Trying to interview here.

“Lestrade says bugger off, you’re slowing down his investigation,” John reported.

Sherlock snorted rudely. “He doesn’t have an investigation. He’s completely in the dark.”

“Well, stop interrupting him, and maybe he’ll see the light. What’s my assignment?”

“Delphi. Everything you can find out. Especially financial.”

John made a face. Sometimes he thought Sherlock kept him around just so he could delegate the boring jobs. “What about you?”

“Novel toxins. Paul Willfen.”

“Lestrade says he has an alibi.”

Sherlock didn’t even dignify that with a snort. “Tea first though.”

John went to wash his hands. He’d worn gloves in the lab, but Sherlock’s “novel toxins” remark was a little unnerving. He frowned at the bottle of paracetamol by the basin. Had he left that out last night? He didn’t remember feeling he’d drunk enough to need any, but he must have been more tired than he thought.

Two hours later John was so bored he was thinking wistfully of Boffin Bill’s lab notebooks, and had found absolutely nothing incriminating on Delphi. “I’m taking a break. Fancy something to eat?”

“No. More tea,” Sherlock said, eyes on the screen.

“Have you eaten at all today?”

“Yes.” Sherlock actually looked up. “Lestrade saw your note, so he went to Speedy’s and bought a sandwich whilst I was in the shower, and then he stood over me until I ate it.”

John looked around. The note was still there: Back this afternoon. YOU NEED TO EAT. “I owe that man another pint,” he muttered, and, right on cue, his phone rang.
“Thank you for feeding Sherlock,” John said.

“I wasn’t being nice. He looked like shit. I was afraid he’d pass out,” Lestrade said grumpily. “I’ve got that information he wanted, but I don’t know if you want to waste your time: Willfen’s alibi looks good. He was coaching his son’s football team last night, in full view of 3 other coaches and a whole load of eight year old boys.”

“Give it to me anyway,” John said. He wrote everything down, thanked Lestrade, and took it to Sherlock. “Willfen’s alibi checks out—coaching his son’s footy team—so, do you still want all this?”

“More than ever.” Sherlock’s eyes were gleaming.

“Okay. Wife, Helena Madden—she provided most of Delphi’s startup money, by the way, it was in the financial stuff—she’s a cardiologist, department head apparently, I’ve the information here; sons Julian and Hugh, nanny called Tassie Phelps.”

“Tassie?”

“With an i-e. At least it’s not Emma. I’ve the home address too.”

“This should be enough to go on.” Sherlock looked around. “Where’s my tea?”

By midnight Sherlock had Facebook-friended Tassie Phelps—or his muscle-bound Australian surfer avatar had, anyway—and had run out of boring assignments, so John went to bed. He’d thought he’d lie awake for hours, worrying over the Sherlock-Moran mess, but surprisingly he fell asleep within minutes.

In the morning his first thought was Moran, and it took a few moments of deep breathing and listening to the reassuring sounds of meaningless clatter from downstairs for him to calm down. His second thought was to get breakfast before Sherlock could drag him out chasing clues. He was in the kitchen, reaching for a pan, before the extra presence in the lounge registered. “Morning, Mycroft,” he said, blinking a bit—the full Mycroft was a bit overwhelming first thing in the morning. “Coffee?”

“Lovely,” Mycroft at the same time that Sherlock snapped, “He’s not staying that long.”

“Well, I need some coffee,” John said mildly. He carried three cups in and gave one to Mycroft, who was seated on the sofa, and the other to Sherlock, who stood with his arms crossed near his desk, scowling furiously. He brought his own cup to his chair.

Mycroft sipped his coffee and said, “There’s no need to be so cantankerous, Sherlock. I am here because you texted me, after all.”

“I texted you because I thought there was a high likelihood of an issue you would wish to investigate, not to invite you to brunch,” Sherlock snapped, but he crossed to his chair and perched on the very edge of the seat. Mycroft’s eyebrows rose, slowly. His eyes narrowed at Sherlock and then, for no reason John could fathom, flicked to John. Sherlock inexplicably colored, then leaned ostentatiously back in his chair.

John drained his cup of coffee. He was going to need more. Maybe a whole pot. With whiskey.

“It appears,” Mycroft said finally, “That your suspicion was correct. We were able to trace a number of emails to a now defunct address, between someone with ties to Delphi and another party whom we believe to be an agent of the Chinese government. It also appears that a large amount of money
was transferred to an offshore numbered account last week. Unfortunately, the precise identity of the person engaging in this highly illegal activity has yet to be determined. We are at something of a dead end.”

“Hence you need me,” Sherlock said with some satisfaction.

“Hence you are going to identify someone you were going to identify anyway in the course of solving your little murder. I have merely aided you in clarifying the motive. I assume you will reciprocate by keeping me apprised of anything you might discover that I would find…interesting.”

“So are you saying that somebody at Delphi invented a nasty neurotoxin and decided to sell it to the Chinese? Was it was Shah?” John asked.

“If there are a large sum of money and a corpse,” Sherlock said, “Then there are two possibilities. Either Shah had the money and someone killed him to get it, or someone else had the money and Shah attempted to get it—“

“—and got himself killed,” John finished. “Well, that ought to narrow things down a bit, anyway.”

“Indeed. And now I have more pressing matters requiring my attention.” Mycroft stood, tapping the floor with his umbrella. “John, would you—“

“No, he wouldn’t,” Sherlock snapped, leaping to his feet and immediately wincing. “We’re meeting Lestrade in an hour and he will require a ridiculous amount of food first.”

Mycroft raised one eyebrow, gave Sherlock a pained, tight-lipped smile, and said to John, “Would you give my regards to Mrs. Hudson? And thank you for the coffee.”

John waited for his tapping to recede off down the stairs before remarking, “It really ought to disturb me more when your brother acts even weirder than usual.”

“Oh, ignore him, he just wants attention.” Sherlock stomped huffily to the desk.

This was so ridiculous coming from Sherlock that John couldn’t help laughing. “Are you okay? You seem a bit stiff.”

“Slept on the sofa for a bit,” Sherlock said, now glaring at the sofa as if it were personally responsible for Mycroft’s existence.

“Are we meeting Lestrade?”

“Yes, but there’s no set time, take as long as you like.”

“Breakfast then,” John said, turning toward the kitchen. He opened the cupboard to look for the weetabix and was abruptly arrested by the realization that Sherlock might be sore for a different reason entirely. He had been with Moran two nights ago; he had been moving gingerly ever since, even Lestrade had commented on it, especially when he was sitting—oh, Jesus Christ. John’s face went hot.

“Are you making more coffee?” Sherlock called.

“Um. Just a minute. We’re out of weetabix, did you do something with it?” John rested his forehead against the cupboard door.

“I ate the weetabix. I do occasionally consume food when you don’t force me, you know,” Sherlock
said, sounding aggrieved.

John moved to the refrigerator and stared into it blankly. Sherlock had never been stiff after visiting Moran before, not like this, not that John had noticed. A phrase he’d heard before, had maybe even said himself, kept running though his head—I’m going to fuck you so hard you won’t be able to sit down for a week—was that what had happened? Had Sherlock ever let Moran have him before? What if he hadn’t wanted to let him this time either? John closed the refrigerator, feeling nausea rise in his throat. “I think I’ll dress first. Why don’t you make the coffee, since you’ve just admitted you actually do know your way around the kitchen,” he said and escaped upstairs, Sherlock grumbling behind him.

Safely away, John grabbed his phone and savagely texted Owen.

Tell me you’re getting somewhere.

Working on it. Can you talk?

Not now. Later.

Call me this afternoon when you get a chance.

John sat on the edge of the bed and breathed deeply, deliberately, clearing the awful images from his mind. Sherlock was fine. He was right downstairs. Moran would not touch him again; John would kill him first. Everything would be fine, and right now they had a case, and he needed to focus on the case or Sherlock would start to notice something was up. Case. Coffee. Breathe. He could do this. Moran would wait.

“Shah needed money,” Lestrade said. They were sitting in his office, Donovan leaning against the wall looking more put out than usual. “Those twins apparently took three rounds of private IVF, which is, I don’t know how much a pop—“

“A lot,” John interjected.

“—so, yeah. They were also supporting the wife’s family back in India. So that’s why he moved to Delphi a year or so back; his wife says he didn’t really want to leave his old job at the NHS, he missed seeing patients, but the money was a lot better at Delphi.”

John glanced at Sherlock, but apparently the numbered account was off the record for now. “I know the autopsy results already,” Sherlock said when Lestrade reached for a folder.

“Right, you’ll have talked to Molly, so you know the bottom line is that we still don’t know what could have caused him to die like that.” Lestrade sighed. “It’s like Boffin Bill all—“

“It is not like Boffin Bill. Why does everyone keep saying that? Boffin Bill was a moron who couldn’t reliably reproduce his own recreational chemicals and inadvertently wreaked havoc. This agent was carefully, creatively and specifically designed to do exactly what it did: kill. Efficiently.”

“Okay, okay,” Lestrade said placatingly. “It’s just that we could do with Boffin Bill’s big mouth to help us out, because we’re no closer to a suspect than we were when we started.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.” Sherlock said sweetly.

“Sherlock, we’ve been over this. The other three coaches all vouch for Willfen.”
Sherlock did not seem in the least dismayed by this information. “I’ll need their names.”

“You can’t harass witnesses,” Lestrade protested.

“I’m not going to harass anyone.”

“You can’t turn up and not-very-subtly accuse upstanding citizens of lying, then, I know what you get up to.”

Sherlock sighed. “I just want to look into things a bit. Which you would do yourself, if you had an ounce of imagination. If I need to talk to any of them I promise to discuss it with you first. Agreed?”

Lestrade frowned suspiciously, looked at John—who shrugged—and finally pulled a piece of paper off a pad and wrote down three names.

“Also the location of the practice,” Sherlock said. “The stadium or the field or the pitch or whatever it is.”

That was apparently the last straw for Donovan, who muttered to something that sounded to John like “Dweeb”, and huffed out.

“You’ll ring me. You promised,” Lestrade warned.

“I’ll ring you.”

Sherlock set John to looking up Shah’s pre-Delphi research, a task which was, predictably, so mind-numbingly dull that John found it increasingly difficult to pay attention. “Okay,” he said finally, standing and stretching. “As far as I can tell, Shah did do a lot of work on neuromuscular junction stuff, which is probably the site of action of the mystery toxin, but I haven’t found mention in his grant proposals of anything like, ‘As a bonus, this can also be used as a weapon of mass destruction.’”

“Mycroft would have already hired him if he had,” Sherlock murmured, eyes fixed on his screen. “You’d have finished that an hour ago if you hadn’t kept checking your email.”

“Molly met a guy at my sister’s party and he’s asked her on a date,” Jon protested. “I had to email Harry and Clara and make sure he isn’t—“ a serial killer suddenly seemed a lot less funny. “Moriarty,” he finished lamely. Oh shit, he needed to phone Owen. “I’m going to the shops. I need a break, and we need more weetabix.”


John moved around to see what he was working on. “Are you—Sherlock, why are you playing internet poker?”

“Research.”

“Why can’t I get the internet poker research? You’re not losing our rent money, are you?”

“I’m up fifty pounds! It would be more, but I lost the first few rounds. It’s much harder to detect bluffing online.”

John reached to ruffle his hair and Sherlock immediately tipped his head to rest against John’s side. John felt warmed all the way down to his toes, even though he thought it likely that Sherlock didn’t
consciously realize what he was doing. He stroked the soft curls gently. “There is no way he has a
flush,” Sherlock said, grimly.

“Are you counting cards?”

“How else would I win?”

“We should go to Las Vegas,” John said dreamily, imagining his own personal Rain Man…
deducing some American Mafioso and getting them both killed. “Or maybe not.” He stroked
Sherlock’s hair again, cupping his palm against the curve of his head. Sherlock made a soft hum of
pleasure, tipping his head further to rub against John’s ribs. It didn’t tickle as much as it ought. John
thought of a cat again, but knew to hold his tongue this time.

John looked down at what he could see of Sherlock—the top of his head, the curve of his cheekbone
—and slid his hand slowly down the bare skin of Sherlock’s neck to rest at the junction of neck and
shoulder, just inside the collar of his shirt. There was no way even Sherlock could interpret it as
anything but a sexual touch, and yet he did not pull away. John felt him still for a moment, and then
he arched his head to the side, deliberately baring more of his neck. John had never touched him like
this before and it felt unbearably intimate, the skin even softer than it looked. If he leaned down now,
would Sherlock lift his face to his? Would Sherlock let him kiss him?

Something blinked on the monitor, but Sherlock’s drooping lashes did not even flicker. John
swallowed. He wanted to kiss Sherlock more than he could remember wanting anything, but not like
this, in the middle of a case, with so much unspoken between them. When he made his move he
would do it properly, with all Sherlock’s attention on him. He uncurled his hand from Sherlock’s
neck and gave his head a final, gentle squeeze. “If you get to a hundred, text me, and I’ll buy that
fancy French jam in the pink jar,” he said, surprised at the steadiness of his own voice as he pulled
away.

Sherlock did not look up at him. “Framboise,” he said.

“I know.”

“What if I win two hundred?”

John paused on his way to the door. Was that innuendo? From Sherlock? “Then I’ll buy you two
jars,” he promised, and grinned at Sherlock’s huff.

John rang Owen from the street.

“I’ve got something—well, I hope I’ve got something,” Owen said. “Three years ago, a young man
in Amsterdam was assaulted, raped and beaten. He identified his attacker as an American soldier.
The Americans investigated, but they never got anywhere. Yesterday, I was going out on every limb
I could think of and I talked to an American MP I know—uh, that’s military police, not politician--
who told me about the case. The victim matches Moran’s type, and the description of the assailant
sounds a lot like Moran. It’s not really a stretch that a Dutch kid would mistake a British soldier for
American if he were out of uniform—“

“A lot more of them than us,” John agreed.

“So, I’ve got one of my people on her way to Amsterdam now. She’ll work with the Dutch police. If
we can find the victim, and if he can pick Moran out of a photo array, and if there’s DNA evidence,
and if it matches ours, then we might have enough for a warrant.”
“Brilliant work,” Jon said, because it was, even if the whole thing had more holes than a tea strainer.

“It’s a long shot and it’s going to take some time, but it’s all I’ve got right now. Are you doing okay?”

“We’re busy, and busy is good,” John said. “But he’ll crack this sooner or later, and when that happens… I won’t let him go back there.”

“I know, I know. I’m doing everything I can.”

John thanked him and disconnected. He felt optimistic, although not because of Owen’s slim lead. He was thinking of Sherlock, the feel of his temple nuzzling into John’s side as he arched his long neck into John’s hand. For the first time since talking to Lestrade, John dared to believe that Lestrade might have been right about Sherlock. The minute this case is over, I’m going to tell him how I feel, he thought. Maybe that will be enough. Maybe he will choose me. As soon as it’s over.

“Fancy a coffee?”

John looked up. “It’s half past six.”

“So?”

“So nobody goes for coffee at half past six. They go for a drink, or maybe an early dinner.”

“Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” Sherlock intoned, sounding nearly as pompous as Mycroft.

“Well, what if I happen to want dinner?”

“Coffee and a pastry then.”

“Sherlock, no matter how much you might wish it were so, coffee shop pastries do not actually constitute a meal.”

“Coffee then dinner?”

“Why don’t we just go to dinner and you can order coffee?”

“I rather fancy a proper Italian espresso,” Sherlock said, eyes gleaming.

“When you say dinner, do you mean an actual dinner at an actual restaurant with menus?”

“Whatsoever you like. I’m paying, I did win 86 quid at poker, even if it wasn’t enough to get me jam.”

“You’re on,” John said, slamming his laptop shut.

“Darby Road Sports Centre,” Sherlock said when they got into the cab.

“Oh, let me guess,” John started.

“No.”

John had to laugh, because he’d walked into that one. “Let me deduce—that’s where Willfen’s kids
play football, isn’t it?”

“Every Tuesday and Thursday,” Sherlock agreed.

“What about your espresso?”

“After.”

They reached the sports centre and Sherlock told John to have a look whilst he waited in the cab.

“What am I looking for?” John asked.

“The football team. I assume you, unlike me, actually played at some point and will therefore be able to make an informed assessment.”

John looked. It didn’t take long. “Bunch of kids in two groups, coaches running drills,” he reported as the cab made its way back to the main road. “Can’t tell if they’re any good. Not a big team, although some could be on holiday.”

“Hmmm,” Sherlock said. He was watching out the window. They were driving back along one of the neighborhood’s one-way streets, crowded with tasteful yet trendy shops. “Right here,” he said suddenly and the cab stopped.

John followed Sherlock into the tasteful-trendy coffee shop, where Sherlock ordered a double espresso for himself and a decaf for John, added an alarming amount of sugar to his, tipped extravagantly, and flashed what John recognized as one of Lestrade’s pilfered IDs. “I need to ask you a few questions,” he said sternly.

The young man at the till—all black clothes and hip spectacles—looked startled. “Sure. Can we do it out here? Louise is on break.”

“This won’t take long.” Sherlock held up a photo of Paul Willfen; John recognized it as one from Delphi’s website. “Are you familiar with this man?”

“Sure. He’s a regular. Every Tuesday, just after seven. Comes in, buys two coffees, leaves. Bit of a prick,” he added as an afterthought.

“And this one?” John didn’t recognize the man in the second photo Sherlock was holding up, but the young man nodded.

“Thursdays. About the same time; gets a bottomless cup and sits over there with his laptop. Haven’t seen him tonight though.”

“What about him?” Sherlock held up a third picture, also unfamiliar.

The man frowned, looked closer, shook his head. “Nope. Him I don’t know.”

Sherlock nodded and held up Paul Willfen’s photo again. “Was he here this week?”

“Yeah, same as always. No, wait.” The young man frowned. “He was here, but he left out the back door. Which was kind of weird. I mean, it’s not against the rules, but no one does it in the evening. The car park is out front and so is the main road. Kids do it in the morning sometimes, because there’s a secondary school back there.”

“But this man usually goes out the front?”

“Yeah, everybody does. That’s why I noticed Tuesday when he went out the back.”
“Do you mind if we go that way?” Sherlock asked.

“No, go ahead. Like I said, no rule against it.”

Sherlock thanked him, left another fiver, and drained the rest of his espresso. John sat down his half empty cup and followed. The door opened onto a narrow lane which Sherlock followed unerringly about a hundred feet, at which point it suddenly opened onto…the Darby Road Sports Centre. Which was in fact next to a secondary school, now that John noticed.

“He found a short cut?” John asked.

“Then why come in through the front?”

John shook his head. None of this was making sense to him. “So this means…what does this mean?”

“It means Willfen’s alibi isn’t as strong as Lestrade thinks.” Sherlock looked around in satisfaction. “Dinner?”

Sherlock pounced on John as soon as he walked into the kitchen the next morning.

“You don’t need that, we’re going out.”

“I need the coffee before we go out,” John protested.

“No, you don’t, we’re going out for coffee.”

“Again?”

“John.”

In the end John let himself be towed along without a fuss. He had slept well for a surprising second night and didn’t really need the coffee—not much, anyway.

The cab deposited them outside a bustling café near the BBC, and Sherlock craned his neck to see inside. He whipped out his phone. “Good morning, Lestrade. I’m about to talk to Simon Fuller.” An outraged squawk came from the phone. “I am talking to you. Right now. I’ll be in touch this afternoon.” He disconnected. “Better turn off your phone,” he advised John, spinning on his heel to enter the shop.

John’s phone buzzed angrily. He hesitated, grabbed it up, said, “Sorry, I swear he didn’t tell me, I’ll get back to you,” and then, cursing, stuffed the phone back in his pocket and chased after Sherlock.

Simon Fuller was a pleasant faced man with huge bags under his eyes and a coffee even bigger than Sherlock’s. He regarded them nervously as Sherlock planted himself opposite and loomed over the table.

“All right. What is it?” Sherlock demanded without preamble.

“What is…what?”

“Your dark secret! What you do on Tuesday nights! I know you have one, you wouldn’t have agreed to this meeting else, but I can’t work out what it is. Willfen and Bonaventure are both having affairs, Patterson is playing internet poker—he’s set it up very cleverly, did you know? He got a pay raise and arranged to have part of it deposited into a separate account and he uses it as his gambling
allowance, every Thursday night, using the wifi at Café Milano. The same Café Milano you drive to every Tuesday, with Paul Willfen, who then meets his mistress. But you—what? You don’t drink, you don’t smoke, you don’t cheat on your wife, you’re to all appearances an upstanding citizen, C of E every Sunday, so what do you do?"

“Sleep,” Fuller said. He looked stunned.

“Sleep? What do you mean, sleep? Why do you sleep? No, where do you sleep?”

“In my car,” Fuller said helplessly.

Sherlock leaned back, staring narrowly. “Tell me—no, don’t. I see it. You’re a producer on the morning news programme, very prestigious, your dream job, but you have to be here at, what?”

“4 AM. And now, the kids—they have their sports and all that in the evenings, and my wife feels I don’t spend enough time with the family, and then she’s a bit of a night owl herself, so…” Fuller gestured tiredly with his coffee. “When Charles joined the football league, Paul pointed out that we really didn’t need four coaches at every practice, and he suggested this arrangement. At first I didn’t see the point, but then I realized I could sleep a whole hour and a half without anyone disturbing me…” He sighed. “It’s the best part of my week.”

Sherlock clearly found this disappointing. “Tell me what the arrangement is. Exactly.”

“We met at the sports centre, do the little pep talk. Then the boys split into groups and Paul and I leave. Our own kids never notice, they just think we’re with the other group. Leo and Tony do the same on Thursdays. I drive to the café and park in the shade, Paul buys coffee, his girlfriend picks him up. He comes back about 8:45 and we drive back.”

“Picks him up how? She doesn’t have a car.”

“Yeah, she does, but it’s not registered to her. He told me one time. It belongs to her gran, but she’s in hospice or a care center or something. Paul pays for the garaging.”

“Ah.” Sherlock’s face lightened. “That’s most interesting. Three days ago, did everything proceed as usual?”

“Yes. Well, I guess so. Lily had the stomach flu, was up all night Monday being sick—I was so knackered I was out practically before I turned off the car. I saw him go in the café though.”

“But you told the police he was with you.”

“He was—well, and with her, but I could hardly tell them that. He was back the same time as always.”

“And the other coaches assumed he was with you, and none of you wanted your secret activities to come to light,” Sherlock said, almost approvingly. “All right. Thank you, Mr. Fuller, you’ve been most helpful.”

“You won’t, uh—this isn’t—“

“I’m not going to tell your wife, no,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes.

Fuller looked sadly at John. “I don’t even like footy,” he said miserably. “I was crap at it at school.”

“Does your son like it?”
Fuller considered. “I don’t think so. He’s more of a reader, like me. Likes Harry Potter. His mum thought it might bring him out a bit—he’s shy.”

John remembered how things had improved when his mother stopped trying to push Harry into ballet and dresses and gamely gone along with her real interests (punk music and bike racing). “Drop out,” he advised. “Take him to the café instead and let him tell you about his books. You’ll both be happier.”

“You think?” Fuller brightened a little. Sherlock, now at the door, shouted impatiently, “Come on, John,” and John hurriedly shook his hand, saying, “Good luck.”

John assumed that they would head for NSY to pacify Lestrade, but Sherlock had other ideas.

“Dr. Madden is in a meeting,” the cheerful receptionist chirped, when they had finally managed to locate the cardiology department, which was miles from the cardiology clinic.

“Oh, I think she’ll see us,” Sherlock said, flashing his shark smile along with Lestrade’s warrant card. The receptionist scurried away, clearly afraid, and returned to show them into a large office.

Helena Madden was dark haired and commanding, nearly as tall as her husband, and just as haughty. “You aren’t DI Lestrade,” she said, frowning.

“Of course not. How did your receptionist make that mistake? Sherlock Holmes, John Watson,” Sherlock said, whipping out Mycroft’s identification this time. “We were called in due to the national security implications of this situation.”

Which was actually sort of true, John reflected.

Dr. Madden was now looking perplexed as well as annoyed. “Security issues?”

“Dr. Madden, you provided the startup funding for Delphi Biotech, correct?” Sherlock asked, laying on some hauteur of his own.

“Yes, but Delphi isn’t engaged in anything with ‘security implications’.”

Sherlock smiled silkily. “But if it were, with you being the major investor and on the board…now, what if you were to divorce? What happens to Delphi?”

“There would be a settlement of some sort, I suppose. Probably I’d retain my interest until Paul could buy me out.” Her eyes were narrowed, watching Sherlock intently—no longer protesting, just waiting to see where he was going with all this. Clearly Paul Willfen was not the only clever member of the family.

Sherlock seemed to be thinking the same thing. He looked at her a long minute and then said, “Do you have a solicitor? Of your own?”

“Cecily Fielding.”

“Call her. Now. Your husband is preparing to defraud you, your children and every employee at Delphi. He has developed a lethal agent which can be given orally without detection and is currently untraceable—the holy grail of poisons—and sold it to the Chinese. He’s using the money to move to Singapore and set up a new company, taking Delphi’s most promising research projects with him and leaving Delphi an empty shell. Oh, and he’s having an affair.”

“Sherlock!” John gasped.
Dr. Madden put her hand out, palm up, to quiet John. “No, it’s all right. I appreciate your directness, Mr. Holmes.” She looked away a brief moment. “That piece of shit,” she said in her crisp, perfectly enunciated finishing school accent. “I thought the marriage was over ages ago, but he kept insisting he still loved me. It was the money all along, I suppose. Bastard.” She looked absently at the pictures on her desk. “He’s fucking the nanny, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Of course he is.” She sighed. “During the bloody holidays, no less. What the hell am I going to do once I sack her?”

“Don’t sack her yet, and say nothing to your husband. Call your solicitor and get started nailing down every asset you can. I plan to ensure your husband is arrested before the end of the day, but if he’s tipped off he may bolt.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan to speak to him again until we meet in court. I can’t wait for you to arrest him so I can refuse to bail him.”

“Not the nanny either,” Sherlock warned.

“I’ll have to talk to her if she calls, but she won’t suspect anything, she thinks I’m a bitch anyway. I’ll look forward to throwing her slutty arse on the street.”

Sherlock stood and said “Start calling,” and Helena Madden stood too.

“Mr. Holmes,” she said, proud and formal once more. “Thank you again, for telling me. There is no good way to learn such a thing, of course, but this is preferable to the alternative.”

Sherlock inclined his head, holding her gaze.

“Could you tell Vanessa—there was the tiniest wobble in her voice now—‘to cancel all my appointments, and be in here in precisely ten minutes?’”

“Of course,” John said gently. As they closed the door, he saw her sit down and bury her face in her hands.

“Well,” John said as they waited for the lift, “That was…”

“Not good?” Sherlock looked worried.

“No, actually—I think for once your approach was exactly right. If you tried to break it to her gently she might have eaten you alive.”

“Oh,” Sherlock said and smiled, so pleased and open and grateful that John forgot the mess they had left behind them and smiled back.

“Where to now? Lestrade?”

“Not yet. We still haven’t got him. Willfen is clever, really clever. He’s convinced Tassie Phelps he’s taking her to Singapore with him—she thinks she’s keeping quiet but it’s obvious from her Facebook page—although he’ll have kept her in the dark about the less savory aspects of his deception. Who knows what he told her; I doubt she’s much of an expert on intellectual property law. Undoubtedly Tuesday he led her to believe that he had an urgent secret meeting of some sort, so she’ll back his alibi. It’s really quite brilliant,” Sherlock said admiringly, “convincing everyone they’re helping you to cover up a venial sin, when all along it’s the mortal one they don’t see.”
John, who was uncomfortably reminded of Sebastian Moran, said nothing.

Sherlock directed the cab to drop them a few blocks away from Delphi so he could prowl around, apparently in the hope that inspiration would hit from staring at the outside of the building. “There has to be something here,” he muttered, pacing along. “Something that will tie him to the murder…” The day, though overcast, was warm, and Sherlock was not wearing his coat. John wondered if he thought better when he could swirl it about.

They turned a corner, Sherlock muttering to himself and waving his hands in a way that caused passers by to give them a wide berth. They drew near Delphi—an unattractive concrete monolith of a structure—and the sun suddenly dipped out from behind a cloud, lighting up the plate-glass façade of a bank opposite in a flash that seared John’s retinas.

“Jesus, that’s bright! Just as well Delphi doesn’t have any windows—Sherlock?”

Sherlock was standing transfixed, every muscle tensed, eyes wide and flying. A well-dressed woman ostentatiously crossed the street. Sherlock whirled to John, the light of revelation suffusing his face.

“John. Go back to the sports centre, quickly. Tell the cab to wait in the car park. Take the shortcut, buy two coffees, and take the cab back here. Start timing from the moment you walk into the café and text me the time when you arrive.”

“Okay,” John said obediently, “but what are you—“

“Later, go on! Go!” Sherlock was all but shoving John up the street. John gave in and headed back to the main road at a trot. He had caught Sherlock’s excitement now. He had no idea what Sherlock had seen on the street, but he felt the feverish tingle of the dominoes beginning to fall.

The Café Milano-sports centre-Delphi run took exactly 19 minutes; pretty good for the middle of the day, John thought. This part of London was newer and designed for cars. There was no sign of Sherlock. John binned his now-empty cup and balanced the other precariously as he texted, 19 minutes. Now what?

Sherlock’s replay came almost immediately. NSY. Need 2 things ASAP: 1) Willfen car description and license; 2) Garage where Willfen pays for Tassie Phelps’ car. Text me. SH

What about your coffee?

Give it to Lestrade. SH

John considered. It would take at least 30 minutes to reach the Yard from here; the coffee would be stone cold. On the other hand, Café Milano made very good coffee, and a peace offering might be in order. He climbed back into his cab and began texting Lestrade.

“So you still haven’t talked to him yet?” Lestrade asked. They were sitting in Lestrade’s office eating sandwiches while waiting to hear from Sherlock.

“No…” John realized he had not checked in with Owen that day. He pulled out his phone. “I reckon right after this case. You know. He’ll be in a good mood.”

“If he’s right about all this on Willfen, I’ll be in such a good mood I’ll snog you myself,” Lestrade said cheerfully. John had filled him in on the day’s developments.
“Yeah, not sure you’re my type,” John said, texting *Any luck?*  “Thanks though, I’ll let you know if I get really desperate.”

“I’ll settle for your address book and some tips if you’re giving up women. Been out of the game for awhile.”

John’s phone chirped and read, *Not yet, still trying to locate victim, hope tonight.* He texted back *good luck* and sat back to look at Lestrade. “It’s not changed that much. You’re a good-looking guy, you should—”

John’s phone rang. “Hey, it’s him,” he said and hit the speaker button. “Sherlock?”

“Did you verify the car is at the garage?” Sherlock said, sounding impatient.

“Yeah, what—“

“Is Lestrade there?”

“Right here,” Lestrade said.

“Good. Both of you meet me at Delphi as soon as you can.”

“Just me and John, or me and John and a load of backup?” Lestrade asked.

“Backup. And send a team over to the garage to watch the nanny’s car. He doesn’t know we know about it, so if he tries to run, he’ll take her car.”

“Okay, we’re on it,” Lestrade said, signaling to Donovan through the window and grinning hugely at John.

“Wait for us,” John said sternly and Sherlock said, “Yes—right outside,” and rang off.

Willfen was not delighted to see them.

“You said you had a question,” he said, emphasizing the singular. They were back in his office near the labs, sitting in front of his large desk while Willfen himself leaned back in an enormous master-of-the-universe leather chair as though their presence bored him beyond endurance.

“Yes, thank you,” Sherlock said in his sweetest voice. “Why did you kill Alpesh Shah? Obviously he was trying to blackmail you, but wouldn’t it have been far simpler just to agree to pay him off and then stall until you could get out of the country?”

Willfen’s supercilious face had frozen into a stony mask. “I have no idea what you are talking about,” he said stonily and turning to Lestrade, “Now, see here—“

“Oh, do you not?” Sherlock asked, alight with gleeful excitement. “Wonderful, I do so love explaining. You told Dr. Shah that you would come by Tuesday evening to discuss his demands, and told Tassie Phelps that you would be unable to keep your usual assignation for reasons of the utmost secrecy. You then proceeded to football practice and to Café Milano as usual, but went through the back door, cut back over to your car, drove here, and murdered Alpesh Shah by putting your special new poison into the coffee you had so considerately brought him. Was that the reason you killed him, you couldn’t wait to see how it performed in clinical trial? You then disposed of the coffee, went to the security office and disabled the cameras, returned to the football field, doubled
back around, and arrived at Simon Fuller’s car at precisely your usual time. Quite efficient, really.”

Willfen’s face was now pinched so tightly John was surprised he could speak. “You haven’t a shred of proof of anything you just said.”

“Oh, but I do,” Sherlock said brightly. He pulled out several pieces of paper that John recognized as printouts of grainy security footage. “These were taken by the CCTV cameras at the bank across the street. The glass walls make a highly effective mirror, and it was still full light at 7:41 Tuesday evening. It’s quite easy to make out the reflection of your car as it turns into underground garage. Look, here’s your car—that is your car, isn’t it?--and the back of your head, and here’s a really lovely profile view of your face.”

They all stared at the photo, which did in fact show exactly that, and then at Willfen, who was frozen with fury, and then at Sherlock, radiant with delight at his own brilliance.

John couldn’t resist. “Oh, the cleverness of you,” he said, grinning, and Sherlock lit up like the sun.

“Well, Dr. Willfen,” Lestrade said, “We’re going to need to go to the Yard now, as I’m sure you realize. If you’d like to provide the name of your solicitor to Sergeant Donovan—“

“Yes,” Willfen said blankly, rising to his feet. He seemed dazed. “I’ll just, my jacket…” He turned to a door in the back wall of his office—some sort of wardrobe, John assumed--and reached for the handle as though unsure how it functioned.

“No,” Sherlock said sharply, standing up, and Willfen’s lassitude vanished abruptly. He whipped through the door and it clicked shut behind him. Sherlock snapped “locked” and rocketed out of the room, eliciting a startled squawk from Donovan.

“The hell?” Lestrade said. There was a crash and a shout, and they both tried to barrel out of the door at the same time, tangling up while John shouted “Sherlock” and Lestrade bellowed, “Lock it down, exits, doors, call it in, call it in,” and then they were through and off down the hall and the back stairs, following the shouts and the points of the bewildered employees until they ended up at the back service entrance, two minutes behind Sherlock and two minutes and fifteen seconds behind Willfen, who had leaped into the biohazard waste disposal lorry and nimbly driven off.

“Are you sure he’ll come here?” hissed Lestrade, for what felt like the hundredth time.

John put a calming hand on Sherlock’s arm. Sherlock, not calmed in the least, hissed back, “Of course he will. His wife froze all the accounts, including the ones he didn’t think she knew about, and you’ve plastered his picture all over the news. He has no idea we know about this car so it’s by far his best option.”

It was several hours after Willfen’s escape, late in the evening and full dark. John, Sherlock and Lestrade were pressed into the alcove of a fire staircase directly across from Tassie Phelps’ gran’s ancient yellow car. The lightbulb overhead had been strategically removed.

Lestrade lifted his radio. “Anything yet?” he murmured.

“Nothing so far.” Donovan was in the garage attendant's booth, keeping an eye on the pedestrian entrance. They also had police on every exit; Willfen would not slip away a second time. If he showed up. John was beginning to have his doubts too, or maybe he was just bored and claustrophobic after hours crammed into a space the size of a cupboard. He also needed a piss.
John pushed himself upright, careful to be quiet. He felt Sherlock wince as he was jostled. Whatever Sherlock had done to himself earlier in the week, he hadn’t improved matters by his mad dash through Delphi. “Can’t feel my feet,” John whispered. He stomped a little to bring the feeling back, caught Lestrade’s fingers, and got a sharp elbow in the knee. “Sorry!” Tempers were beginning to run a bit short.

Against his leg John felt the vibration of Sherlock’s phone in his jacket pocket. Sherlock carefully worked the phone free and tipped it so the light would not be visible from the garage, giving John a clear view over his shoulder.

*You’ve been ignoring me.*

John felt himself stiffen and prayed Sherlock had not noticed. Below him Sherlock’s fingers moved; John knew he shouldn’t look, couldn’t help it.

*Working. SH*

*I want you.*

Please no, please say no, John thought desperately. The phone buzzed again.

*We’re not finished.*

Sherlock looked at the phone for a moment, his hands still. John jerked his eyes forward and stood stiffly, not moving a muscle, until finally Sherlock slid the phone back into his jacket pocket and settled back. He shifted a little so that he leaned against John’s leg, pressing his cheek slightly against the fabric of his trousers. The tight knot of fear in John’s chest slowly eased. He reached down and touched Sherlock’s hair, lightly.

Lestrade’s radio crackled. “Someone’s come in, heading up—not sure but it looks like the nanny.”

“Be ready,” Lestrade whispered and rose to a half crouch. The lift dinged and a young woman with long blonde hair strode out, pulling a wheeled suitcase. She went straight to the yellow car, put the suitcase in the boot, and plunked herself into the driver’s seat.

“Oh, shit,” Lestrade muttered under his breath. He pressed back further into the dark and held the radio close to his mouth, saying softly, “You lot at the exits, get ready to follow.”

But Tassie Phelps made no move to leave. She just sat there, arms crossed, staring straight ahead. John and Lestrade looked down at Sherlock, who was still crouched on the floor, and Sherlock held up a finger: *wait.*

So they waited. After a while John and Lestrade slid slowly back down, resting in their original positions. Tassie continued to sit and stare out the windshield, her eyes pale in the dark.

Donovan’s quiet voice crackled over the radio again. “It’s him. Willfen is coming up. Everybody in position.”

The lift opened and there was Paul Willfen, wearing some kind of uniform—probably appropriated from the biohazard lorry—and carrying a duffel bag. He was directly in front of them when he stopped, staring at the yellow car, and said “Tassie?”

Tassie unfolded herself from the driver’s seat and walked around the front of the car, facing Willfen. “Why so surprised? You told me you’d come for me when it was time to go.”
Willfen gaped. If he hadn’t been a murdering adulterous criminal—and, more to the point, an arrogant prick—John might almost have felt sorry for him.

“You said you’d phone me, you said you loved me, you said you’d do anything for me, you said all this was for me, so we could start a new life together. So here I am.”

Willfen was rapidly recovering his usual arrogance. “Tassie, there’s no time for this. I promise—“

“You must think me very stupid.” In the dim light, John could see the shine of tears in her eyes, but her voice was cold and steady. “Stupid little Tassie, she’ll believe anything, right? Right up until the end. I left as soon as I heard. I hid so they couldn’t force me to tell them anything, though I would have lied for you. I would have done anything for you. But you…you were never coming for me, were you? There was never going to be any new life.”

“Tassie, I have to go now,” Willfen snapped. He stepped forward to loom over her. “Give me the damn keys and—“

Everything happened at once. Sherlock, once again a half step ahead of everyone else, suddenly exploded up out of their huddle, knocking John backwards. He heard Lestrade shout into his radio at the same instant that Tassie said furiously, “Fuck that, you bastard,” and then there was a shriek and a crash and Lestrade, trying to get to his feet, tripped over John as he was trying to stand also and they both crashed into a nearby car. John pulled himself up to see Willfen pelting toward the main staircase and thought, no fucking way, not again, and then the door to the staircase opened and Sally Donovan stepped neatly forward and punched Willfen right in the face. He dropped like a stone.

John looked around. Lestrade was trying to calm Tassie Phelps, who was screaming incomprehensibly and seemed, incredibly, to be holding a knife. Which was covered in blood. Which probably meant—“Sherlock!”

Sherlock pushed himself up from where he had evidently landed on the far side of a green Jaguar. “I’m right here. I’m fine.” He suddenly sat down hard on the boot of a tiny sports car. “It’s just a scratch,” he added unconvincingly.

“Jesus.” John was on him instantly, unbuttoning his shirt. He tried to get Sherlock’s shirt and jacket off, but Sherlock resisted him. “Just—let me see.” John took his handkerchief and wiped at the blood. Actually, it wasn’t too bad—a long cut running across the left side of his chest. It would need sutures, but there was no serious damage. “You got lucky, you idiot,” he said with relief. “How did you know she had a weapon?”

“The way she crossed her arms. Ow!”

“I’m sorry,” Tassie Phelps said miserably from where she had surrendered her knife to Lestrade. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Can I get my bag from the boot? I could get a T shirt or something.”

“That’s all right,” Lestrade said, rather more gently than John thought necessary. “There’s an ambulance coming.”

“I don’t want an ambulance,” Sherlock said.

“Sherlock, shut up.” John snapped, exasperated.

The paramedics wanted to take Sherlock in for stitches, or at least clean him up, but Sherlock flatly refused—“John can do it”—and in the end they gave him a large wad of gauze and turned him over to John. “I want to go home,” Sherlock said.
John looked at Lestrade, who shrugged and nodded. “Statement tomorrow,” he said and winked at John over Sherlock’s head. “Good luck!”
Chapter 13

Sherlock wanted to stop for dinner.

“Absolutely not,” John said. “You’re covered in blood and your shirt is slashed open. You can’t go in a restaurant like that.”

“Blood doesn’t show on a black shirt, remember? I can button my jacket.”

“Sherlock,” John said with all the patience he could muster, “You’re still bleeding. That gauze is almost soaked through. You’re not going to stop bleeding until I get that wound properly closed, so if you won’t go to A&E, then we’re going straight home.”

“But I’m starving!”

“Well, you should have thought of that before you got yourself stabbed, shouldn’t you?”

“I was not stabbed. Tassie Phelps has the upper body strength of a caterpillar. She wasn’t going to seriously injure me, and I knew you could fix it anyway.”

John looked at Sherlock with fond exasperation. Sherlock was still fizzing with adrenaline, his whole body humming with it, his eyes bright with delight in himself and utter trust in John’s ability to take care of him. He was radiant. John felt his usual warmth of affection suddenly swamped with a desire to grab Sherlock by his wild curls and snog him until they were both covered in blood.

“We’ll get takeaway.”

“But I want Bombay Palace! They don’t do takeaway!”

“They will for you,” John said cheerfully.

Sherlock was not the only one who was hungry. The sandwiches in Lestrade’s office were a distant memory, and by the time they made it back to the flat John was ready to eat the entire bag of food himself, containers and all. He contented himself with eating samosas one-handed while he went in search of his supplies. He felt wryly amused at the wreck of his plans for the night. Dinner and post-case adrenaline had featured prominently; Sherlock bleeding all over the kitchen had not. Bloody floor or not, John was determined to have it out with Sherlock before the end of the evening. The thought sent a stab of anxiety through his gut, but then he thought again of Sherlock’s head tilting against him, offering his neck to John’s hand, Sherlock leaning into him in the garage, his bright trusting eyes in the cab. He squared his shoulders and pushed the nervousness down. John wanted Sherlock and he would have Sherlock, but first he needed his hands to be steady.

Gauze. Needle driver, suture, scissors…no lidocaine. Where was the lidocaine? God damn it.
“Sherlock.” John stomped back into the kitchen, where Sherlock was shoveling biryani into his mouth with one hand and texting Lestrade with the other. “Did you do something with the lidocaine?”

Sherlock momentarily stopped eating and looked guilty. “Yes.”

John waited, but no more information appeared to be forthcoming. “Is there any left?”

“No.”

“Well, you’ll just have to go to A&E after all then, won’t you? I can’t suture up half your chest without lidocaine.”

“Of course you can. I’ll be fine.”

“No, you won’t!”

“John. I’ll be very still. I can bite on a bullet or you can give me a shot of whiskey or…”

John snorted. “No.” He considered. Truthfully, he really didn’t want to go to A&E either. It was Friday night, they’d be there all night waiting, Sherlock getting progressively more difficult, and more likely than not the staff would stitch him up without lidocaine after all out of sheer aggravation. “Will you take something for the pain first?”

“If it means we can stay here, then yes.”

John sighed. “Fine. No complaining about how much it hurts.” He went to fetch the painkillers from their hiding place. As a precaution it was ridiculous—Sherlock could find them in a minute if he wanted, though it was unlikely he would; Sherlock was only interested in stimulants. Nonetheless John kept them hidden out of the vague sense that Sherlock should be kept away from any potential hazards, like a toddler. He returned to the kitchen and proffered the tablet on his palm.

“Half,” Sherlock said promptly.

John didn’t quibble; along with enthusiasm, Sherlock lacked any tolerance for depressants. He broke the tablet in half and left it to take effect whilst he ate his own dinner. After ten minutes, Sherlock had gone glassy eyed and hazy and left off texting, so John washed his hands, gloved up and set to work.

Sherlock seemed disinclined to take his shirt off and John didn’t press; the shirt was ruined anyway, so he just pushed it back out of the way and washed out the wound. The cut was deep at the beginning over Sherlock’s sternum, tapering off into a shallow scratch at the edge of his chest, and blood was still trickling sluggishly onto the old towels John draped onto his lap. At the first bite of the needle Sherlock jerked and hissed, hands coming up involuntarily. “Hands down,” John said sharply and then, “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

Sherlock sucked a deep breath through his nose and nodded, tucking his hands back down at his sides. John said more gently, “The medication probably hasn’t kicked in all the way, do you want to wait a bit?”

“No. I’m all right.”

John went back to work. True to his word, Sherlock held still, although he twitched when the needle pierced his skin. He peered down with fuzzy interest. “Those look different, why are they different?”
“Those are mattress sutures. It’s a type of stitch that can take more tension…Sherlock, move your head, I can’t see what I’m doing. You can look all you want when I’m done.”

Sherlock moved his head back, although he continued to peer down his nose. It took a long time. John eventually switched to interrupted sutures, which went faster, and the pace picked up even more when he no longer had to swab blood every few minutes, but the laceration was several inches long and it was some time before he noticed Sherlock had stopped wincing. He looked up to see Sherlock’s eyelids drooping. “Just a few more minutes,” he said. He snipped the last suture, then reached for the basin of soapy water. It had gone cold, but Sherlock barely reacted as John cleaned his chest, spread antibiotic salve over the wound, and neatly taped gauze over the whole thing. John sat back and admired his handiwork. It looked good. “Okay,” he said. “You need to keep this dry, and—Sherlock? Are you asleep?”

Sherlock’s shirt had slipped down and puddled around his elbows. John reached out, gripped a bare shoulder, and shook gently. Sherlock hummed a little, eyes still closed, and John rolled his own eyes, unable to help smiling. He reached out and gently stroked Sherlock’s hair off his forehead, smoothing it back even as it fell forward again.

Sherlock’s eyes fluttered open. He looked up at John and his face suddenly melted into a smile of such pure, trusting sweetness that John felt his heart clench. Maybe, after all, there was no need for the words he had so carefully planned. This was his chance; he would never get a better moment than right now, with Sherlock gazing up at him in dopey adoration.

John took a breath. He stroked Sherlock’s hair back again and cupped the back of his head. Then he leaned forward and brushed his lips over Sherlock’s, so lightly it was barely a kiss at all.

Sherlock went absolutely still. John thought he might be holding his breath. John brushed his lips over Sherlock’s again and heard Sherlock inhale once, sharply, almost a gasp. John’s heart was thumping so loudly he could hear it, so hard he thought it might actually crash out of his chest. He leaned in and this time applied just the tiniest hint of pressure before pulling back. It was still chaste—plausible deniability could be maintained by all sides—but it was, definitely, a kiss. On the lips.

Sherlock made a tiny longing sound and tipped his face up and that was all the encouragement John needed. He curled his fingers around the back of Sherlock’s head and brought his mouth to Sherlock’s, firmly this time. Sherlock’s mouth opened beneath his, soft and warm and sweet, and distantly John was aware of Sherlock’s hands sliding up to grip the backs of his arms, his body arching up to John’s. John slid his tongue in to lick at Sherlock’s mouth and felt him shiver beneath him. John slid his free hand down the side of Sherlock’s neck to caress his collarbone, much as he had before, but with possessiveness and intent in his touch now. Sherlock broke his mouth from John’s to gasp. His head fell back, cradled in John’s other hand, and John ran the flat of his tongue up that long white throat from the jugular notch to his ear. Sherlock’s whole body shuddered, quivering again when John licked at his ear.

Jesus, this was, this was—John felt that his brain was rapidly losing control of the situation. BDSM fantasies notwithstanding, John had vaguely assumed that Sherlock kissing would be like Sherlock doing anything else: bossy and domineering. This version of Sherlock, practically swooning in his arms like a pulp heroine begging to be ravished, had not figured into his imagination at all. But he liked it—God, how he liked it. If John didn’t slow this down he was going to have Sherlock over the kitchen table before they ever got to the all-important “Please dump Sebastian Moran for me” talk.

John returned to Sherlock’s mouth, gentling his kisses and smoothing his hair again. Sherlock, however, had not gotten the “slow down” message. He licked back into John’s kiss with real heat, arching his back and sliding his hands up to grip John’s neck and shoulder. John promptly forgot
what he had been thinking and ran his palm down Sherlock’s bare chest and under his open shirt. He was desperate to get the stupid shirt off—it was hampering Sherlock’s arms like this anyway—but untangling their arms seemed like too much bother at the moment. He slid his hand over Sherlock’s ribs to his back.

He froze. That was—not right, something was not right, something was really, really wrong in fact, because at the same instant that he registered the change in texture he also registered Sherlock’s whole body flinching away from him.

“Sherlock—“ John was up, trying to peer over his shoulder while Sherlock struggled to evade him, but Sherlock made the mistake of trying to go forward, away, and John caught him by both shoulders and looked down at his exposed back. “Jesus Christ!”

Sherlock twisted, eeling out of John’s grip and stumbling to his feet. He was pulling his shirt back on, eyes wide, fumbling with one hand as he held the other out—whether to ward John off or to placate him, John couldn’t tell. “John, it’s all right, it’s nothing, it’s—”

“No, it is bloody well not all right! Nothing about this is all right! Did Moran—did you let—“ He had to get a hold of himself. The paracetamol, Sherlock moving so carefully, all the signs were there and even after Owen’s warnings he didn’t see—“Sherlock, there is no circumstance in which this can be all right. This is not—this is abuse, Sherlock. This is not fine.”

Sherlock’s face snapped closed like a shutter. He spun and grabbed for his jacket, fingers scrabbling, and was down the stairs in the time it took John to blink. John felt his leg buckle beneath him. He grabbed for the chair, missed, landed hard, pulled himself up by main force as the downstairs door slammed, skidded onto the landing and caught the railing, flinging himself at the stairs. His downward descent was saved from disaster more by luck than anything else. At the bottom he threw himself out the door, the cry trying to wrench itself out of his throat, Sherlock, but it was too late. Sherlock was gone.
John stumbled back into the flat and grabbed for his jacket, frantic to find his phone. He fumbled it out, sat down hard, and typed out a text with shaking fingers.

*I am so, so sorry. Please come back.*

A familiar chirp sounded from the kitchen and John dropped his head to his knees. Sherlock’s phone was still on the table, where he had been texting Lestrade while John collected supplies, forgotten. He could not reach Sherlock. Sherlock did not know that John had not meant to hurt him, did not know how John really felt about him, did not know that his abusive boyfriend was actually a violent serial killer. Worse, if his abusive violent serial killer boyfriend picked tonight to actually beat him to death, Sherlock had no way to call for help. Why the fuck had John not warned him? Why had he let Owen—*Owen.*

John snatched up his phone again. Owen, when he answered, sounded surprised and sleepy, but he woke up quickly once John started talking. He ran through the events of the past few hours, leaving out the kissing—no need for Owen to think that John was blowing up out of jealousy, although there was probably some truth to that—and implied that Sherlock, drugged and exhausted, had simply not realized his shirt had slipped down.

“So his back—*“* Owen said.

“He was beaten, Owen, with the buckle end of a belt. We’re taught to recognize what that looks like, and I’ve seen it before, although never this bad. This wasn’t some kind of rough sex play. This was Moran beating the crap out of him. It must have hurt like hell.” The image of the paracetamol flashed through John’s mind again and he had to stop to fight the tightness in his throat.

“So okay, so you saw the damage, and then…”

John swallowed again. “I lost my head,” he admitted. “I saw those marks and I just lost it. I was shouting, and Sherlock, he—remember I told you he can’t really read people, he doesn’t understand feelings, he’s a bit Asperger’s—when I got angry and shouted, he probably thought I was angry at him. That he’d done something wrong. So he left. Bolted out of here before I could catch him and left his phone.”

“You think he’s gone to Moran’s,” Owen said, not a question.

“I need you to give me the address. I’m not leaving him there, not knowing what I know now, not after what I saw—*“*

“No. No way. I’m not letting you—*“*

“I’m not going to say anything about your case! I don’t need to! I’ve enough reason to go after him without that. This is my best friend, and he’s in over his head. I’m getting him out.”

“John. Think this through. You’re a civilian now. You know I can’t just let you walk into a situation like this. What are you even going to do if Sherlock doesn’t want to go? Or what if Moran doesn’t let him leave? Are you going to call the police and report a domestic? You think Sherlock wants that?”

“I don’t give a sodding fuck if it means getting Sherlock out in one piece,” John said savagely. “I don’t think you’re hearing me, Owen. I’m getting Sherlock out of there. I can get the address other ways, but it’s faster to go through you, and I’d rather work with you than against you.”
Owen blew out a sharp breath. “All right, here’s what’s going to happen. You’re not going over there—no, shut up, listen to me—I’m going over there. I’ll look around and see what’s going on. If I judge that Sherlock is in any danger, I will get him out, I give you my word on that. Okay?”

John’s need to protect Sherlock, personally, was so visceral it nearly overwhelmed him, but the rational part of his brain recognized the sense of Owen’s plan. “Okay,” he said finally.

“John.”

“Yeah?”

“I need you to understand. If when I get there what I see is two legal adults engaged in consensual activity, I’m walking away. Are we clear?”

So John had not been fooling anyone. He was surprised to find how little he cared. “We’re clear. I just…I need to know he’s okay.”

“Give me thirty minutes,” Owen said and hung up.

John remained where he was for a long moment before the unfocused adrenaline forced him to his feet. He paced back and forth, back and forth, trying to push down thoughts of what could happen in thirty minutes and, worse, what could have been happening instead if John had just kept his head, held his fucking tongue and not lost it like a bloody teenager—this was not helping. John took a deep breath and went to the kitchen, where he methodically cleaned up all the food, bloody towels, and assorted medical litter still lying about, then went to work on the rest of the kitchen. Twenty-seven minutes later, he got two back-to-back texts: Just arrived all quiet and Going to look round. John clenched his jaw and carried on cleaning.

He was making a list of supplies for his medical kit—lidocaine at the top—when his phone rang. John dropped the list.

“I don’t know if this is good news or bad news,” Owen said, sounding tired, “But there doesn’t seem to be anything going on in there at all. I even knocked up the civilians opposite and used thermals, but these building are old enough and thick enough that it’s almost impossible to see much of anything unless they’re in front of a window. Somebody’s definitely home, but there isn’t a lot of activity. I don’t see any sign of trouble, John.”

John felt a brittle calm descend.”That’s not good enough,” he said.

“John—“

“No, Owen, you need to hear this.” John had only one card left to play, and he needed to be sure Owen recognized it for the ace it was. “Sherlock has a brother. You won’t have heard his name, because blokes like us never hear about blokes like him, but he’s high up, high up enough that if anything happens to his little brother while you’re sitting outside his flat, your whole investigation is going to blow up in your face. And if I have to call him in, you’ll never get your day in court with Moran, because he’ll take the whole thing over and vanish Moran off th face of the earth. I’m not telling you this to threaten you, I’m warning you. This guy is not someone to underestimate.”

There was a long silence, during which John imagined Owen was cursing the impulse that had led him to follow John out of the bar. “I need to call my boss.”

“Yes.”

“What’s this guy’s name?”
“Mycroft Holmes. And if your boss doesn’t know it…have him call his boss.”

“Bloody hell,” Owen muttered and disconnected.

John sat down. Now that he had crossed that particular Rubicon the adrenaline rush was gone, leaving him feeling shaky and strangely calm. Sherlock might never speak to him again, Owen almost certainly wouldn’t, and he might have blown Moran’s case along with any chance he ever had with Sherlock. It didn’t matter. Whatever happened now, John Watson would know that he had done everything in his power to protect the man he loved. At the realization of what had just gone through his head, John put his head back down into his hands again. He took a deep breath and felt the cool clarity he associated with the moments before a firefight. The only thing that mattered now, the only thing, was getting Sherlock back safely. He thought of Sherlock’s wide eyes, of the livid marks on his thin vulnerable back. He thought, please. Please come back.

His phone rang.

“I hope to hell you know what you’re doing, mate,” Owen said without preamble.

“Yeah, me too. He kicking it upstairs, your boss?”

“She, and yes she is, and she’s not pleased. So.” He sighed wearily. “Again, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Owen, believe me, nobody wants—“

Owen interrupted him, voice dropping low and urgent. “I have to go. Somebody’s coming.” He clicked off.

John was already wound so tight he couldn’t get any tighter. He set his phone down carefully, placed both hands flat on his knees, and concentrated on taking slow, steady breaths. It seemed hours before his phone rang again.

Owen’s voice was light with relief. “Your boy’s on his way home in a cab.”

“What? How—“

“He came out the door a few minutes ago, that’s why I rang off so fast. I’m across the street and he had his head down, but I’ve looked at enough pictures lately to be pretty sure.”

“Oh my God.” John was glad he was already sitting down; he closed his eyes against the overwhelming rush of relief. “Owen, I can’t—“

“The civilian’s safe, that’s what matters, and Moran’s none the wiser. We’ll talk tomorrow. I’ve got to go, that’s my boss ringing back.”

John dropped the phone and took what felt like his first full breath in hours. Sherlock was safe. He was coming home. And John…John had one more chance to get this right. He got up shakily and headed for the kitchen to put on the kettle.
Chapter 15

John settled himself into his chair and slowly drank his tea, thinking hard about what he was going to say when Sherlock came home. He’d botched his earlier attempt spectacularly; he only hoped he’d get a second chance. He warmed his hands around the comforting heat of the mug. He had turned off all but the small lamp, not wanting Sherlock to feel as though he were coming into a bright interrogation room, and now he found himself relaxing into the dimness, the tension lessening almost in spite of himself.

The door closed downstairs.

John was fully awake at once. His hands clenched involuntarily and he carefully placed the empty mug down, forcing his hands to loosen. Sherlock’s slow footsteps came up the stairs. He did not pause at the living room door but went straight through to the kitchen, apparently heading for his bedroom.

“Sherlock?”

The footsteps stopped. John stood. He could see Sherlock in the kitchen, back to John, not even trying to square his shoulders. He looked slumped and exhausted, too slight without his coat.

John’s throat was dry despite the tea. “I need to apologize,” he said. He’d decided to lead with this mostly because it was true, but also because it seemed the most likely to meet with a favorable response. “I’ve no right to tell you what to do. I shouldn’t have tried to go all Mycroft on you like that. I’m sorry.”

A small, stiff nod. Sherlock was still turned away, but he didn’t leave.

“I also want to make sure you understand,” John plowed on, “that it wasn’t you I was angry with. I was upset you were hurt. I was angry someone hurt you. I’m very, very upset about that. But not at you.”

It always felt a bit uncomfortable, spelling things out to Sherlock like this as though he were a child, but Sherlock’s genius failed him in these matters, and they both knew it. Sherlock trusted John to make things clear to him. He needed this.

John took a deep breath. “I’m upset,” he said carefully, “because I care about you. A lot. Um, not just as a friend. What happened earlier was—“ Oh God, it broke his heart how Sherlock’s shoulders hunched then, obviously expecting the next words to be something like “a mistake”—“something I’ve wanted for a long time. Wanted a lot,” John finished defiantly. “I would have said something sooner, but I thought, you know, you were already taken.”

There. Cards on the table. His heart in his throat, John stood straight and waited for Sherlock’s response. For a long, agonizing moment Sherlock just stood there unmoving, his head still down.

“It’s over.” Sherlock’s voice was so quiet John could barely hear him. “With Sebastian. I ended it.” His voice sounded curiously stuffy—had he been crying? He finally turned a little but then stopped, looking down at the table, so that John still could not see his face. “In retrospect, I should have anticipated that he would take it badly.” He took another step toward John, and then his knees crumpled and he went down.

“Sherlock—“ John was kneeling in front of Sherlock before he was even conscious of moving. Sherlock was folded over his knees, trying to push himself up, so John took his shoulders and
supported them as he lifted his head.

“Oh, the cleverness of me,” Sherlock whispered.

John stared, frozen in shock. He had seen worse injuries, of course he had, but nothing he had ever seen, not even in war, had prepared him for the ruin of Sherlock’s face. “My God,” he whispered. He lifted his hand and let it hover just over Sherlock’s cheek, finally letting it settle, light as a snowflake, over his hair. Sherlock’s good eye closed and he curved forward and rested his forehead against John’s chest. John carefully cradled his shoulders with his other arm, holding him lightly, feeling Sherlock take deep, shaky breaths. His fingers curled tentatively into John’s jumper, as though unsure of their welcome.

After a long moment Sherlock pushed himself back, exhaustion and pain leaking out of every pore.

“I know you will want me to go to hospital,” Sherlock said, not meeting John’s eye, “But. Can you.” He swallowed, grimacing a little. “Please John, can you look me over first. I don’t believe I have any serious injuries. If you still think I need further treatment, I will do as you say.”

It was on the tip of John’s tongue to ask about evidence, but he thought better of it. “Did you lose consciousness at all, at any time?” he asked instead.

“No. I think I still feel the effects of the medication though.”

John looked at his watch, calculated. “Maybe, or maybe you’re just knackered. All right, let’s have a look.”

They didn’t stay in the kitchen this time; John wanted a different location, better light. He arranged a chair in the bathroom and sat Sherlock down in it while he rummaged for his kit and ophthalmoscope. He looked at the bloody mess of Sherlock’s face, frowning at the grotesquely discolored eye. “I need to try and see your eye before the swelling gets any worse. If I turn the lights off, do you think you can open it?” The eye was the worst of Sherlock’s immediately apparent injuries; if John couldn’t get a decent examination, he would need an ophthalmologist.

Sherlock managed to pry his lids apart just enough for John to get a look, and in the end the eye seemed all right. John smiled with relief and fetched a basin of cold water, setting about cleaning the dried blood. “Do you want some ice for your mouth?” The cuts on Sherlock’s swollen lips had stopped bleeding and none would need stitches, but they must be painful.

“No, it’s fine.”

John puzzled at the bruising that became evident as he cleaned. “What did—this doesn’t look like…”

“Slammed my face against a wall,” Sherlock said dispassionately. “Then a table. He did hit me though, but not much.”

John winced. “Your teeth are okay. Your nose—“ He prodded as carefully as he could, but Sherlock flinched back for the first time, his good eye watering. “Your nose is broken. It’s not displaced, so it should heal fine, although it may not look exactly the same.”

“I don’t care how my nose looks,” Sherlock said. He could barely hold up his head. “How long until I can breathe out of it?”

John smiled a little. “Might be a while.” He cleaned and poked in silence. There was a horrible livid bruise on Sherlock’s left ear—had Moran grabbed him by the ear?—and dried blood on the right. John fetched his otoscope. “Jesus Christ, your eardrum is ruptured.”
“Oh.” Sherlock appeared to be considering this news. “Is that why it’s hard to hear on that side?”

John sighed. “It will heal. I’ll need to get you some drops.” John checked over the rest of Sherlock’s skull, his fingers tangling in his blood-stiffened curls: no Battle sign, no fractures. “Okay, shirt off, let’s have a proper look this time.”

Sherlock obediently slid off his wrecked shirt. The bruising on his chest wasn’t as bad as John had expected, though the gauze was soaked with fresh blood. John peeled it off to see that some of his careful sutures had torn. He silently snipped the stitches and put on steri-strips. Then he gently ran his hands over Sherlock’s sides.

“They’re all right, I think,” Sherlock said. “I had broken ribs once before—it doesn’t hurt the same way when I breathe.”

It should not hurt in any way for Sherlock to breathe, but John let it go. There was nothing to be done for his ribs in any case. “Turn around for me now,” he said, keeping his voice light. Sherlock complied without hesitation.

Sherlock’s brutalized back was hard to look at. The welts and cuts John had seen earlier were bad enough, now overlaid with bruising so dark it was nearly black in places. John was glad Sherlock could not see his face. “Did he kick you?” he asked, struggling to keep his voice level. Sherlock nodded wordlessly.

John cleaned where the buckle had broken skin, but the wounds were starting to heal and seemed free of inflammation. Somehow Sherlock’s naked back, the vulnerable droop of the nape of his neck, stirred all of John’s protective instincts. If ever got the chance, he was going to kick Sebastian Moran into fucking Wales.

“Okay,” he said finally and Sherlock turned back to him. “You’re going to hurt like hell for at least a week, but you’re going to be all right.” He tapped Sherlock’s thigh through his trousers. “Anything under here I need to see?”

Sherlock shook his head, then looked as if he wished he hadn’t. “Just some bruising on my, um, backside. It’s fine.”

John held his gaze. “Did he fuck you?” He had given this phrasing some thought. “Rape” allowed too much room to prevaricate, and “penetrate” was too mild. He wanted to shock Sherlock into telling him the truth.

Sherlock’s gaze slid away. He nodded once.

John’s jaw clenched, but he kept his voice matter-of-fact. “Okay.” He stood and turned on the taps in the bath. “I’m going to go and fetch your pajamas. You are going to take a piss. There’s a lot of bruising over your kidneys. If you see any blood at all, you will tell me.” He waited for Sherlock’s nod, then pulled out his travel kit from the cupboard and extracted a shaving mirror. “Then you are going to look yourself over. Thoroughly. If there’s any fresh bleeding, any tears, you will tell me. We’ll decide how to handle it from there. But, Sherlock, you have to tell me. I know you feel this is all bad enough, but trust me, an abscess would be much, much worse.”

Sherlock nodded again. He still didn’t meet John’s eye. John hesitated, then reached to touch his hair. “Just a little bit more now,” he said gently. “We’re almost finished, and then you can sleep for days.”

He stepped away, quickly, before he got soppy. Sherlock didn’t need that right now. Sherlock
needed him clear headed enough to take care of him, after the mess he’d made of looking after
himself. John collected Sherlock’s pajamas and then, after some consideration, went and changed
into his own. If Sherlock needed more attention than he wanted John to provide, it could wait until
morning.

John went back downstairs. The taps were off, so he peered around the door. Sherlock was in the
bath with the curtain pulled. “Sherlock? All right?”

“Yes.” Sherlock’s clogged voice was very quiet. “No bleeding. Just…bruising.”

“Brilliant,” John said, relieved. “I’m setting your pajamas here and, here, there’s a tube of salve—use
it anyplace the skin is broken.”

“Should I keep the stitches dry?”

“Out of the water if you can but it’s okay to splash a bit. Don’t stay too long in there.” John made to
go and then paused. “Sherlock? Is there a chance—will Moran come after you?”

The sounds of washing stilled. “Possibly, but not tonight, I don’t think.” John wished Sherlock
sounded more certain when he said this.

“I’ll lock up then.” John checked the street doors, then locked the doors leading to the lounge and
kitchen, then the windows for good measure. He’d sleep on the sofa.

Sherlock managed to get himself out of the bath and into his pajama bottoms before running out of
steam. John came back and found him swaying and glassy, and quickly helped him into his shirt.
Sherlock turned automatically for the washbasin. “Sherlock, can’t you—no, you can’t.” John sighed.
In a major concession to his spit lips, Sherlock skipped flossing for, as far as John could tell, the first
time in his life. Sherlock was now so punch-drunk he could barely stand, so John guided him to his
room, pulled back the covers, and eased him onto his less-damaged side. He pulled the blankets up.

“John,” Sherlock said softly. His eyes were already closed. “Did you mean it?”

John did not have to ask what he meant. “Every word.”

“Will you stay then?”

John smiled for what felt like the first time in hours. He switched off the lamp and slipped under the
covers, scooting forward to face Sherlock. He hesitated, wanting to hold and comfort, not wanting to
cause more pain, and finally took Sherlock’s hand where it lay between them. Sherlock smiled very
slightly in the near dark. It looked like it hurt.

“I didn’t know,” Sherlock whispered. “I thought you didn’t like men.”

“Ah, you see, but you don’t observe,” John whispered back and Sherlock’s lips twitched in another
half smile.

“The army,” he murmured and John, laughing, said, “Nope, farther back than that.” He reached to
stroke Sherlock’s hair and then said, “I thought you didn’t like anybody.”

“I didn’t,” Sherlock said and then hesitated, clearly struggling to find the right words. “Not for a long
time. Not until you. Moran was…a distraction, a means to an end.”

John wasn’t sure what to make of that. It was his turn to be quiet, turning over Sherlock’s words and
trying to fit them with what he knew of their relationship, with his research, with what he had learned
from Owen.

“Was he hurting you all this time?’

“Not like this.” A bit too quickly.

John hesitated again, but this was something that had to be asked.

“Sherlock, is that…something you need? In a relationship?’

“No.” Sherlock was vehement, suddenly awake. “No. I don’t want you to hurt me. I don’t like pain, it was never about that.”

Then why did you stay? John wondered desperately, but Sherlock was now gripping his hand tightly enough to hurt. John rubbed soothing circles with his thumb, smoothed his hair. “Can you tell me what you do need?”

Sherlock sighed suddenly, a warm gust on John’s hand. “I don’t have the words for this,” he whispered. John inched forward until he could touch their foreheads together.

“It’s fine,” he said softly. He could see Sherlock’s face inches from his own, feel his breath on his cheek. “It’s all fine, Sherlock, I promise.”

They were still a moment, just breathing together.

“I don’t like to be touched lightly.”

“I know. I know you don’t.” Sherlock was quiet, apparently searching for the right words. John wondered if he’d meant it literally—maybe he’d deleted the words. “But you do like to be touched,” he said, because this seemed an important point to clarify, even if it had seemed very much that Sherlock did like it earlier in the evening.

“Yes.”

“Touched…firmly.”

“Yes.”

“Very firmly?”

“Yes.” Sherlock’s voice was full of amazement and gratitude that John had worked this out.

“Dominance-submission stuff?”

“Not as such,” Sherlock said in a tentative way that told John it certainly wasn’t off the table. John paused to think about that one a while. He turned it over and over in his head until he thought he had it clear: Sherlock liked a dominant partner. Sherlock almost certainly hadn’t the least idea of how to negotiate for his own needs and limits, if he even understood them himself, which was questionable. Sebastian Moran had seen this, and had abused Sherlock’s submission and his trust.

“I never… I’ve never had anything like this.” Sherlock’s fingers flexed, then curled back around John’s. “I thought I never could. I don’t…I still don’t know if…”

“I do,” John said firmly.

“I did try. At university. But…” There was so much sadness in that one word, a universe of
loneliness. “I got things wrong, and I didn’t like…but I couldn’t explain.”

John squeezed his hand. “It must have been so difficult for you,” he said gently.

“Well, getting high helped rather a lot,” Sherlock said, sounding like himself for a minute. Then that soft exhale again. “So I…I would…”

“You looked for the toughest, toppiest guys on offer,” John said, working it out, “and you told them…”

“…’I like it rough’.” It was barely a whisper. John smoothed his hand over Sherlock’s hair, trying to make his own arms a circle, a tiny safe place for Sherlock to open himself.

“It’s easier for you, isn’t it? Having someone else take control? It makes it all less overwhelming. Probably takes a lot of the pressure off too—less chance of you misreading signals.” And no one bothering to read Sherlock’s.

A very small nod.

“Well, then, we’re going to be just fine,” John said, smiling. “I am an army captain, after all; I think I can manage being in charge.”

Sherlock melted against him in relief. John had not thought it possible for his heart to break more tonight, but it was aching now. There was a great deal he still didn’t know—the path from “rough” to viciously raped and beaten was fairly murky, for one—but this was enough for one night. One thing was clear, and that was that Sherlock’s injuries were not the only reason they were going to be taking things extremely slowly. Sherlock’s heart was a guarded, fragile thing, and John had no intention of treating it carelessly.

“Sherlock,” John said, very, very gently, “This is going to be a little different. This…” he opened and closed his hand as Sherlock had done, squeezing his fingers for emphasis. “This makes it different.” Sherlock’s forehead wrinkled painfully, and John knew he was going to have to spell it out. “I will put my hands on you to ground you or to make you feel safe, but never to hold you down or hurt you. When I touch you it will be to give you pleasure, too, not just to take it. You don’t have to tell me what you want, not right away,” he added quickly. “We’ll find out together.”

Sherlock pulled John’s hand closer to his chest and curled around it as though it were the most precious thing in the world. John stroked his hair and said, “Go to sleep, love. We’ve plenty of time to work all this out. Rest now.” Sherlock sighed, his whole body relaxing, and just like that he was asleep.

John suddenly felt exhausted himself. It had been a very, very long day. He wanted to stay awake and just revel in the wonder of ending up here in Sherlock’s bed, the amazement of Sherlock actually talking to him like this, but he found he couldn’t keep his eyes open. He let his other hand slide down to cover Sherlock’s, and followed him into sleep.
Chapter 16

John woke up wondering where he had left his phone. He blinked up at the unfamiliar ceiling, briefly disoriented, then turned his head quickly to the side. Sherlock lay in exactly the same position as the night before, looking not so much asleep as comatose, his fingers curled as though they still held John’s hand. John grimaced at the sight of his face—even the bruised ear looked swollen. This reminded him of the need to phone to the chemist’s for ear drops, which reminded him of his phone, which made him realize that his phone had probably woken him up.

John slid as quietly as possible from the bed, padded blearily out to retrieve his phone, and then brought it into the kitchen to start coffee. He phoned the chemist first so he wouldn’t forget, then checked the screen. Four texts and two missed calls. He read the text from Lestrade first: Need name of security officer @ bank. Don’t forget statement. Did u talk 2 him?? The rest of the texts and the calls were from Owen, in progressively urgent tones. John sighed, looked at Sherlock’s closed door, and took his coffee upstairs.

“It’s really hitting the fan over here,” Owen said grimly. “Turns out bringing in this Mycroft Holmes was rather the nuclear option. My boss’s boss is worked up. There’s a meeting this afternoon. Apparently it’s make or break time for us—he could take the whole case away.”

“Oh, shit,” John said. Invoking Mycroft had been the nuclear option for him too—Sherlock would hit the roof. “Well, there’s a bit of good news: Sherlock’s broken it off with Moran.”

“Really? Fantastic. What’s the bad news?”

“Moran didn’t take it well. Beat the living daylights out of him.”

“Oh, my God,” Owen said with genuine shock in his voice. “John, I swear, I—”

“No, it’s not your fault. I think it was over by the time you got there.” Owen had said Sherlock had his head down when he came out; he probably hadn’t noticed anything from across the street.

“Oh God. How bad is it, anything broken?”

“His nose and eardrum…probably a couple of ribs.”

“Shit.” Owen was silent a moment, then said tentatively, “John…”

“No.”

“What?”

“He’s not going to talk to you, Owen. He’ll clam up and then insult you and you’ll end up wanting to punch him yourself.”

“I have to try,” Owen said, clearly frustrated. “Sherlock Holmes is the only lead I’ve got. The victim in Amsterdam is dead.”

“What?” John set his coffee down quickly. “Did Moran—”

“No, nothing like that. The guy was a drug user; he died of an overdose about a year ago.”
John was silent, thinking. “What time is your meeting?”

“Sixteen hundred.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to Sherlock. I’ve a much better shot at finding out what he knows than you do. I assume I’m clear to tell him everything now?”

“If you’re sure he’s not going back to Moran—“

“I am absolutely sure,” John said, letting Owen hear the steel in it.

“Then okay, everything you know. When can you get back to me?”

“I’ve got to go round to the chemist and get some things for him, and then I’ve got to try to wake him up, which is going to be harder than it sounds—he was up for three days. I’ll ring you in—“ John checked his watch. “—three hours, or when I know something, whichever comes first.”

“That’s your way of telling me to sod off and not bother you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” John smiled. “I’d best be off. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Waking Sherlock was every bit as horrible as John had predicted.

“I know, love, I’m sorry,” John said as Sherlock made a miserable noise, trying to burrow under the covers without actually moving. “We need to get these drops in your ear and you need to drink something. Just budge over a bit.” He finally managed to maneuver Sherlock to his other side and said, “Here, hold this ice in your mouth while I get the drops. Good. Now hold still.” He tipped the tiny bottle, replaced the cap, and realized that Sherlock had dozed off again. The ice had slid right out of his mouth.

“Sherlock—“ John retrieved the ice before it melted. “Come on, Sherlock, wake up. I really have to talk to you. There are some things I didn’t tell you last night.”

Sherlock’s good eye cracked open at that. “What didn’t you tell me?”

“Drink first. Look, I’ve water, tea, and one of those iced coffees from the Thai place.”

Sherlock tried to frown. “You really want me awake.”

“Afraid so, yeah.”

“I’ll take the coffee.”

Happily the coffee had come with a straw, so drinking it whilst practically lying on his side was not as difficult for Sherlock as it might have been. He drank the whole thing, then took the paracetamol John brought him with the water.

“You think I’m going to be upset,” Sherlock said dispassionately as John took the glass away. He painfully pushed himself upright. “Whatever it is you have to tell me, you don’t want to. You think I won’t like it.”

“Pretty much,” John said.

“Stop putting it off to mollycoddle me then.”
“Sherlock—“

“I’m an adult. I make my own choices, whatever you think of them, just as you make yours, and you are certainly free to unmake them if you’ve thought better of it.” Sherlock was using his snottiest, poshest voice, which at the moment sounded like nothing so much as Mycroft with a bad head cold, and John whipped around to snap back at him. But he didn’t. Sherlock’s last words sank in at the same moment he glimpsed Sherlock’s face, which was…scared. At least in the split second before his aloof expression slammed into place.

John’s irritation evaporated. He sat on the bed and made himself comfortable against the headboard. “You’re being an idiot,” he said amiably. “But you’re short on sleep and you’ve been knocked around like a football, so. I’ll make allowances. What’s really worrying me is that you’re not going to want to be with me when I’m done talking, so please bear in mind that everything I did was to try to keep you safe, because you’re too mental to do it yourself, and you’re the most important thing on the planet to me. Now can you please come over here? Because that’s about all the talking about feelings I can manage at one go.”

Sherlock stared for a second, looked away, glanced back, looked away again, and finally—still not looking at John—eased himself down. To John’s surprise, he rested his head on John’s thigh. He curled up as John carded his fingers through Sherlock’s wild curls and ran his hand softly over his neck and shoulders.

“Okay?” John asked and Sherlock nodded, curling his fingers against John’s leg. “Tuesday night when you left the Yard, I went after you,” John began. “but you’d gone, so I went for a pint with Lestrade….” He described the encounter with Owen and their subsequent meeting, including everything he could remember about Moran’s crimes. He thought he was doing quite well until he realized that he was gripping Sherlock’s shoulder so fiercely that he would likely have a fresh bruise. He loosened his hand. Sherlock lay very still; John couldn’t see his face.

“Last night…” This part was even harder. John hated even thinking about the terror he’d felt, waiting, and he really hated admitting to Sherlock that he’d gotten Mycroft involved. Sherlock, however, showed no reaction at all. John was beginning to wonder if he’d gone back to sleep.

“…so there’s a meeting, with Mycroft I assume, later this afternoon. Sherlock, I—I can’t really say I’m sorry because I would do it again if I had to, but I know it’s not what you would have wanted. I don’t know if there’s any way to get Mycroft out of it now, but if you know anything, anything at all, that could help with the case against Moran…”

Sherlock was motionless, his fingers still against John’s leg. The silence stretched out. John swallowed against his dry throat, his heart beginning to thud unpleasantly again. Had he ruined everything? Was Sherlock angry? Shocked by what John had told him about Moran? Frightened? What?

When Sherlock finally spoke, his voice was so quiet that John could hear no expression in it at all.

“I haven’t told you everything either,” Sherlock said.
In the end, he still didn’t tell John everything. Not right away.

Sherlock informed John that if he had to be awake he might as well be up properly, so John nodded and went off to make tea while Sherlock struggled to the toilet and then to his chair. Everything hurt, but he didn’t really feel much worse sitting up than he did lying down. Telling John what he had to tell was going to be agonizing, and he couldn’t bear the thought of being left pathetic and crumpled on the bed if it went badly.

John brought him some tea and very soft toast, with lots of butter and jam. He was matter of fact and didn’t fuss. Sherlock felt mortifyingly grateful. He drank the toast and tried the toast, but he couldn’t swallow it down. He steepled his fingers and gathered the shreds of his dignity around him like armor, a process made difficult by the knowledge that he resembled a dog’s chew toy.

“As you are aware,” he began formally, “In the past, for a period of time, I was sexually active. My attempts at relationships had been unsuccessful, so most of my encounters were with strangers and took place whilst I was high on cocaine.”

He chanced a look at John, but John was simply listening, his face open. He did not seem shocked or disgusted. Heartened, Sherlock went on.

“As I stated last night, I usually sought partners who would be, er, firm. I did not seek sadists or invite violence. After I was clean and had committed myself to my work, I left all that behind.” Even with John having done the hard part of speaking first, the next part was difficult. “Recently, however, after the incident at the pool, I realized that I had formed an attachment to you.” Deep breath. Was that all right? Yes, John was smiling. “A strong attachment,” he added emphatically. “But you—I believed you to be unattainable. I tried to put my feelings aside. In the course of a case, I was propositioned. It had been a long time, and under other circumstances…but you were out. On a date. I accepted.”

“But you didn’t get high,” John said, not quite a question.

“No!” Sherlock looked John in the eye. Then he dropped his gaze. “Alcohol and caffeine,” he admitted.

“The club was more overwhelming sober than I remembered,” Sherlock said irritably. “It took two drinks for me to be able to tolerate it, so I was somewhat impaired, yes.”

For some reason John seemed to be finding this rather funny, although Sherlock could see him struggling to hide it. “So you went to a club, got drunk, and pulled a bloke without lifting a finger,” he said. “Why am I not more surprised? Then what happened?”

“I went back and did it again,” Sherlock snapped. “You were seeing a lot of the vegan, and I kept thinking about it. What you were doing.”

The amusement was gone now; John’s smile was fond, and a little sad. He still showed no sign of anger though. Sherlock had worried that John would view his getting off with multiple strangers as
very much not fine, so overall this conversation was going better than he had hoped.

“The night I left with Sebastian, I believed that it would also be an isolated event. However, he expressed a desire to see me again. I knew I did not have feelings for him—“ Sherlock grimaced—“but Sebastian had been quite clear he had no wish for any sort of relationship, so I thought an arrangement would be acceptable. In the beginning things were satisfactory. If we were both free I would go to his flat, he would pour a drink, we would talk about music.” Sherlock made a vague gesture meant to convey ‘and then we had rough but not abusive sex’. “One night, several weeks ago, Sebastian expressed a desire to tie me up.” Sherlock looked away. “I had never done this before, but I was…not opposed.”

“As I understand it, many people who are sensitive to sensory input find bondage very soothing,” John said reassuringly. “Where you blindfolded too?”

Oh thank God, apparently being tied up was fine. “No. He offered, but I preferred to be face down so it was unnecessary. But that was a problem, because Sebastian wanted me on my back. I can’t—I don’t like to be on my back.”

John’s eyes narrowed. “In general, or during sex?”

“Sex—ah, penetrative sex,” Sherlock managed. His throat was tight.

John nodded calmly. “There are things I don’t like too. We’ll talk it all out when the time comes.”

Sherlock was torn between frustration that John did not understand—this wasn’t like having ticklish earlobes, the blind choking panic that came over him at the very thought of it—and the horrible suspicion that he actually did.

“He acquiesced and tied me face down, but I did not realize that I had angered him by insisting. I, I don’t always realize, you know that. He was rough, much more than usual, more than I wanted. I didn’t like it, I didn’t want—but he, he—he touched me, and I—“ Sherlock was drowning, unable to string the right words into a ladder to get out.

“Sherlock.” John’s voice was gentle and firm. “Sherlock, if you responded to sexual stimulation in that circumstance, that doesn’t make you a masochist or mean there is anything wrong with you. It means that you are a physiologically sound human male. It’s normal, Sherlock.”

Sherlock dared to look, but it was not all fine. John’s hands were clenched. Sherlock glanced away again. He hated it, the not knowing. He had to know.

“Are you angry with me,” he managed finally and hated how small his voice sounded.

“What? Oh—“ John glanced down and deliberately opened his hands. His voice, impossibly, became even calmer, as though gentling a spooked horse. “No, Sherlock, I’m not angry with you. I’m angry at Moran, for not respecting your limits. For being rough. Did you try to safeword?”

Sherlock stared. Safeword?

“He tied you up and hurt you and didn’t give you a safeword,” John said, voice gone dangerous again. He looked at Sherlock and took a deep, deep breath. “Still not you. All right? Not you.” He folded his hands deliberately in his lap.

Sherlock nodded, still not entirely reassured, but he forged on. “The experience was very intense, and I was not…entirely aware of my surroundings immediately after. I believe Sebastian believed me to be only semiconscious, because when he returned from washing—he always washed immediately...
after—I heard him taking pictures.” Sherlock was trying to sound detached, but he heard his voice rising. “I registered this as unusual. I was also somewhat surprised by the degree of violence he had exhibited during the encounter. I do not understand much of what passes between people, John, but I do have experience with this, and I did not feel that these behaviors were typical of someone wishing to exert dominance in a consensual environment. Because of this, and because—because of this, I became suspicious. I therefore called in my favor from Mycroft and requested information on Sebastian’s postings during the past ten years. The information was heavily redacted, obviously, but I had no interest in his clandestine activities, only in the locations. I then scanned reports for the corresponding dates. My findings, of course, are already known to you. I concluded two things: that Sebastian Moran was at heart a sadistic predator, and that he kept a visual record of his victims. I thought of it as a scrapbook.”

Silence fell. Sherlock didn’t dare look at John. There was no need; he knew John would be angry. He didn’t want to know how much.

“You knew,” John said in a tone that could freeze lava. “You knew weeks ago. You knew, and you went back.”

“I went back,” Sherlock said with precision, “for the scrapbook.”

John stood up abruptly and went to the window. Sherlock closed his good eye and bit his mangled lip. There was a hateful trembling in his stomach. John would leave now, John who had held his hand through the night, who had called him love. John could not forgive this, Sherlock knew it. He bit down harder, tasting fresh blood. He was broken and hurting and half blind and half deaf and John was going to leave him, and he would not cry.

Footsteps stopped in front of him; Sherlock had not heard John move from the window. The trembling feeling spread, making his body feel chilled and distant. Then something cold and soothing touched Sherlock’s mouth: ice. “Don’t, love,” John’s voice said softly. “It’s bad enough as it is.”

Sherlock’s eyes flew open and his mouth opened in surprise. John rubbed the ice over his bottom lip, cupping the back of his head when Sherlock wobbled. The cold soothed the pain in his lip even as the rest of him warmed, and the trembling subsided. John lifted the half melted ice cube, tipped Sherlock’s head back to check his mouth, and took the bloody ice to the kitchen.

“Now you are angry with me,” Sherlock said when he came back.

“Oh, yeah,” John said as he sat down. “And you knew I would be, didn’t you?”

Sherlock nodded. “Are you going to leave?”

John tilted his head. Sherlock studied him desperately, but his face revealed nothing—not to Sherlock, at any rate. John’s eyes softened a little.

“I don’t want to, no. I just got you, I don’t want to give you up. But Sherlock, you have to promise me. The next time you think it would be a good idea to do something that you know will make me angry—don’t do it. Not without talking to me. Really talking, not that trick you pulled with Lestrade.”

Sherlock was already nodding. “Yes,” he said.

“What do you mean, yes?”

“Yes. I promise.”
John looked nonplussed. “Just like that?”

“What I had not anticipated,” Sherlock began, “was that Sebastian’s behavior toward me would change. At first I was afraid that I had aroused his suspicion, but I do not think that was the case. Where previously he had been indifferent to my reasons if I were unavailable, he now began to demand that I account for the time that I spent out of his company. He was consistently more forceful when we were together but afterwards began briefly to display tenderness if I appeared to be in distress. I had been able to persuade him to limit the amount of visible marking by telling him that as a doctor you would be excessively concerned if you noticed anything, but now he became infuriated if I so much as mentioned your name. I was at a loss to account for this behavior.” He looked hopefully at John.

John was rubbing at his head, a strange little smile on his face. “It sounds to me,” he said, “like you managed to find the one person on the planet with even less experience and skill at normal relationships than you, and then your no-strings-attached casual fling went and fell for you and turned into a possessive, jealous, abusive cliché. If I didn’t want to see him spend the rest of eternity in a bottomless pit, I might feel a bit sorry for him.”

Sherlock’s mouth fell open in what he knew must be an unattractive expression of astonishment. It hurt his jaw. Dear God, he was the interpersonal equivalent of Anderson. Jealousy! He had taken Sebastian at face value; this possibility had never occurred to him. “That…explains quite a bit,” he acknowledged. “Tuesday…” he trailed off as John went white.

“Oh no. God, no. Is that why he—because I texted you that night? Sherlock, is that why?”

“I had already made him angry,” Sherlock said desperately, but John was up and pacing, rubbing a hand across his mouth as though he might be sick. Sherlock went tight and cold but John stopped in front of him and said, “Not angry at you, not angry at you, just—shit,” and turned to lean his hands on the windowsill.

Sherlock said tentatively, “It’s all right, really, it worked out for the best—” and John whirled on him, almost shouting, “What?” and then held up both hands when Sherlock flinched. “Just give me a minute,” he said and went to the kitchen. The kettle clicked on. John strode back into the room, took Sherlock’s head in his hands, and kissed him: forehead, top of his head, forehead again, and finally rested his cheek against Sherlock’s hair. Sherlock reached up and gripped John’s wrists to hold him in place.

“He hurt you because of me,” John whispered and Sherlock, finally understanding, said, “No. He hurt me because he could.”

After a minute John sighed and said a bit shakily, “Tea,” and Sherlock let go of his wrists. John came back with two fresh mugs, looking calmer, and settled into his chair. “Okay,” he said.
“It worked out for the best,” Sherlock began again tentatively, “because I had been searching the flat, every chance I had which was not often, and found nothing that could be the scrapbook. Sebastian had a laptop, obviously, but I was sure he would keep nothing sensitive on it. But Tuesday Sebastian was—I angered him, when I arrived there, I was intemperate because of—the police, and he—he tied me to the bed, rather in a hurry. He had pushed me onto my back first, I was—I was—"

“Breathe, Sherlock,” John said softly. He was very pale.

Sherlock sucked in a huge breath and then couldn’t stop, panting until John pulled his own chair forward and lay his hands gently over Sherlock’s.

“I was frightened,” he got out finally. “But then when you texted, he was very angry and he said I needed to be taught a lesson, and he turned me over so he could…and then he didn’t bother to turn me back round. John, I could not have borne it if he had. As it was…Sebastian was usually fastidious about mess, he always took the duvet off, put down towels, but that night he was distracted. When he—it happened again, what you said was normal—“ Oh God, he hoped John was understanding this, he couldn’t bear to spell it out further. “He was angry after, at the mess, there was blood too—from my back,” he added hurriedly at John’s look of horror. “He was so angry, he thr—he pushed me to the floor so he could strip the duvet off and I landed half under the bed. I saw a slit cut in the box spring and I reached up. There was a memory stick inside.”

“Did you take it?”

“I couldn’t. Sebastian would know it was me. And obviously as evidence its admissibility would be seriously questionable. There was too much risk for too little gain.”

“Then what—"

“I bought an identical memory stick as soon as I left his flat. I took it to a contact of mine—she keeps late hours, fortunately—who knows computers and owes me a favor. She corrupted it with a virus, so that it would look as though the original had been damaged, and I kept it with me.”

“So last night…”

“I went back.” Sherlock met John’s eyes. “It would have been wiser to wait, to go when he called, to have control over the situation. But I just wanted it to be over, to be able to tell you that I had ended it. But as I said, I underestimated Sebastian’s anger. I didn’t know at first if I would be able to get to the bedroom at all.”

John just looked at him, his face full of pain, and Sherlock said helplessly, “Don’t make me tell it all, you won’t like it.”

“Okay. How did you do it then?”

“It was difficult; I could have gotten away at any time, of course, but I had to seem convincingly overwhelmed but also as though I were at least trying to resist. In the end I said I was going to be sick. I knew Sebastian would let me go. But then he, he—“ Sherlock swallowed and felt John’s hands tighten. “He caught me coming out of the toilet. I assure you, I did not respond to that encounter with anything but revulsion.”

“Oh Sherlock,” John said, anguished.

Sherlock had to look away. It had hurt. Coming after the beating, with no preparation, the brutal violation of his body had been almost more than he could bear. He stared at his knees a moment, unseeing, then focused on John’s steady hands holding his, and then he could go on.
“When he finished he went to wash as he always did. I switched the memory sticks as quickly as I could but he came out before I could get away from the bed, so… I was sick on the floor.” Sherlock smiled, a tight painful thing. “It was the only thing I could think of to do but I hated it—I kept thinking how angry you would be, that I vomited the only food I had eaten in days. He threw me out, as I expected.”

“Sherlock, he’ll come after you,” John said.

“It could be days, or weeks, before he realizes the stick is damaged. Even if he connects it to me, which he may not, by then we should be able to have him arrested.”

“That wasn’t what I meant, he’ll come after you because—wait, how? You said yourself it wasn’t admissible as evidence.”

“Because he takes pictures of all his victims, not just the ones he kills. Murder was never the object, rape was the object. He killed the men in Afghanistan and Iraq because he knew their families would cover up the circumstances. But when he was back home, he didn’t kill his victims, because there would have been a much more thorough investigation. Instead he preyed on drug addicts and prostitutes, who were less likely to complain about rough treatment, and let them live.”

“You might be right. There was a victim in Amsterdam, raped but not murdered; but what makes you so sure that there were any in London? That’s a lot more risky.”

Sherlock went silent. He had never had any intention of telling this part to John. He had never talked about it, had done his best never even to think about it, would have given anything to delete it. But now the thought of giving this one last thing to John like an offering, to have no more secrets from him, seemed almost possible.

Sherlock carefully withdrew his hands from John’s and steepled them under his chin. It happened to somebody else, he told himself, just a crime from the past I never got around to telling John about, a long time ago. He was distantly aware of John pushing his chair back a bit, respecting the unspoken plea for distance. Sherlock took a deep, painful breath, sat up straight, and said in his most clipped voice, “I know because I was one of them. Eight years ago, I agreed to perform oral sex on a man in exchange for enough money for a hit. Instead the man forced me down when I was too strung out to resist and forcibly penetrated me while applying pressure to my trachea until I lost consciousness. He repeated this multiple times. He then took pictures and left me on the street. My memory of the event was obviously fragmentary and I was unable to provide a description of my assailant at that time, but it was Sebastian Moran. I knew the night he tied me down and took pictures. I knew, and I remembered everything, and I knew he had to be stopped. He never recognized me. I looked very different, back then.”

John said nothing. Sherlock flicked a quick look at him—waxy and stricken—and then it was his turn to get up. The movement made pain ripple through his back and chest. He went to the window and leaned on the sill, looking out at nothing. He was too exhausted even to fidget.

Behind him he heard John stir and then his soft footsteps, coming toward the window. His warm hand closed over Sherlock’s cold fingers. “What I’d really like,” he remarked, matter-of-factly, “would be to take you back to bed and kiss every part of you, so many times, so many different ways, that the sheer volume of the data would drive everyone else out of your head. But this is about the only part of you that seems safe to touch, so…” He kissed the palm of Sherlock’s hand, tenderly.

Sherlock had to squeeze his eyes shut briefly. “The top of my head seems all right,” he said finally, trying to match John’s carefully light tone. He couldn’t quite manage eye contact yet.
John huffed a small laugh against his palm. “Can’t reach it, you great giraffe.”

Sherlock turned and folded himself over to lower his head. He could only hold the position for a few seconds—the pain in his chest was awful—but it was worth it to feel John smooth his hair back and kiss the crown of his head.

Sherlock had to put his other hand on John’s shoulder to straighten up. “Time for you to call Owen Davies,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

Medical inaccuracies drive me bananas, so I want to clarify that Sherlock failing to recognize Moran initially is actually completely plausible. By his own account (and Lestrade’s), Sherlock lost consciousness repeatedly and was unconscious when he was found. Because of the way the brain stores memories, a person who loses consciousness suddenly will usually be amnestic not just for the event, but often for the preceding hours or even days. The memories often return in some form, but it may take months. (Famously, the "Central Park Jogger" never remembered anything, which was part of the reason that the wrong men were convicted and spent years in jail before being exonerated by DNA evidence.) When Sherlock awoke, he would have remembered almost nothing about Moran. The memories that gradually surfaced later would have been ruthlessly suppressed. The event that caused Sherlock to remember happened fairly early on—before John and Sherlock went to Dartmoor—so for almost all of the period described in the story Sherlock knew Moran for what he was, hence all the brooding and sleeplessness and so on.
Chapter 18

“All right, explain this plan to me,” Owen said.

Sherlock and Owen were at the desk with Sherlock’s laptop open and John was dragging a kitchen chair over to join them. John had told Owen about the memory stick as he was en route to Baker Street, while Sherlock looked over the pictures. Sherlock, on being introduced, had drawled with all the hauteur he could muster—a fair amount, considering he was in his dressing gown and pajamas and looked as though he’d been hit by a lorry—“Left Wales fifteen years ago, recently promoted, would prefer a dog but your partner has allergies—no, cultural or religious objection, hence a cat.”

Owen, not batting an eyelash, looked Sherlock up and down and replied, “I thought you were meant to be good looking. If that’s the best John could do for your face, you need a new doctor, mate.” They had got on splendidly after that.

Mrs. Hudson bustled in with a plate of biscuits. “I heard company—oh. OH.” She caught sight of the pictures on the computer, then of Sherlock. “Oh, dear.”

Sherlock ignored her. John said, “It’s all going to be fine, Mrs. Hudson, but you might want to excuse us, thanks very much for the biscuits.”

“I’ll just let you get your own tea, then,” Mrs. Hudson said and beat a hasty retreat.

Owen said, “I’ve got, um, forty-four minutes, so maybe we should skip the tea and you can talk me through my official story.”

Sherlock frowned at Owen and said, “John requires tea in stressful situations. Or whiskey.”

“I’m okay, Sherlock, I’ll have the tea later,” John said, thinking that actually the whiskey did sound like a better idea. “Show him what you’ve got.”

“All right. These are the most recent photos by date—all taken between four and seven months ago.” Sherlock clicked and a series of three photographs appeared. Owen leaned forward, peering at the three men intently, but John had to look away. “As you can see, all were taken in the same location, not Sebastian’s flat, a cheap hotel. I’ve been able to deduce the most likely part of town due to findings in the rooms and the pattern of lights seen through the windows.” He pointed at Owen. “You had assumed, reasonably but incorrectly, that Sebastian Moran was a serial killer who derived pleasure from strangling his victims. This is untrue. Sebastian Moran does enjoy a sadistic form of breathplay, but at heart he is a rapist, who kills as needed to conceal his crimes.”

Owen rubbed the back of his neck. “The profiler we tried, the American, said that he was motivated by his conflicted sexuality. That he blamed the victims for making him want them.”

Sherlock shrugged. “Not my area. Ask him when you catch him. At any rate after Amsterdam you realized your error and set out to investigate potential victims here in London. By great good fortune you had recently encountered John, on an outing with his army mates, and been informed of his flatmate’s prodigious detecting skills.”

“Which has the considerable advantage of being true,” said Owen, kicking John, who was still giggling over “prodigious detecting skills”.

“Of course you verified my credentials with Detective Inspector Lestrade, as well as my extensive knowledge of London’s seedier neighborhoods. You phoned John, we met today—now—and have
arranged to visit the most likely neighborhoods tomorrow night, to locate Moran’s victims and persuade them to swear out a complaint.”

“Why not tonight?” Owen asked, ignoring John’s outraged squawk.

“Because it’s Saturday. Nobody will talk to us tonight; too busy.”

“And also you can barely move,” John pointed out.

Sherlock waved this aside—not very gracefully—and then said to Owen, who was looking worried: “Seventy-two hours, that’s all you’re asking for, likely less but that gives us an extra night if we need it. We aren’t going to be looking at random, we already have pictures of the victims, but obviously your superiors need to remain ignorant of that fact given the circumstances under which they were obtained.”

“All right. I’d best be off then.” He nodded at John and said, “I’ll text you directly it’s over, okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll walk you out,” John said. When they were down the stairs he said, “Listen, don’t let Mycroft push you around. He’ll try but he’ll never respect you if you don’t stand up to him. You know the type.”

“All too well. Take care of your lad there,” Owen answered and then looked uncomfortable. “About that...you know I was just taking the piss, right?”

“It’s fine. Now go on, you’ll be late.”

When John returned Sherlock was still sitting at the desk, looking thoughtful. The laptop was still open in front of him, screen gone dark. John crossed to stand next to him and rubbed his unkempt hair. “Doing all right?”

“My brother is going to contact you after the meeting,” Sherlock said, almost absently. “He might phone, though it’s more likely he will actually turn up.”

“Want me to tell him to piss off?”

“If he deserves it, but...I think he will wish merely to ascertain that I am all right. You may reassure him if you like.”

John was not sure what that was all about, but he had long ago learned that he was happier staying out of the Holmes brothers’ weirdness. “Okay.”

“And if insists on being concerned,” Sherlock said, giving the word his usual disdainful emphasis, “we might as well take advantage of it. Have him send a doctor round tomorrow…” John’s face must have revealed something, for he snapped, “Oh, don’t be an idiot. I would prefer never to be touched by anyone but you for the rest of my life, if possible.”

“Well, I’m not cutting your hair,” John said, relieved. “Why the doctor then?”

“I want to be tested. Sebastian was meticulous about condoms but still…” Sherlock gestured toward the laptop. “I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Oh.” John considered this. “Can Mycroft’s doctor test me too?”

Sherlock looked startled. “Certainly, but you know what Mycroft will deduce from that.” The uncertainty in his face, even now, hurt.
“Well,” John said lightly, “It’s Mycroft. He’s going to deduce it anyway, won’t he? If he hasn’t already.” The uncertain look vanished.

“Nosy git,” Sherlock muttered. John grinned, but then Sherlock looked up at him, his face serious. “I need to show you something.”

“Something to do with the scrapbook, or…”

“Yes. Here.” Sherlock touched a key and a picture appeared on the screen. A different room, even more run-down than the ones they had seen previously; a different young man, far more emaciated. His ribs and cheekbones stuck out like…his cheekbones.

“That’s you,” John said numbly, staring at the screen. “Eight years ago.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said quietly. “I didn’t—I didn’t want you to see it, but I want you to know everything there is to know, no more secrets. I did crop it though. I thought it might help.”

The gaunt figure on the screen was shown only from the waist up. John looked at it silently, seeing everything: the long tangled hair, the bruises, the track marks. His own arms came up and he wrapped them around Sherlock’s shoulders, gazing over his head. Sherlock turned his less-injured temple to nuzzle into John’s arm.

John reached for the track ball and clicked. “Do you want to keep this for anything?”

“As a reminder of my foolishness, you mean? No. I’ve been trying to forget it for eight years.”

John clicked “delete” and the picture vanished. He tightened his arms a little, careful not to squeeze. Sherlock rested his head on John’s arm and sighed. John closed his eyes, just letting himself feel the live warmth of Sherlock’s body.

“I’m going back to bed,” Sherlock mumbled into John’s shoulder.

That woke John up. “Food first.”

“Food tomorrow.”

“No, food today. I got you mango sticky rice when I was at the Thai place.” Cool, soft, sweet: Sherlock would not be able to come up with a reason not to eat it.

“Mmm,” Sherlock said, considering. “John?”

“Yeah?”

“May I have the other half of that pill?”

It took a minute for John to realize he was referring to the painkiller John had given him the night before. It seemed like years ago. “Not on an empty stomach.”

“I’ll eat the rice.”

John got out the rice and stuck the previous night’s leftovers in the microwave for himself while he went for the pill. They really needed to eat more veg, he thought vaguely as he poked at his chicken. Here he was, a doctor, feeding his patient iced coffee and sticky rice. Sherlock wasn’t even eating the mango; he was pushing it aside in a little pile.

“The mango hurts my mouth,” Sherlock said without even looking up. “And it takes three to six
months to develop clinical symptoms of scurvy in the absolute absence of ascorbic acid, which is almost impossible in the developed world. There’s loads of vitamin C in jam.”

“What a relief,” John said dryly. “It still wouldn’t hurt either one of us to eat a fruit that hasn’t been processed with a quart of sugar. Or better yet a green leaf that hasn’t been dried, steeped, and doused in sugar and milk.” He ate some more chicken, thinking that the next time he would at least order saag. “Do you think they’ll buy Owen’s story?”

“Why not? As he said, it’s mostly true. Mycroft won’t, but that doesn’t matter. He’ll give Owen his seventy-two hours rather than admit he doesn’t know what I’m up to. Oh.” Sherlock reached into the pocket of his dressing gown and held something out to John: a memory stick. “Give this to Mycroft when he comes calling; I’ve already copied it.”

“The scrapbook? Why?”

“So that he can replace it in Moran’s flat after he’s arrested. That way Owen’s team will find it when they search the flat.”

This seemed vaguely unethical, but John couldn’t think why. It wasn’t as if they were planting anything, after all; just replacing something Sherlock had actually stolen in the first place. Minus the pictures of Sherlock, obviously. A thought struck him. “Sherlock? What about the other pictures of you, the recent ones?”

“They weren’t there.”

“What, he deleted them?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t find them.”

John frowned, puzzled. “Doesn’t that seem a bit weird?”

“I don’t know…I don’t even understand normal relationships, let alone this one. Does it?” Sherlock scraped the bottom of the dish. Then he sat and fidgeted with his spoon until John finally got the hint.

“Want me to lie down with you for a bit?” he asked, and Sherlock broke into a somewhat tattered version of the radiant smile John only seemed to get when Sherlock was half drugged. “All right. Go clean your teeth, I’m just going to clear this away. And put on some more salve!” It was only late afternoon, but John rather thought he wouldn’t mind a bit of a lie-down himself; the day had been exhausting. Sherlock would undoubtedly sleep clear through until tomorrow, but John would just rest a bit until Mycroft showed up.

The thought reminded him of the memory stick. He looked at it in his hand, small and innocuous, and thought about all the pictures on it and the suffering they represented, of what Sherlock had gone through to get it. The sooner the thing was out of their flat the better. He set it carefully on the table, and went to find Sherlock’s ear drops.
Chapter 19

John stared at Sherlock over the grubby table in the dingy pub. “You want us to what?”

“To stay here,” Sherlock repeated patiently. “You’re both completely obvious. No one is going to talk to me if you’re along.”

“Absolutely not,” John said. He narrowed his eyes. “You knew I wouldn’t like this, that’s why you didn’t mention it until now.”

“Invoking third party arbitration,” Sherlock said, turning to Owen.

“Not him, he’s biased.” John pulled out his phone. “I’m calling Lestrade.”

Lestrade was pleased and surprised to hear from John so early in the evening, though from the sound of it he was in the middle of his dinner. “Did you find someone already?” Lestrade had been drafted as their official police liaison; he would file civilian charges against Moran if anyone they found could identify him from a photo array.

“Not yet, we need you for something else.” John switched the phone to speaker and set it on the table. “Sherlock and I have an agreement that he’s not to bugger off and do anything that endangers his life without consulting me. If we can’t agree on how fucking stupid it is, we ask you to decide.”

“Okay,” Lestrade said agreeably. “What fucking stupid thing does he want to do?”

“I need to have John and the military investigator remain here whilst I meet with some drug dealers and pimps of my acquaintance and give them exorbitant sums of money to tell me if they know of any assaults on young men meeting our victim profile.” Actually Sherlock had the pictures in his pocket, cropped to head and shoulders, but only the three of them knew that. “Anyone with viable information will be unwilling to speak in their presence.” They heard Lestrade chewing as he thought this over. “I promise to remain within walking distance and to check in within one hour,” Sherlock added. John looked up, surprised at this concession, and Sherlock evidently misinterpreted his expression because he added, “Lestrade, John is wearing a cardigan.” Sherlock himself was wearing a battered fedora with the brim pulled down to shade his battered face. He should have looked ridiculous, but as usual was managing to pull it off.

“Well, I understand how you feel, John,” Lestrade said judiciously, “but I think it’s probably okay. For all the trouble I’ve seen Sherlock get into, it’s not usually been from criminal lowlifes. Criminal lowlifes seem to like Sherlock.”

“Yes, thank you. Go eat your pizza, we’ll be in touch,” Sherlock said briskly and disconnected the phone as Lestrade began “How—“ Evidently he feared Lestrade might start adding conditions of his own. Owen made a sympathetic face at John, who scowled. He knew he was being irrational, but he hated letting Sherlock out of his sight, especially when he could barely get to his feet unassisted.

“One hour,” Sherlock promised and then, to John’s surprise, dropped his hand to John’s shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. John, startled out of his sulk, looked up and said, “Just—“ and Sherlock said, “I will,” and walked out.

John turned back and caught Owen’s smirk. “Oh, don’t start.”

“What, has he taught you to read minds now too?” Owen was grinning. “Glad you managed to convince him you’re an improvement over the serial rapist. I could tell you wanted to.”
“Yeah, I did,” John admitted. He couldn’t help smiling back. He hadn’t really talked about the change in their relationship at all, even to Lestrade—it all seemed so new and fragile—but now he felt like a giddy kid. Sherlock fancies me! A beer or two and he would be writing their initials on the wall of the toilets.

“Calls for a pint, if we can trust the taps in this place,” Owen said, eying the bar dubiously.

“Might as well. We’ve got an hour.”

When they settled back down with beer and crisps John said, “You know all about my crazy life now; what about you? All I know is that your partner doesn’t like dogs.”

“Hisham. He’s an analyst for MI-6,” Owen said, brightening. “He was in military intelligence when we met but switched to documents when we decided to have a family. Muslim, obviously, so yeah, no dogs.”

“You’re gay,” John said, astonished.

Owen’s eyebrows went up. “So’re you, unless that whole conversation was some kind of weird metaphor for something.”

“Well, yeah, but—I mean, I’m actually bi, so—oh shit, I sound a right prat.” John mentally shook himself. “Sorry. See, my sister is gay, full stop, and she’s been an unstable mess most of her life. And Sherlock, well, you can imagine. So I’m bi, and most of my flings with men have been wild crazy unstable things, while most of my relationships with women have been really stable and kind of boring. I think I always assumed that when I settled down and became a real grown up, you know, stable and boring, it would be with a girl. But instead I went and fell for Sherlock hook, line, sinker and boat, even though I reckoned that meant a lifetime of, well, wild unstable craziness. Probably a short lifetime, truthfully. But here you are, and yet you have a normal stable life with, with cats.”

Owen burst out laughing. “You do realize that lots of other gay people manage those things too,” he said, snorting. “And I don’t want to make your head explode or anything, but we’ve also got kids.”


“You have a seriously weird circle of friends, mate,” Owen said, still laughing.

“Well, you’ve met Mycroft,” John said, pulling himself together. “You’ve pictures, yeah? Let’s see these kids.”

At three minutes shy of an hour John’s phone buzzed on the tabletop.

John did not even try to hide his relief. “He wants us to meet him at a restaurant,” he reported to Owen, reading the text. “Look this place up, would you? He says it’s nearby.”

The restaurant was only round the corner. It was a tiny curry place, so dark it was hard to make out the décor, which consisted mostly of photos of famous cricket players. As soon as John and Owen stepped in they were corralled by a waiter, who apparently spoke no English, and who silently showed them to a curtained alcove where Sherlock was sitting with two young men.

“This is Owen, and this is John,” Sherlock said to his new companions as they slid into seats.

“Hey. Nasir,” the younger man—no, a kid, he didn’t look a day over fifteen—said. He had artfully
tousled hair, a touch of mascara, and the ragged multi-layer wardrobe John associated with Sherlock’s homeless network. He had a large plate in front of him and was shoveling in food as though he hadn’t eaten in a week. He probably hadn’t. The other man was older, mid twenties, thin with long wavy hair and tired eyes. When he looked up, John realized with a shock that he was one of the men he had seen in Moran’s pictures. “This is Stephen,” Sherlock said. Stephen nodded and resumed carefully turning his teacup in his hands.

“Nasir and Stephen both had encounters with the man we are investigating,” Sherlock said.

“Encounter, fuck,” Nasir said. In spite of the circumstances, he had an engaging, friendly manner. “Bastard fucked me up.”

“How did you meet him?” John asked.

“I was on the streets, see? My parents had chucked me out. They’re old country, religious,” he explained at John’s shocked expression. “When they twigged I was gay they disowned me. So I came to London, tried to find a shelter but I was underage so I was put in care. That lasted about three weeks. Half the guys beat me up for being Muslim and half beat me up for being gay, and anybody left over beat me up for fucking existing. So I ran off. I was living with some mates in an abandoned building and I had a boyfriend then, so I was only doing oral here and there to get money.” He paused to slurp up a few quick bites. “This bloke picks me up, a big guy, I thought a soldier or a fighter but he talks more like a toff, no tattoos on him either. I say fifty for a blow job and he says fine, he has a room. I should have known that was off; most guys don’t spring for a room just for head. But I hadn’t been at it long then. So we go to the room and he has a flask—whiskey, I think it was—and it’s drugged. I mean, I don’t drink really,”—righteously—“but even I can handle that much.”

Stephen was nodding. “Same with me.” His accent was Irish, his voice pleasant and soft. “I don’t know what he put in there, but it wasn’t roofies. Some kind of sedative.”

Nasir made a face around his food. “It’s a bit blurry cause of that, but next thing I know I’m flat on my back and this guy has my fucking pants off and it’s pretty obvious he’s not interested in my mouth anymore. I’m saying, hey, no, man, I said oral, and he tells me to shut up, grabs my neck—“ Nasir tilted his head, demonstrating, “—so I shut up, yeah? He was pretty fucking scary. After, he leaves, and I’m, I’m hurting pretty bad, and I’m still all groggy, and I meet one of my mates on the street and he says I should go to hospital. So I do and I say I was assaulted but I can tell they’re just thinking, oh he’s just high, had a little fight with the other queers. And I get mad and I’m saying no way, I have rights, I did not consent to that and I want the police. So the police came and they took my complaint, but I don’t think they ever did anything, the tossers. No offense,” he added, looking at Owen.

“When was this, as best you can remember?” Sherlock asked, already texting.

“Just before Valentine’s Day. They had decorations up in the Casualty.”

Sherlock cocked his head at Stephen, who seemed considerably more reluctant. “It was the same for me.”

“If you could tell us just a little bit more,” John said, in his gentlest upset-witness tone.

Stephen stared at his hands. “I came to London with my band, but the band broke up. I share a flat with five other lads and play backup for clubs sometimes, but it’s hard to make the rent some months. I…I started using when my band broke up, and if I could just get clean…I’ve been on a waiting list for months. So sometimes if I really need money, then…I’m not gay, see. I mean, there’s nothing
wrong with it—“he looked anxiously at Nasir as though afraid of giving offence—“but I’m just not.”

“Well, yeah, I know you’re not gay, mate. Look at your hair,” Nasir said pityingly.

Stephen almost smiled but then dropped his head again. “I’ve never done anything but blow jobs. When that guy pushed me on the bed I just, I lost it a bit. The sedatives—I could feel it but not much, I’m sure my tolerance is higher than yours,” he said to Nasir. “I fought back and he ended up tying me down with my own socks and shirt. So I started screaming and he put his hand on my throat, just like with you, and he squeezed. He said if I screamed again he would kill me. I believed him.”

Stephen’s voice cracked. He tried to pick up his tea, but his hands were shaking too badly. “But then when he—when he—it hurt and I screamed anyway, and he…” He reached for his throat with one thin trembling hand. “I passed out.”

John stood up abruptly, feeling light-headed. He stepped through the curtain, went to the bar, and asked for a glass of water. He then stood there for a moment, breathing deeply, until his own hands stopped shaking enough to pick it up. He carried the glass back to Stephen and put a hand on his back; Nasir and Owen were already patting both shoulders as Stephen wiped his eyes with a handkerchief that John though was probably Owen’s. Sherlock, across, the table, appeared to be ignoring all of them as he tapped on his phone, but for once John didn’t mind. Sherlock was entitled to a bit of psychological breathing space at the moment.

“Lestrade’s obtaining the police reports,” Sherlock announced, pocketing his phone and standing impatiently. “They’re going to meet us there. Let’s go.”

“Hang on, don’t we need to—” Owen began.

“No,” Sherlock snapped and strode out.

Owen looked at John, who shrugged and said, “I don’t know--people just owe him favors. Ready, lads?”

They all met up at Owen’s office: Lestrade and Donovan, several of Owen’s people, and one of Mycroft’s indistinguishably glossy assistants. Lestrade, forewarned by John, restrained himself to a brief wince, but Donovan took one look at Sherlock and said, “Oh no. That’s just not on. A pop in the mouth, sure, but that’s way out of order. You want me to take care of somebody for you?”

“It’s being handled, thank you,” Sherlock said dismissively.

Donovan shrugged and strode off. John caught her as she was conferring with one of Owen’s agents. “Thanks,” he said.

Donovan looked at him as though he were being obtuse. “He may be a freak, but he’s our freak.”

Donovan and the agent took Stephen and Nasir to look at the photo arrays while Lestrade filled the rest of them in on the police reports. John had told Lestrade a version of the official story that included Sherlock getting beaten by shadowy military-government type thugs trying to drive him off Moran, followed by confessions of true feelings as John patched Sherlock up, with happy ever after sure to follow. As Owen would have said, it had the advantage of being mostly true. Lestrade therefore now gave John a quick thump on the shoulder and a grin before settling down to business.

“This one from February doesn’t give us much,” Lestrade reported. “There’s a description of the alleged assailant that definitely could be Moran, but there’s no hospital report included and as far as I
can tell no physical evidence logged. It would still be enough to arrest if the kid makes an identification though, especially given he’s underage. This other one, Stephen Kearney, is a different story. His injuries were more severe due to the, uh, assault. He ended up having a repair done under anesthesia. The good news is that DNA was recovered from under his fingernails, skin and blood both; he fought back pretty hard. There’s also a tox report positive for opiates and benzos. The hospital record is in here if you want to take a look, John.”

John opened the folder and immediately wished he hadn’t. He passed it to Owen.

“The DI worked the case pretty hard. She even identified two other previous cases that sounded similar, but couldn’t locate the victims.”

“Copy the files,” Sherlock said. “If we need the victims, I’ll find them.”

Donovan came up holding a photo of Moran. “Is this your guy?” she asked. “Cause if it isn’t, you might want to look into him too.”

“Did they make the ID?” Owen asked.

“Two for two,” Donovan replied and Owen whooped and hugged her.

Lestrade flourished a form. “Interagency request for DNA matching, already filled out, just sign right here.”

“So: you have enough at this point to arrest Moran,” a very tall woman, whom John thought was some type of military barrister, said to Lestrade. “But you’re going to hold off until the DNA from the Stephen Kearney assault is matched against ours, so that if there’s a match we can perform a joint arrest—“

“—and then you take physical custody, that’s correct,” Lestrade finished.

“What about the victims?” Donovan asked.

“Mycroft’s putting them in protective custody,” Sherlock said. He seemed please at Mycroft’s having to do anything.

“You’re all ready to take them, right? Sorry, didn’t catch your name,” John said to the sleek assistant.

“Emma,” she said, smiling brightly.

“Oh, God,” muttered Sherlock.

Hand on John’s shoulder aside, Sherlock had been so Sherlock-typical all evening that John felt as though the past two days might never have happened. He was silent all the way back to the flat, declined tea, and vanished off to clean his teeth as soon as he hung up his coat. John half expected him to close his bedroom door, but found it still open when he came back downstairs. John took in his pills and eardrops and then hesitated by the bed, saying, “Do you want me to, er…”

“Oh, don’t be an idiot,” Sherlock snapped and grabbed for his wrist. John smiled. He climbed into bed and took Sherlock’s hand, but Sherlock worked his way over until he was practically burrowing into John’s chest. John let go his hand to wind his fingers into Sherlock’s hair, and Sherlock gathered up a handful of John’s shirt.
“Do you want me to rub your head?” John asked, and Sherlock nodded. “And tell you how wonderful you were?” he said, teasing a little, but Sherlock dipped his head again. His noisy mouth breathing was loud against John’s chest.

“Okay, just—here, lift—” John got his other arm under Sherlock and maneuvered him so that he was wrapped in John’s arms. “Hey, Sherlock? It’s fine if you just want to hold my shirt, but you can also, you know, hold me. If you want. Like I’m doing.”

Sherlock loosened his grip on John’s pajamas and tentatively reached around his back, where he carefully clutched a fresh handful of shirt. This was progress, John supposed. “That’s perfect,” he said gently. “You are a fucking marvel, you’re a bloody fantastic genius, look how you found those kids, not even an hour, and now you’re my fucking marvel, your mad brilliant brain and all the rest of it, my beautiful, beautiful genius…” Sherlock, his eyes closed, smiled like an angel, albeit an angel with a broken nose and split lips. “My beautiful, beautiful love,” John whispered. He kept it up even after Sherlock’s one-quarter pain pill had kicked in and his breathing had gone slow and even, as though Sherlock could still hear him in his sleep.

Late as it was, John himself felt no desire to sleep himself. Now that the net was closing around Moran, he felt keyed up and restless, anxious about the myriad ways things could still go wrong. What if the DNA tests were inconclusive? What if Moran got wind of the investigation and slipped away, or, worse yet, came after Sherlock? The thought made John’s arms tighten protectively. Sherlock stirred, disturbed by the pressure on his back, and John made himself relax. Mycroft had made it clear that the flat was being placed under surveillance and John himself would die before allowing Moran to touch Sherlock again. There was no more they could do for the time being but let Owen do his job.

John rested his cheek against Sherlock’s rumpled, slightly smoke-scented curls and decided to just enjoy the wonderful strangeness of having Sherlock asleep in his arms. He was under no illusion that it would happen very often once Sherlock recovered, so he might as well make the most of it now. Sherlock snuffled into his shirt, his swollen nose making his breathing loud and oddly soothing, the warm weight of his head heavy on John’s arm. John closed his eyes and smiled.

The DNA took three days.

John knew it was a ridiculously short turnaround, and that it was likely only due to Mycroft’s influence that it took three days instead of three months, but still: it was a long three days. They spent most of it in the flat. Mycroft had put security teams in place, and Sherlock’s main form of entertainment was picking them out from the window and then making John try to identify them. He usually failed.

Sherlock slept a great deal. John worried about depression, a little, but Sherlock was his usual self otherwise: stroppy and bored. Well, almost his usual self—to John, the only thing more adorable than Sherlock’s tentative attempts at expressing affection was his transparent joy when they were reciprocated. He seemed to find it easiest when they were in his bed, holding John’s hand or curled against him, dozing as though on an extended post-case crash. John decided he needed the sleep. Sherlock had been through a lot, no matter how much he pretended otherwise; he needed time to heal. John didn’t mind this a bit. He was so ridiculously infatuated that lying on Sherlock’s bed watching him sleep was fairly high on his list of favorite activities too. It was like an extremely chaste honeymoon.

Wednesday John was looking through one of Mrs. Hudson’s cookbooks, wondering if Sherlock would actually eat macaroni and cheese, when his phone rang. It was Lestrade.
“Are you at the flat?” Lestrade asked.

“Rhetorical question,” John answered, looking automatically at Sherlock. He was lying on the sofa in his new default brooding position, face down with his head hanging off the edge. He claimed it increased blood flow to the brain, but John knew it still hurt him to lie on his back.

“Excellent, stay there. The Combined Task Force is coming round with dinner.”

“Oh, thank God,” John said, shutting the cookbook. “What, you and Owen?”

“And Mycroft, of course,” Lestrade said, then, when John choked, “Just taking the piss. We haven’t even seen Mycroft. He just sends those android women around to harass us.”

“We’ll let you in then,” John promised, disconnecting. Sherlock sat up, his face bright red, and said, “They must have a DNA match.”

John had been so desperate for diversion he hadn’t even considered the reason. “That would be brilliant,” he said fervently. “You know what else would be brilliant? If you actually got dressed. You’ve been in those pajamas for days.”

“The shower hurts, and when do I get these stitches out? They itch.”

“Sunday. Stop whinging. You can take a bath if you want, just keep the water out of your ear.”

Sherlock was right, as always. Lestrade and Owen turned up flushed and happy, with cartons of food, a case of beer, and a bottle of whiskey for John. “From me,” Owen said, handing it to him, “on behalf of my whole team, for helping us finally get a case together against this bastard.”

“Thanks, but shouldn’t this be for Sherlock?”

“I’ve got him something else. You don’t drink, right, Sherlock?” Owen pulled out a woolen cap.

“What is that?” Sherlock asked, horrified.

“It’s a cap!”

“My grand dad had one like this,” John said, examining it with interest.

“Next time you need to go out with your face hidden, you can wear this instead of that awful hat,” Owen explained.

“Oh, I know that hat,” Lestrade said, looking up. “Take the cap, Sherlock. The hat makes you look like Humphrey Bogart.”

“Columbo,” Owen corrected.

“A flasher,” John said, and they all collapsed into giggles. Sherlock put on the cap, looked in the mirror, scowled, and put it away.

“So what happens now?” John asked when they all had food.

“The plan is that Mycroft is going to send an order for a sniper to be sent to the Middle East. Top secret, undisclosed location, blah blah blah. It’s sure to be Moran. Everything will go through the usual channels and he’ll show up at the airfield tomorrow night to take his super secret plane, as usual. We’ll have everything set up and make the arrest there. Sorry you can’t be there, but we have to be absolutely certain that there’s nothing out of the ordinary to tip him off.”
“What about you?” John asked Lestrade.

“Nope. I’m back on the rota tomorrow, waiting to hear just like you two.”

“You’ll let us know when you have him,” John said to Owen, not a question.

“Of course. You going to open that whiskey? We need to drink to Sherlock!”
Chapter 20

Of course Thursday was longer than the three previous days combined. In fact, it might have been the single longest day of John’s life. In the late afternoon he fled downstairs to Mrs. Hudson’s, where he and Mrs. Hudson made macaroni and cheese. Once it was in the oven they drank boxed wine and watched telly. It was the high point of John’s day.

Sherlock, predictably, refused to eat the macaroni and cheese. By evening they were driving each other mad: John sniping at Sherlock for his incessant fidgeting and Sherlock at John for constantly checking his phone, “as though the signal were suddenly to vanish in central London, honestly John.”

“Oh, go play your violin,” John snapped.

“I can’t. It hurts my jaw.”

“Your jaw is fine. Play me that thing you’ve been working on, the polyphonic whatever it is.”

“John.” Sherlock clutched at his hair in agony. “Polyphonic, John. Even you in your spectacular ignorance must be aware that ‘poly’ is a prefix meaning more than one and that therefore a single violin cannot play a polyphonic motet.”

“I’m watching telly,” John said.

John turned on the television and settled on the sofa, gritting his teeth to ignore Sherlock agitatedly flapping about. Finally Sherlock slunk over and curled up against him. John blew out a breath, looked down, and rumpled Sherlock’s hair. “I hate waiting,” Sherlock muttered.

John flipped around until he found a movie he had already seen, which meant Sherlock could enjoy criticizing it without ruining anything. He actually thought Sherlock had seen it too, but he probably deleted it. Even with Sherlock’s acerbic running commentary, John managed to get distracted enough that when his phone finally rang it took until the second ring to register. He leaped to his feet.

“Hello?”

“We got him,” Owen said, exultant. “It went off like clockwork. No resistance at all. He’s on his way for processing now.”

“Brilliant!” Something caught John’s eye out the window. He turned to see the lights in the flat opposite—occupied by their current security detail, according to Sherlock—flashing on and off. They stayed on, and a woman appeared in the window, giving John a grinning thumbs up and then a wave. The lights went off.

“I’m about to leave to follow them over,” Owen was saying. “If he’s half a brain he won’t say a word, but it can’t hurt to have a crack at him. It’s all down to you two, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Let me know how you get on,” John said, smiling. They said goodbye. John’s giddy relief was like helium—he felt he could float right out of the room.

John turned and almost collided with Sherlock, who was standing directly behind him with a complex mixture of hope and anxiety on his face. “Yes?” he asked.

“Yes,” John answered, and Sherlock broke into a huge, glowing smile. It ignited something low in
John’s gut that he had been rigorously tamping down for a week. He didn’t hesitate for a second; he grabbed the back of Sherlock’s head and dragged him down for a kiss.

Sherlock made a startled sound and for an instant John panicked, but then Sherlock melted against him, mouth opening, clutching at John as though trying to absorb him through his skin. John ran his tongue along Sherlock’s teeth and deepened the kiss, reveling in the sensation of Sherlock’s tongue against his, his soft lips and quickening pulse. They had slept together every night without so much as a proper embrace; Sherlock had just been too battered, and John was determined to let him set the pace. But now it felt as though every lustful thought he’d avoided for the past week was boiling up at once. He threaded his fingers in Sherlock’s hair and slid his other hand down to grip his arse. He was terribly careful not to pull even a little—if Sherlock so much as stiffened John swore to himself he would back off—but Sherlock moaned, tipping his head back to gasp for breath. John had a moment’s gratitude that Sherlock could finally breathe through his nose again before he registered the white, enticing length of Sherlock’s bare throat in front of him and forgot his nose entirely. Sherlock made a breathy sound when John sucked at his throat and grinded his lower body into John’s. Apparently Sherlock was definitely up for this, more than up for it if the erection pressing into John was any indication.

Sherlock’s fingers brushed John’s gun, which he’d been wearing for the past week. He put his mouth to John’s ear, licked delicately—John moaned—and whispered, “And here I thought you were just happy to see me.”

“Should probably, uh, put that…” Sherlock’s teeth nibbled at his earlobe. “Oh, fuck.” His knees went weak. “Do you, do you want…”

“Yes,” Sherlock hissed in his ear.

John suddenly realized that they were right in front of the window, in full view of the street, not to mention the security team if they were still packing up. “Why don’t you go to your bedroom and, uh, get comfortable while I put this away,” he managed.

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him. “Is that a euphemism for naked?”

“Well, yeah, but I meant it literally this time,” John said, momentarily rallying his faculties. “I don’t want you to feel like—“

“I feel like you should hurry,” Sherlock growled, sliding his hips against John in a way that shot heat through John’s groin.

“Okay, okay, just—“John kissed him again for the pleasure of sucking that already-swollen lower lip between his teeth and Sherlock made a ragged, open mouthed sound that made John throb. “Oh God go,” he managed, pushing Sherlock away and staggering toward the stairs.

Up in his room he shucked his jeans as quickly as possible, freeing his aching erection, and put his gun away. He heard the front door click downstairs; Mrs. Hudson locking up, probably. They should let her know Moran was in custody. Tomorrow. John pulled off the rest of his clothes and then hesitated. Sherlock was clearly keen, but John didn’t want him to feel pressured, and he’d never been much of one for sleeping in the nude anyway. He pulled on his pajamas. As a last thought he picked up his phone and switched it to silent, thinking he could do without Owen calling to update them on anything Moran might say tonight.

As though it were reading his mind, the screen lit up: Owen. John rolled his eyes. He decided to take it, so he could tell Owen they were going to bed and to catch them up in the morning. He hit the
button and lifted the phone to his ear, but before he could get a word out Owen was saying urgently, “John, John, he’s gone, the car’s missing, we can’t raise them, I’m going to—“

John’s whole body flashed hot and then cold, leaving a freezing, prickling sweat. The door. It wasn’t Mrs. Hudson locking up, it was Sebastian Moran. Sebastian Moran was in his flat. He hit the disconnect button to silence the tiny sound of Owen’s voice and stood stock still for a moment, trying not to breathe. Nothing. The flat was silent. John picked up his phone and texted rapidly, He’s here, and then dropped it back on the bed. He retrieved his gun and thumbed the safety off.

Upstairs landing: nothing. Stairs empty. He crept silently down, hugging the wall, skipping the steps that creaked. He arrived at the first floor landing and looked down through the stairwell: empty. He pressed back against the wall, considering: if he stepped into the kitchen he was exposed on two sides, but if he went into the lounge he’d have to cross the kitchen doorway. He inched forward, ears straining.

And then, low but perfectly audible, he heard Moran’s voice coming from the left. He was in the bedroom. “Nice and quiet,” he was saying. “Your little friend will be here any minute, won’t he? He seemed keen enough just now. We don’t want him to get a nasty surprise.”

John’s vision went white with incandescent fury. Sebastian Moran was in Sherlock’s bedroom—their bedroom—threatening Sherlock, who was John’s, whom John would fucking die to protect. John forced himself to push down his rage and think. He had to assume Moran was armed, but Moran did not know John knew he was there. He would not expect John to have a gun. But Moran, evidently, had Sherlock. John had to get past his guard.

As silently as he could, John backed up the stairs to his bedroom. He ignored the phone blinking frantically from the bed and pulled his tightest pair of underpants from a drawer as quietly as he could. He pulled the pants on, ears straining for any sound from downstairs, and replaced the pajama bottoms. Back down the stairs and onto the landing. He tucked the gun into the waistband of his pants at the small of his back, pulled his pajama shirt down to cover it, and then spotted Sherlock’s dressing gown draped over a chair in the living room. Even better. Ignoring the way his scalp prickled, he walked as naturally as possible into the lounge, slipped on the dressing gown, and grabbed a small bottle at random from a jumble of chemistry equipment. Striding down the hallway, he called out, “Sherlock, you forgot your ear drops—“

John froze just inside the door. He had no need to manufacture his shock: Moran was standing on the far side of the bed, gun held casually on Sherlock, who was stretched out stark naked with his hands cuffed to the headboard. Sherlock did not even glance in John’s direction; his body was slack on the bed, eyes half open. His gaze was not so much unfocused as distant in a way John had seen before, in Afghanistan: the eyes of a prey animal brought down, already slipping away, waiting only for the teeth to close on its throat.

Moran brought the gun almost lazily to bear on John, and John dropped the little bottle—quickly, in case Moran noticed they weren’t actually ear drops—and raised his empty hands. Moran gestured with the gun. “A few steps to the right.”

John moved, watching Moran, and then stopped. It seemed the worst kind of violation to look at Sherlock, whom John had never even seen entirely naked before, but he couldn’t bear not to. Sherlock looked horribly fragile with his arms pulled taut, the sharply etched arch of his ribs shadowing his concave abdomen, all his wounds visible. He seemed only semiconscious. “What did you do to him?” John asked tightly.

“Nothing,” Moran said, sounding surprised. “A little drink. He never needed one before, but I thought under the circumstances it couldn’t hurt.”
John thought of Nasir saying *he gave me a drink, it was drugged* and the toxicology screen on Stephen, positive for opiates and benzodiazepines. He looked back at Sherlock, whose eyes had drifted closed. He was still breathing, the rise of his chest perfectly visible, rapid and shallow. John frowned. That wasn’t typical for opiates. What the fuck had Moran given him?

“Move another step,” Moran said. “That’s better. It’d be almost impossible to get a line on me over here, but your head in the window will be a little extra insurance.” He glanced past John. “Mind you, I could probably make that shot, but then I’m the best.” He looked back at Sherlock. “Your brother hasn’t anyone else who could do it. His loss.”

John blinked. “His—how do you know about his brother?”

“Moriarty, of course.”

John felt the name like a kick in the gut. *Moriarty*? How the hell was he involved in this? His brain spun like wheels in the mud, trying to get traction.

“Not that I ever met Mycroft myself, you understand. Never even heard his name, not officially,” Moran added. “You know how it is. I’m just a weapon for them: they point, I shoot.”

*Moriarty*. How the hell… John looked at Sherlock, who had not moved a muscle, then back at Moran, who was half smiling.

“Want the whole story?” Moran asked. “I don’t mind. We’ve got some time to kill before the cavalry shows up.”

“Yeah,” John said. “That would be…yeah. Why not.”

“See, I knew I would get caught sooner or later,” Moran said almost companionably. Were it not for the gun and the naked, drugged man on the bed, they might have been trading war stories in a pub. “I’m good at keeping secrets, obviously. I’m clever, and I know how to cover up. But I’m not invisible. Somebody was going to catch on eventually, although I have to admit Owen Davies was not too shabby at covering up himself.”

“When did you realize?” John asked. He was genuinely curious, although he had no idea why Moran seemed happy to just stand around spilling this story like the villain in a poorly written film.

“Months ago. So I decided to get out, of course. There were rumors—well, barely even rumors. If you wanted to go freelance, they said, you see a man called Moriarty. But turned out he was a hard guy to track down. I started on Google, like everybody does, and guess what I found? A blog! Not a blog by Moriarty, unfortunately, but by a former soldier from the Fifth. Well, of course I read it. Interesting stuff, but it didn’t get me much closer to what I wanted. I did find him eventually, and I told him I could trade him some good intelligence in exchange for getting me out and setting me up as a contractor. He wanted the information first, so I gave it to him. He liked it. Unfortunately he liked it enough to want to keep me where I was for a while. He did promise to get me out if they ever caught up to me, which, obviously, he did in the end.”

“So what does this have to do with Sherlock?” John asked carefully.

“One night I met the lads for a pint, and they had a stranger with them. Oldest story in the book, isn’t it? I met a boy with eyes like a winter sky, and he was clever and beautiful, and the way his face lights when he talks…” Morn looked at Sherlock’s limp, still form a minute, gun steady on John. “You never put any of that in your blog,” he said, looking back at John. “What he’s really like.”

John swallowed. “No,” he said. “I suppose not.”
“I remembered his name, of course. Moriarty’s enemy. It just made him more interesting. From the beginning I wanted him, in a way I’d never wanted anybody else. I told Moriarty I’d had him. I thought I could use it somehow, play them against each other, force Moriarty’s hand. He went a bit mad. He’s got a rather unhealthy obsession with Sherlock, did you realize? I couldn’t tell which he wanted more, if he wanted him for himself or if he just wanted to make sure I hurt him. Didn’t matter, anyway.” John’s mounting confusion must have shown on his face, for Moran said, “Well, you understand, I can’t leave him now. He’s mine.”

“Wait a minute,” John said. He thought he understood where this was going, but it seemed simultaneously so frightening and so preposterous that he couldn’t wrap his head around it. “Are you saying that Moriarty helped you escape, but you came back for Sherlock?”

Moran shrugged. “Yeah.”

“But you could be out of the country by now!”

“Oh, you know. True love.” Moran glanced at Sherlock again. “Also, I realized that I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life on Moriarty’s leash, and maybe I didn’t need him after all. Don’t you understand yet? I’m the British government’s favorite toy. That means I know things, which gives me leverage, and now I’ve got Mycroft Homes’ little brother, which gives me even more leverage. You’re just the short term insurance that Sherlock behaves.”

“So that’s what we’re waiting for? Mycroft’s people to show up so you can negotiate your way out with Sherlock?” The man was mad. “You can’t keep us hostages forever, you know.”

“I won’t need to.” Moran smiled. “You still don’t get it, do you? Sherlock is mine. He needs me as much as I need him. He’ll never leave me, not really. No matter what I did, he wanted more. The more I hurt him, the more he spread his legs. He’ll always come back in the end.”

John stared. A tiny trickle of doubt ran down his spine.

On the bed Sherlock stirred, eyes flickering. Moran glanced down at him. Sherlock’s cloudy eyes sought Moran, who ran a finger along the sharp edge of his hipbone, smiling indulgently. “Isn’t that right, Sherlock? You’re mine. All of you, heart and soul, mind and body, all of it, all of this…” He spread his large hand over Sherlock’s hip, possessively, making acid rise in John’s throat. “Mine.”

Sherlock made an inarticulate sound and twisted, his head lolling back to bare his throat. There was a faint mark on the white skin above his collarbone, a fresh bruise from John’s teeth. John did not remember making it.

Moran saw it too. His eyes darkened and he leaned over Sherlock, distracted from John for the first time, the muzzle of his gun drifting down. John froze. He might not get another chance to go for his own gun, but the muzzle of Moran’s was bare inches from Sherlock’s chest.

Sherlock’s eyes flew open.

What came next happened so fast that it blurred in John’s mind. Sherlock’s hands gripped the chain of the cuffs, metal biting into his wrists, arms cording as his whole body jackknifed in half, feet coming up to his shoulders. John grabbed for his gun in the same instant that Sherlock jerked his head forward and spat a huge mouthful of amber liquid straight into Moran’s face. Moran jerked back instinctively and Sherlock’s feet pistoned straight up, heels catching Moran under the jaw so hard he was lifted right off his feet. John was across the room before Moran even hit the floor. Moran landed in an awkward sprawl, gun skittering out of his hand, and John flung himself hard onto his back and slammed his head into the floor, grabbing Moran’s arms and kneeling on them as he
scrabbled for the gun. He thumbed the safety off, tossed the gun on the bed, and yanked the sash out of the dressing gown to tie Moran’s wrists tightly behind his back. Moran lay flat and did not move. John checked for a pulse: alive, but between the two of them they had knocked him out cold.

“That went well,” Sherlock said from above him and John looked up. Sherlock had managed to get himself rolled over and was kneeling on the bed, arms twisted sideways, peering down at John.

“I rather thought,” Sherlock remarked, “that you didn’t quite believe me, before, when I said I could have overcome Moran at any time.”

“You fucking marvel,” John said fervently and stomped hard on Moran’s spine as he surged up for a kiss. Sherlock kissed him back with great enthusiasm.

“God, you taste—did you have all that whiskey in your mouth the whole time?” John gasped.

“I had to drink it at first. Then he heard you coming and he got distracted.”

“Oh, the cleverness of you,” John breathed and kissed him again.

“—no, of you, of you too—the gun in your pajamas, I never even saw it, how did you—“

“Owen,” John said and then “Oh shit, I need to ring him—shit, I have to hide my gun.”

“Get me out of these first,” Sherlock said, rattling the handcuffs.

John sprinted for what passed for a utility drawer in 221B—handcuff keys, lockpicks, purloined IDs—dashed back, unfastened Sherlock, and snapped the cuffs on Moran. He then used the dressing gown sash to tie his ankles. Moran groaned, rolling his head

John hesitated. He looked over at where Sherlock was hopping on one foot as he pulled on his pajama bottoms. “He’s coming around,” John said. "Would you take this up and bring back my phone?"

Sherlock, who generally couldn’t be arsed to pick up his own phone when it was right in front of him, took the gun and vanished without protest. Perhaps he too thought staying alone with Moran was a bad idea. John found Moran’s gun and sat cross-legged on the bed to watch him, peeling off the dressing gown. It was too long, and he was sweating already. He heard Sherlock barking impatiently into the phone as he clattered back downstairs; good, he wouldn’t have to deal with any questions for a bit. Sherlock dropped the phone on the bedside table and climbed onto the bed beside John, pulling the discarded dressing gown over his bare chest.

John had been wondering something. “Why did you let Moran handcuff you?” he asked. “Why not knock him out as soon as he came in?”

“He caught me by surprise,” Sherlock admitted. He leaned against John and John felt him shivering as the reaction set in. “I wasn’t—I was distracted. When I heard footsteps I assumed it was you.” The trembling intensified. “And he said he would shoot you if I made any noise.”

John wrapped his free arm around Sherlock and held him tightly. Sherlock tucked his head into John’s shoulder. “Actually, I couldn’t have done that so well without the handcuffs anyway. Leverage,” he said, muffled.

“Oh, you’d have managed,” John said. He rubbed Sherlock’s arm. “Where did you learn a trick like that?”
“Baritsu,” Sherlock said. John was relieved to hear an indignant bite back in his voice. “The certificate is hanging over my bed. It was literally staring him in the face.”

“Sherlock, that certificate is in Japanese,” John said and then they were both giggling, John’s gun hand never wavering, Sherlock pressed tightly against John’s side.

The security team crashed through the door about three minutes later and things went a bit loud and chaotic for a while. It looked to John as though everyone who had ever worked for either Mycroft or Owen was there. The men who had been transporting Moran still had not been located; there was considerable confusion as to whether they had been dispatched by Moriarty’s men or were in fact Moriarty’s men themselves, as well as even more confusion as to who exactly Moriarty was and how he was involved in all this. Moran was no help; he was barely conscious. Paramedics arrived. Mrs. Hudson turned up in her nightie. Sherlock, totally overstimulated, tugged his dressing gown sleeves over his raw wrists and shouted for everyone to get the hell out of his flat. John had never been so glad to see Mycroft, who swept in with Emma, an umbrella, and an expression of icy fury that made Owen blanch. Everything was sorted very quickly after that.

“Mycroft,” Sherlock said quietly when everyone was finally leaving. Mycroft frowned at the fading bruises on Sherlock’s face and stepped over to him. Talking about Moriarty, John assumed; there was a leak someplace, if it wasn’t Owen’s two missing men. He couldn’t see Sherlock, whose back was to John, but he saw Mycroft’s eyes rest on Sherlock with quiet, intent concern. When Sherlock finished Mycroft nodded, glanced at John, appeared to think better of whatever he had been about to say, and instead gave him a small nod. He tapped off down the stairs and the flat fell abruptly, startlingly silent.

John turned to Sherlock. “Do you want me to look at your—”

“No,” Sherlock said, almost desperately.

“Good,” John said, grabbed him by the dressing gown, and hauled him in. Forget careful. As Sherlock had amply demonstrated, he could take care of himself. John kissed him hard, walking him backward until he reached the wall, and then pressed into him. Sherlock groaned and slid lower so that their heads were level, spreading his legs. John slotted himself between his knees and rocked his hips. He had never been so hard in his life.

“I’ve been wanting you for hours, fuck, I’ve been wanting you for days, fucking Sebastian Moran, that—cockblocking--” John growled. Sherlock was already panting, opening his mouth to John’s kisses as though John were the only source of oxygen in the room. John licked him, tasting the lingering whiskey, feeling him harden. Sherlock pressed against him and John felt a wave of heat. If he kept this up, he would come in his horrible tight pants. John took a single step back and ran his hands down Sherlock’s silk-clad arms, caressed the torn skin of his wrists, and entwined their fingers. He kissed Sherlock slowly, gently, as he lifted their joined hands over their heads, gathered Sherlock’s wrists into one hand, and pinned them to the wall. Sherlock’s breath shuddered.

John knew the secret truth at the heart of Sherlock’s relationship with Moran. Moran had known what Sherlock wanted, and he had twisted the knowledge into something dark and possessive and cruel. John knew what Sherlock wanted too, but he would never use it to hurt. He would take nothing Sherlock did not freely give. He clasped Sherlock’s wrists loosely, a token restraint, and leaned in to kiss him again. He ran his free hand along Sherlock’s face, cupping his check and mouthing kisses along his mouth and jaw. “So beautiful, so beautiful,” he whispered. “I’ve wanted you so long.” He brushed his fingers over Sherlock’s closed eyelashes, stroked his thumb along a cheekbone. “I’ve thought about this, about touching your face. Touching your neck. Touching your
neck with my fingers, with my mouth.” He licked along Sherlock’s neck and Sherlock dropped his head back against the wall, mouth falling open. “Tell me you thought about me too.”

“Yes,” Sherlock breathed.

“Tell me what you thought about.” John ran his hand over the dressing gown covering Sherlock’s bare chest, feeling his nipple harden beneath the thin silk. He rubbed his palm over it again, enjoying Sherlock’s sinuous writhing, pinned to the wall by John’s hand. “Tell me what you thought of when you touched yourself.”

“Your hands.” Sherlock turned his head so his lips brushed John’s ear, his whisper hot and almost breathless. “Your hands touching me, your hands holding me, your hands like this.” His wrists twitched. “Your hands in my hair. Your hands spreading me open, your hands inside me…oh.” John shoved down Sherlock’s loose pajama bottoms and gripped his cock through the silk of the dressing gown, rubbing the slippery fabric over the head. Sherlock’s knees were trembling, his head thrown back, a flush spreading down his neck. “Your cock,” Sherlock gasped. “Your cock in my mouth.”

Oh, hell yes, John’s cock responded so enthusiastically John was surprised his pants didn’t split right there. John’s brain had other ideas, however. He had an idea of how he wanted their first time together, and it didn’t include Sherlock on his knees.

“You know what I want?” John said. He slid his hand between Sherlock’s legs, cupping his balls and rubbing him through the silk. “I want to see what you look like when I make you come.”

Sherlock’s hips bucked involuntarily. John let go of the dressing gown and shoved down his own bottoms and pants, which was an exquisite relief. He leaned forward and gathered their cocks together, stroking them both with his hand. Sherlock made a choked sound—“oh”—and his lashes fluttered. John loosened his grip on Sherlock’s wrists, took one of his hands, and brought it down to clasp John’s. Then he reached into the pocket of Sherlock’s dressing gown and pulled out the tube of antibiotic ointment. He drizzled what felt like half the tube over their joined hands, the salve already warm and half melted from Sherlock’s body heat, and tossed the tube aside. Sherlock made that choked, wanting noise again and gripped John’s shoulder as John slid their slick palms down and up, setting up a slow, steady rhythm. John was already ridiculously close; it felt like the purest of pure pleasure lighting up all his nerve endings and with the feel of Sherlock’s hand clutching his shoulder, his breath quickening in John’s ear…Sherlock’s knees were quivering harder: John thought he was barely staying upright even with John’s weight pressing him into the wall. John felt the heat coil in his balls and his hand moved faster, harder.

Sherlock gasped, his eyes flying open. “John, I—John—I, I—“ His eyes were skittering madly, his whole body shaking. John, going on instinct, wrapped his free arm around Sherlock’s head and pressed him firmly into his neck. “I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” he whispered. “Right here. I’ve got you. Come for me, love. I want to see you. Come for me. I’ve got you.” Sherlock was breathing in high, panting gasps, his face pressed into John’s shoulder, and John let his own cock slip free and wrapped his hand around Sherlock’s, pumping. “Now,” he said and Sherlock went stiff in his arms, hips jerking, open mouth pressed to John’s skin, utterly silent. John slowed, stroking him through it, then grabbed himself with his hand hot and slick from Sherlock’s semen and jerked hard and fast, pressing Sherlock back into the wall to keep him upright until his orgasm exploded so sharply it was almost painful.

They ended up half on the floor, slumped against the wall. John felt as though his ears were ringing.

“That was, God,” he said.

“Good?”
“So beyond good it’s ridiculous.” He shook the cramps from his arms. “I quite liked using your dressing gown as a sex toy.”

Sherlock looked down at himself. “I think it’s for the dry cleaner. Or maybe the bin.”

“Absolutely not! After all it’s done for us tonight? We’re keeping it forever. Oh, shit, what happened to the belt thing?”

“The sash? I retrieved it from the paramedics…I think it’s on the desk.”

John leaned back. Now that he had caught his breath, he was so tired that getting up had lost all appeal. “We’d best clean up,” he said. “If I don’t go now I might sleep here.”

“You go first. I’ll be longer.”

John lumbered to his feet and took his pile of clothes off to dump in the hamper. He binned the stupid tight pants. A swipe with a flannel and clean teeth, and he had just enough energy to find his last pair of clean pajamas and fall into bed. Sherlock, of course, brushed, flossed, and showered.

John lay barely awake and wondering about the shower until Sherlock came to bed and crawled straight into his arms.

“You’re worrying about the shower. Don’t,” Sherlock said, his voice muffled by John’s shirt. “I won’t mind smelling of you, I don’t think. But Moran was touching me, I had to wash it off.”

“It’s fine,” John said, burying his nose in Sherlock’s clean damp hair. “You’re lovely like this. As long as you don’t mind me the way I am, because I’m just too knackered to do anything about it right now.”

“I like your smell,” Sherlock said decisively. “You smell like laundry soap and shave cream and sweat and tea. And a bit like sex, which is all right as it’s with me.” He someone managed to nestle even closer, which John wouldn’t have thought possible. “Mine,” he murmured.

“Mine,” John said, kissing the top of his head.

“We’re going to be having a great deal of sex in the immediate future,” Sherlock said. “I want to do everything.”

“Mmmm,” John said, thinking not anytime soon. Brilliant as the end of the night had been, Sherlock was still fresh off an abusive relationship—sort of—who had been sexually assaulted less than a week ago. John thought of Sherlock overwhelmed by John’s touch, his silent shaking climax, the way Sherlock folded in on himself as though his own pleasure were a shameful afterthought. “We’ll need to feed you up again first, get you fit for all that exercise.” A thought struck him. “Anyway, I’m guessing you won’t want to when you’re working, and surely you’ve cases waiting by now.”

“I don’t know if I will or not. No data,” Sherlock said. “Maybe I just won’t work for a while.”

John felt a lump in his throat. Coming from Sherlock, it might have been the most romantic thing he had ever heard in his life. He held Sherlock tight. “But then I’ll have to work more, or we won’t be able to buy jam.”

“True.” Sherlock considered. “All right, I’ll take a case if it’s interesting or the client is very rich. I had an email from Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis today, actually. One of her cronies managed to lose his trophy wife. At the reception.”

“Hope he had a prenup,” John yawned. He felt Sherlock’s answering smile. John rubbed his cheek
against Sherlock’s soft fragrant curls. He was exhausted, but he wanted to stay awake just a bit longer. Sherlock was beginning to go loose and heavy in his arms and John loved the moment when he fell asleep, his face gone slack and trusting, fingers curled in John’s shirt. John had initially found this habit a bit sad—was this all Sherlock thought he was allowed, this tiny handful of John? But Sherlock seemed to truly like the feel of John’s pajama shirt in his fingers. John supposed the texture soothed him. He watched Sherlock’s lids twitch. What was he thinking about? Sex with John, runaway brides, the polyphonic motets of Lassus, Moran, Moriarty, Mycroft? Mrs. Hudson’s new nightie? Sherlock’s eyes had stilled behind his pale eyelids. He was asleep. John let his own eyes drift closed, letting go of that very long day, letting go of everything but the warm weight of Sherlock on his chest.
Chapter 21

Sherlock had no interest in taking things slow.

John had once had a girlfriend who owned a ginger cat. The cat had an inexplicable fascination with John’s bare toes, which he liked to nibble for no reason John could fathom. The morning after Moran had been hauled off, John drifted to awareness through a bizarre dream that Satsuma had joined him in Sherlock’s bed.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Sherlock said from down around his feet. He grasped the hem of John’s pajama bottoms and whipped them off in one deft pull, tossing them back over his shoulder. “I want to see everything. I was too tired last night.”

John blinked at him “Were you just tasting my feet?”

“No,” Sherlock said guiltily.

“You were.”

“Maybe just a little. I needed to know how they taste. Why are you still in your shirt? I told you, I want to see everything.”

John was already naked from the waist down, but that didn’t mean he was going down without a fight. “You too then.”

“Fine,” Sherlock replied and blithely ripped off his clothes. John pulled his shirt off, dragged Sherlock’s pillow under his head too, and lay back to let Sherlock poke and sniff and lick. It was weird, but not unpleasant. Sherlock’s interests seemed random—he spent ages on John’s ankles—and not particularly erotic. John’s initial erection, realizing it would not be needed any time soon, gave up and melted away.

Sherlock peered intently at John’s scar. “Does it still hurt?”

“Not really. Some places I don’t have any feeling anymore so it’s a bit weird if you touch it, is all.”

“I don’t like to think of anything hurting you.” Sherlock was frowning so hard his eyebrows were touching.

“I know,” John said gently. “I know. It’s okay. You won’t hurt me.”

Sherlock spent so much time nosing around John’s scar that John eventually dozed off. When he opened his eyes, it was to the sight of Sherlock’s chest, one dusky nipple directly over his right eye. Sherlock was apparently peering into John’s ear. “My turn,” John said and flipped them over. Sherlock yelped. John looked down at what seemed like an acre of pale skin—God, Sherlock had a long torso—still mottled with fading bruises and with a swath of fresh gauze taped over the chest wound. It wasn’t needed, but Sherlock didn’t like the sutures catching against his clothing. Distracted by thoughts of removing the sutures, it took John a second to realize that Sherlock had gone rigid. Fuck, fuck. The one thing Sherlock had told him clearly, I don’t like it on my back, and John had pinned him down. He quickly pushed up.

“No, don’t,” Sherlock said, catching his arms.
“Sorry, I’m sorry—I forgot, I’m sorry,” John said. He rolled off and pulled Sherlock to him tightly.
“Your shouldn’t be. I’m the one who can’t bear to be touched like a normal person.”

“Don’t be an idiot. I don’t want a normal person.” Sherlock’s body was a tight knot. Brilliant, now John had made him self-conscious. “Hey, Sherlock.”

“What.”

“I hate it when you lick my toes.”

Sherlock loosened fractionally. “Really?”

“Really. I really, really hate it. I almost kicked you in the face.”

“You should have.” Sherlock relaxed. “I won’t do it again.”

“Okay, so…”

Sherlock untangled himself, rolled—still a little gingerly—to his back, and looked at John. “I was surprised. I know you aren’t going to force me, I trust you. Just…stay close?”

John stayed close, and he also didn’t pin Sherlock with his weight again. His investigations didn’t take nearly as long as Sherlock’s since he didn’t feel the need to sniff and taste; just being able to touch everywhere he wanted was thrill enough. Sherlock turned out to be highly ticklish, even when John grasped his feet as firmly as possible. John thought this was hilarious. “I don’t understand why your knees aren’t ticklish. They’re like a transition zone. If I touch you down here you start giggling…”

“I don’t giggle,” Sherlock said, giggling.

“And then nothing, and then up here…”

“Ooooh,” Sherlock moaned, spreading his legs.

“Well, if that’s on the table,” John said, but Sherlock flipped him on his back as neatly as John had done earlier and sat on him, pinning his thighs.

“Oh no,” Sherlock said, eyes gleaming. “I want this. You wouldn’t let me last night, and I’ve been waiting to see what you taste like for ages.”

“But,” John said, unable to remember why this was not an excellent idea.

“I’m very, very good at this.”

Oh, that was why. “I don’t want you to feel—“

“John. When has it ever been a hardship for me to show off?”

John was still trying to think of a response to that when Sherlock leaned forward, grabbed John’s hips, and sucked him down to the root in one fluid motion. “Oh, fuck,” John yelped, grabbing for Sherlock’s head and tugging ineffectually. “Wait—“

Sherlock popped up long enough to say, “Go on, put your fingers in my hair and pull as hard as you want, I love that,” and he slurped John back in. Oh, fucking…fuck. John’s brain surrendered. Sherlock, as usual, was absolutely right: he was brilliant at this. He sucked, hollowed, licked and
swirled, slowing whenever John felt himself getting close, and took John’s whole length down his throat as though he had no gag reflex at all. “Oh, God, oh, fuck.” John gasped, gripping Sherlock’s hair. He had reached the point of no return now, his hips bucking helplessly and his hands fisted in Sherlock’s curls. “Oh God, Sherlock, get off, I’m going to—” He yanked Sherlock’s hair, trying to pull him off, but Sherlock held on tight and hummed, vibrating around John’s cock, and John cried out wordlessly as he came hard down his throat. Sherlock jerked briefly as though startled and then slowed and swallowed, soothing John through the aftershocks until John’s brain slunk shamefacedly back online. He hauled Sherlock up for a long kiss.

“Christ, you’re amazing, but you shouldn’t have let me do that.”

“What, come in my mouth? The taste wasn’t what I expected, but—“

“We don’t have our results back; it’s not safe.”

“Yes we do,” Sherlock said, surprised. “Mycroft forwarded them to both of us two days ago. Haven’t you checked your email?”

“Uh…no. I didn’t want to have to explain to anybody why we were lying low. Wait, Mycroft forwarded them? Has he no boundaries at all?”

“No. And he deduced it anyway, you said as much yourself.” Sherlock’s eyebrows bunched in a worried way that made John want to kiss them. “I thought, I assumed, that a monogamous relationship was—“

“—exactly what I wanted, of course it is.” John gave in and kissed Sherlock’s eyebrows until they smoothed. They were surprisingly soft. “Well, since I’m guessing we’re both clean…”

Sherlock pulled John back up. “No. I don’t like it. Receiving, I mean.”

“You don’t?”

“Too exposed. And I get distracted.”

Hmmm. John supposed he could see that. He also thought he could overcome it, but that was for another day. “Last night, you liked that all right, didn’t you? Can I do that?”

“Yes.”

Sherlock, predictably, had no lubricant, but he did have a jar of hypoallergenic sensitive skin hand cream. John blinked at the price sticker, then scooped some up and warmed it in his hand, smoothing it onto Sherlock. Sherlock was fully hard and John stroked him slowly, watching his face to gauge his reactions. He’d realized last night that Sherlock liked to hear him talk, so he cupped the back of his head with his free hand and kissed Sherlock’s closed eyes and open mouth, murmuring to him. “God, I love having you like this, in my arms, with my hand on you, making you feel this…you’re so hard, aren’t you, you want my hand on you, you want me to touch you, you want me to make you squirm…” Sherlock was squirming, trying to bury his face, but John would have none of it. He was going to make Sherlock own his body, own his pleasure, before giving over control to John. “Shhhh,” he whispered. “Stay just like this, I want to see you, I want to hear you, please let me hear you.”

“Oh,” Sherlock gasped, his body bowing.

“I’ve got you. I’m going to make you come so hard you won’t be able to move after. And next time I’m going to use both hands and I’m going to put my fingers inside you and I’m going to make you
come like that…” Sherlock’s breath was coming faster now and John held his head in place to slide his tongue in Sherlock’s mouth, fast and hard. Sherlock shuddered and moaned, sucking John’s tongue as John fucked his mouth with it, thrusting into John’s hand. “That’s right, do it, I’m going to make you come just like this with my hand on you and my mouth on you and I’m going to make you scream in my mouth…” He didn’t, exactly, but he did cry out this time, jerking in John’s hand as John kissed him sloppily. John stroked him until he whimpered, then grabbed his own shirt with his sticky hand, wiped, and wrapped his arms tightly around Sherlock, kissing his eyes and forehead.

Sherlock shivered a little and his fingers twitched against John’s chest, apparently seeking clothing to clutch. John stroked his hair and Sherlock actually wrapped his arms around him. “Oxytocin,” Sherlock murmured sleepily.

“Yep.”

“Enhances pair bonding. Greater stability for future offspring.”

“Oh shit, offspring! I knew we should have used a condom.”

Sherlock nuzzled lazily at John’s neck. “I liked this before though. When we were just sleeping together, before we were engaged in pseudo-procreative activities.”

“That’s because we’re evolved. We’re more than the sum of our hormones and neurotransmitters, it’s like the ability to appreciate art…actually your blow job practically qualifies as a work of art itself. Put it up by the Sistine Chapel as an inspiration to mankind.”

“The what?”

“Did you delete Michelangelo?”

“Hmmmm,” Sherlock said, not answering. He seemed to be trying to work out how to rest his arm. Knows everything about blow jobs and nothing about how to cuddle, John thought, and kissed his forehead again, feeling a wave of emotion too powerful to be merely oxytocin.

Something caught John’s eye and he looked up. The sunlight was bright in the bedroom now and it had caught a long scratch where the handcuffs had gouged the headboard. John swallowed and tightened his arms. Sherlock hummed happily, apparently willing to be squeezed.

“So,” John said. “You know I don’t like my toes licked, also my belly button, by the way, although I never knew that until this morning…” Sherlock grinned against his neck. “And, I’m not really much for bottoming. I’ve tried it and I didn’t hate it, you understand, just didn’t do anything for me, but if you—”

“Never topped, no interest in trying,” Sherlock said promptly.

“That’s all I can think of for now. You?”

“You know mine.” Sherlock seemed to be thinking hard. One hand rose, almost unconsciously, to his neck. “I like when you have your hands in my hair or on my shoulders, but I think maybe not here.” His curled his hand and frowned a little, eyes unfocused. John was very still as he watched. “I do like when you lick it though,” Sherlock added, face clearing as he looked up at John.

“Good, I like licking it,” John said, smiling. He waited until Sherlock’s hand drifted back to his side. “Sherlock? What happened to you eight years ago—is that why you don’t like it on your back?”

“Yes. That was the first and only time. My previous encounters were not exactly characterized by a
desire for intimacy. After—well, after there was no one. Not until a few months ago. Until you I haven’t let anyone touch me except from behind. For anything.”

“Are you—is this—“

“Yes,” Sherlock said firmly. He wrapped his arms around John as though John might try to turn him away. “I can’t—I can’t do that. But I want to see you. I want to be like this.”

John found his utter trust touching and a bit unnerving. This is why we are going slow, he shouted mentally at his sheepishly flaccid cock. “One step at a time, okay?” he said. “And you talk to me. Spell it out if something doesn’t feel right, you know I’m an idiot sometimes.”

Sherlock kissed him, surprising John. He was catching onto the cuddling quite well. “Only sometimes,” he said and rolled off onto his back.

“Let me guess, you want to go brush your teeth,” John said. “Oxytocin depleted.”

“Of course I want to brush my teeth; I have sperm on my teeth. I also want tea. And breakfast. I’m starving. Whatever that was last night, don’t ever make it again. Pasta is pasta and cheese is cheese, they should not be put together like that. It made my mouth feel strange.”

“Well, keeping your mouth in tip top shape might just be my new life goal, so fine.”

“My mouth wants scrambled eggs and toast. Maybe bacon. Not too—”

“—crispy, I know. Whatever you like. We’ve nothing on today, have we?”

“Er.” Sherlock rolled back to his side and said, “Now that Nasir and Stephen no longer need protection, Mycroft has informed me that we need to find them more permanent accommodations. He’s willing to provide funding if needed, which should be helpful. Stephen has a place to live already, more or less, but obviously would be better served by going to rehab. If Mycroft’s paying it shouldn’t be too difficult to find a private facility. I was rather hoping you’d take care of Nasir.”

“Well, street kids aren’t really my area,” John said, “but fortunately I know a good social worker.”

Sylvie seemed genuinely pleased to hear from John and accepted his offer to buy her lunch in exchange for information. “See, that’s why you should stay on good terms with your exes,” he said to Sherlock, pocketing his phone.

“I hope that wasn’t meant as advice,” Sherlock said grumpily. He was wrapped in his second best dressing gown, curled in his chair and scowling. “I don’t see why you need to go to lunch. She could just send you an email.”

“It’s nice, Sherlock. Are you jealous? Stop that. You’ve nothing whatsoever to be jealous over. You’re planning to follow me, aren’t you?”

“No,” Sherlock said unconvincingly.

John sighed. “I’ll tell you what. I really need that laundry put in the dryer or I’ll have nothing to wear tonight. If you stay around and take care of it, I’ll text you where we’re going to lunch and sit as close to the window as possible. That way you won’t have to follow me and you can still spy on us.”

“Are you going to kiss her cheek?”
“Sherlock.”

“My blow job technique is far superior to hers.”

“Sherlock.”

“Not good?”

It really wasn’t, but Sherlock was barely even trying to sound haughty; the scared insecurity was naked on his face. “Talking about your exes, not good. Comparing in bed, not good.” Thinking John only cared about blow job technique, really not good, but John thought it might take time to convince him of that one. “You wanting me enough to get so worked up, though…good. The wanting, not the worked up.”

“I do want,” Sherlock said with utter sincerity.

“I want you too. Now do the laundry.”

Lunch was pleasant, or would have been if John hadn’t been thinking of Sherlock the whole time. He was torn between worry that Sherlock would come crashing in and throw a wobbly over Sylvie sitting too close and suspecting that he was, perhaps insensitively, beaming his I’m-in-love-and-I-just-had-the-best-blow-job-of-my-life glow a bit too obviously. Apparently Sylvie did not find any of this out of the ordinary. John walked her back to her office after, hoping to manage a casual parting. He could hardly refuse to shake her hand when she put it out, but fortunately another woman hailed her going in, so at least there was no cheek kissing.

John looked around but saw no sign of Sherlock. Where are you? he texted.

“Here,” Sherlock said directly behind him and John jumped a mile.

“Shit, don’t do that!”

“Did you get everything you needed?”

“Yeah, she had loads of suggestions. Some of these look—“

“Excellent, let’s go back to the flat. I want to have sex again.”

“Sherlock, I need—“ Sherlock wrapped his hand delicately around John’s hipbone. His eyes flared. “—oh, all right, just a quickie.”

John managed to convince Sherlock that a brisk round of mutual handjobs would be sufficient, but somehow they ended up with John’s front pressed to Sherlock’s back, John fucking his thighs with abandon while jerking Sherlock off from behind. Sherlock was really starting to get the hang of the vocal thing. Somewhat. He reached back and grabbed John’s arse, crying, “Just like that, just like that, oh, oh, oh,” and then went silent, convulsed forward and came so abruptly that John slipped out. He pinned Sherlock’s hip and slid back in, relishing the sweat-slick heat between his legs, and Sherlock, still shaking, gasped, “Oh John, you’re right there, you’re—you’re rubbing my testicles,” and that sent John over the edge too.

“Testicles,” John snickered when he had caught his breath. “Your dirty mouth, Sherlock…”

“Well, what else should I say?” Sherlock said, sounding miffed.
“It’s adorable. Don’t change a thing. No, wait, change the sheets, they definitely need a wash now.”

“We’re just going to get more semen on them,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Yes, but if you put the sheets in the washer you will have to take my pajamas out, and then you can put them in the dryer, as we agreed.”

“Dull,” Sherlock said.

Out of habit, John waited to ring Owen until he was halfway across town.

“Locked up tight,” Owen said. “Maximum security, solitary confinement, double guard. He’s not going anywhere.”


“My men were found this morning. They’re dead.”

“Ah, shit, I’m sorry,”

“Yeah. They were good lads. No evidence at the scene at all. This guy, Moriarty, this crime concierge or whatever he thinks he is—I called a contact at Interpol who tracks arms traders, she says he’s a phantom, people won’t even say his name. I mean, what the hell? Is he, like, Voldemort?”

“Let it go,” John said sharply. “I mean it. You’re not on Moriarty’s radar and you want to keep it that way. Jesus, Owen, you’ve got kids.”

“So did both my guys who were killed,” Owen retorted.

“He’s a civilian.”

“Yeah, I know.” Owen deflated, all the heat draining from his voice. “I’ve already been informed in no uncertain terms that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is not my problem. Word is Mycroft Holmes is pulling him in for questioning.”

“Huh.” John decided to think about that one later. “Well, if I hear anything, I’ll let you know, but I probably won’t.”

“Yeah, I know. Sherlock doing okay?”

“He is, he’s fantastic. You didn’t get the whole story last night, he was amazing, let me tell you…” John told him everything, including the part where he shoved a gun down his pants, which was considerably funnier in the telling than it had been at the time. Anyway, John was a civilian now too, and he doubted Owen was going to get worked up over him having a gun.

“Oh, I so wish I’d been there,” Owen said fervently. “And obviously I’m glad it was Sherlock who got to kick him in the face, but I wish I’d gotten in a couple while he was down, to tell you the truth. I can’t believe you didn’t.”

“Well, I might have stepped on him a bit,” John conceded. “Completely by accident, of course.”

“Of course. Still wish I’d had a go. Maybe I can bribe one of the guards to spit in his tea.” Owen was sounding much more like his usual self, for which John was glad.
“Listen, Owen. You have the pictures up in your office, don’t you? Of Moran’s victims?”

“Yeah, how did you—never mind, forgot, you work with the police.”

“Nine, right?”

“Yes.”

“Now you can take them down,” John said simply. “Nine families who will know there will be justice for their sons. Ten if you count the one in Amsterdam. And Nasir and Stephen—you know what this means to them, too.” And Sherlock, he thought but did not say; nobody but himself and Sherlock would ever know the whole truth about that. “And everything that won’t happen now, all the people Moran won’t hurt or rape or kill.”

“I know. It doesn’t make it okay. But it helps. I know. Listen, John, let’s keep in touch, all right?”

“I’d really like that.”

John was at the second place on Sylvie’s list when Sherlock texted him.

_I’m hard again. Come home. SH_

Oh God, Sherlock was insatiable. And apparently had decided to take up sexting. John really hoped he got it out of his system before he had to work at the surgery. His phone beeped again.

_I keep thinking of the way you felt pushing against my backside. SH_

John grinned. Backside!

_I want to feel it again. I want you inside me properly. SH_

Shit. Now John was getting hard. Fortunately, in the absence of Sherlock’s actual physical presence, his higher brain function could once again exert a little control over the proceedings. He definitely wanted to keep things from moving too quickly, but it would be extremely counterproductive for Sherlock to think John was coddling him. He leaned against a shop window, thought hard, and sent a series of texts.

_First--Terms_

1. _Do the damn laundry._

2. _Get Stephen into rehab._

3. _I want you to come saying my name. Actually, I want to make you come screaming my name. I need to practice to get my skills up with yours._

John was particularly proud of that one.

4. _Find that rich git’s runaway bride. We’ll want the money, you’ll need to take a few days off after._

He waited a minute.

_And then you’ll have me? SH_
And then I’ll fuck you until your brains come out your ears.

Sherlock’s response came so fast John thought he probably already had it typed, just waiting to hit Send.

Agreed. SH

John smiled.

The third place on Sylvie’s list was so perfect it could have been designed specifically with Nasir in mind. It catered to GLBT youth, provided housing and counseling, and partnered with several vocational schools. Unfortunately, it was full up. The wait list was probably close to a year, the director told him.

“The sad thing is, the building next door’s been vacant for years,” she said. “Foreclosed. We applied to the council months ago but we’ve heard nothing. If we had that, we could double our availability. Bureaucracy.”

John nodded sympathetically. He worked for the NHS; he understood bureaucracy. Fortuitously, he was also acquainted with one of the premier bureaucrats on the planet. He walked outside, looked at the vacant building, and pulled out his phone.

One hour and seven minutes later Emma strode into the café where John sat nursing a coffee and said, “Ready?”

They went back to the youth centre. John was amused to see everyone on the street goggling. Emma, from the top of her perfectly smooth blonde head to the tip of her high-heeled shoe, stood out in the grimy neighborhood like Sherlock at a rugby game. The spiky haired young assistant gaped at them.

“Director Foster, please,” Emma said crisply.

“She’s meeting with the board,” the boy said, blinking. “Oh, hello again,” he said, noticing John.

“Lovely, that will save time,” Emma said and swept past him, John following in her wake, into a cramped room holding far too many people to accommodate two more. Somehow Emma managed this, of course.

“So sorry to interrupt, but I am certain the board would like to hear this as soon as possible,” Emma announced, pulling a sheaf of papers from her immaculate bag. “I am very pleased to inform you that you have been granted ownership of the formerly vacant building next door. Transfer is being effected as we speak; you will receive the keys later today and may take possession after midnight tonight. In addition, a donation from an anonymous donor has been made to enable you to complete renovations. An architect will arrive Monday morning to ensure that the changes will suit your needs. There is a spacious office suite on the ground floor, so you should be able to move your administration there tomorrow, which will free up these rooms. One will go to Dr. Watson’s client, and the others to the next persons on your wait list. Are there any questions?”

“Who the hell are you?” asked a well-dressed man in a Caribbean accent.

“Emma Woodhouse,” Emma said.

Two women burst out laughing—John wasn’t sure why—and one, who had a commanding air John associated with army nurses of a previous generation, said, “Professional meddler, are you?”
“When the occasion requires,” Emma said, brightly.

“Well then,” the commanding woman said, “I’d say you’ve got what you wanted.”

John looked up Emma Woodhouse on his phone on the way home. He laughed too.

Back at the flat, John found the bed freshly made and a neat stack of clean clothing on what he was beginning to think of as his side. He was so pleased that he made Sherlock toasted cheese followed by raspberries and cream. Then he straddled Sherlock’s lap on the kitchen chair and licked cream off Sherlock’s fingers until Sherlock was writhing with his head thrown so far back that John feared for his cervical spine. John smeared cream up Sherlock’s pale endless neck and licked that off too. Sherlock moaned, scrabbling for purchase as he tried to thrust up. John worked their trousers open and stroked them both together until Sherlock dropped his head to John’s shoulder and chanted “John, John, John” like an incantation as he jerked and shuddered in John’s hand. Then Sherlock lifted his head, pinned John with his translucent stare, and whispered, “Now you.” He wrapped his long hand around John’s and his other arm around his back, pressing his forehead against John’s. John stared into his huge dark pupils as Sherlock’s fingers stroked, felt his orgasm rising, kept his eyes open as long as he could until it ripped through him and his eyes fell shut as he clenched forward, crying, “Oh God, Sherlock.”

Afterward, a tangled sticky mess, they rocked back and forth a little in the chair, kissing whatever parts of each other they could reach. Sherlock nestled his head down on John’s shoulder, tucked his nose into John’s neck, and whispered, “One and three.”
Chapter 22

To do: John

Get Nasir moved to the youth centre

New clothes

Supplies for hairdressing school Make Mycroft pay for these

Shopping: butter, eggs, some kind of salad jam

Proper lube

Take Sherlock’s dressing gown to the dry cleaner

To do: Sherlock

Get Stephen into rehab

Take your own bloody dry cleaning.

“Why do we need proper lube?” Sherlock asked. “I thought the hand cream was working quite well.”

“It’s true that my hands have never been so soft,” John said.

“I’m not getting softer at all,” Sherlock said. “Rather the opposite, in fact. Perhaps I need more applied.”

“Jesus, Sherlock, we’ve barely got out of bed!” John said. “I’m not seventeen anymore. Anyway, excellent moisturizer as it may be, the hand cream probably isn’t safe to use with condoms.”

“Why do we need condoms? I thought we’d established we didn’t.”

“Well, we’ll want them eventually, won’t we? I haven’t any firsthand experience without, but I understand it can be rather messy. You don’t like messy.”

Sherlock considered. It was true, he did not like messy. On the other hand, they had been generating quite a bit of mess already, so what was a bit more? He thought about how it felt to have John come in his mouth versus the impersonal thrust of latex, and that decided it. “No condoms. I want to feel you come inside me.”

“Oh, Jesus,” John said. He got up and went to the kitchen, where Sherlock could hear him drinking a glass of water. Sherlock smiled. This was going rather well. When John returned, however, he bore an air of determined resolution. “Also,” he said firmly, “that skin cream is so expensive that if we keep going through it at the rate we have been you’ll have to find a whole harem of runaway brides just to keep up. Lube’s cheaper. What are you doing about that anyway?”
“I’ll contact Lord St. Simon after I’ve sorted Stephen,” Sherlock said. He was actually getting interested in the case despite himself. Lady St. Simon—nee Lyudmila Valanova, a Russian supermodel twenty years younger than her distraught groom—had still not turned up, although the morning papers had carried a breathless account of the discovery of her wedding dress in the Thames.

“All right then,” John said. He gathered his mug and plate and went back to the kitchen, where Sherlock heard him clattering about. Sherlock curled into his chair, bereft. It was so easy for John to leave like this. If it were up to Sherlock, they would stay in bed the rest of the day, or possibly the rest of their lives, pressed together until they were a single entity. He suspected this was a bit not good. Surely it was better to be more normal, to be like John, who could walk out of the flat with a smile? John whose brief gloom over each failed relationship could be drowned by a pint with Lestrade. Was that how it would be when he left Sherlock? Sherlock curled himself tighter. It would not be that way for him. Losing John would kill him. He was not being melodramatic, whatever Mycroft might think; it was simple fact. Without water he would die; without air he would die; without John, he would die.

“So that’s—hey, what’s wrong?” John stopped just inside the door. “Are you hurting?”

“No,” Sherlock said quickly.

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock stretched himself experimentally. His back still ached, as did his chest when he breathed, and he did not need to touch his face to know that his nose was still exquisitely tender. “Not bad. Getting better.”

“Want some paracetamol?”

Sherlock nodded for the sheer pleasure of having John bring the tablets and fold them into his hand. He swallowed obediently and closed his eyes as John stroked his hair. Bliss.

“Take it easy today, all right?” John said. “Tell Lord St. Whatsit you need a couple days before you go chasing around London after his wife.”

“Mmmm,” Sherlock said agreeably.

John cupped his head in both hands and kissed his forehead and then his mouth. Sherlock tipped his face up, a flower seeking the sun, and opened his mouth. John kissed him again, longer, sliding his tongue along Sherlock’s and rubbing his cheekbones with his thumbs, and Sherlock lost himself in the pleasure of it.

“God, you’re—I’ve got to stop, I’ll never make it out of here else,” John said finally, pulling back but still holding Sherlock’s face. Sherlock blinked at him, a little dazed, and John said, “Oh,” and then “Just one more” and kissed him again, hard, fingers sliding into his hair. Then he kissed his forehead again, sighed, and let go. “I’ll be thinking about you all day,” he said.

Sherlock smiled up at him, surprised and happy. “Really?”

“Well, yeah,” John said, looking at him curiously “So, like I said…don’t wear yourself out.” He took a step toward the door, looked back, grabbed Sherlock and gave him a last quick kiss, and wrenched himself with visible effort out the door.

Sherlock felt better.
After John left, Sherlock moped around for a bit before finally dragging himself out of the chair to get on with the day. He tidied the bedroom and went to the cleaners, all of which would have normally made him feel smugly virtuous, but which he knew perfectly well to be stalling. He looked longingly at his composition, which was piled untidily on the desk. He hadn’t worked on it at all since things blew up—too distracted—but he’d awakened early that morning and, unwilling to leave the warm cocoon of John’s arms, begun working over the third movement in his head. As so often happened, the mess he’d parked in the subterranean regions of his mind palace had cohered in the absence of attention, and now he knew exactly how he wanted to form the progression from Lassus’ melody. But if Sherlock got out the music now, he’d be lost for the rest of the day, and John would be disappointed. Finally he took out his phone, read John’s texts over again for motivation, and rang Mycroft. After all, Mycroft already had extensive experience getting people into rehab; no need to reinvent the wheel.

“Fortunately,” Mycroft said dryly, “I anticipated your procrastination. My assistant has ascertained that the…let me see…Thomason Centre for Recovery and Wellness has an opening at its residential unit on Monday.”

“Excellent, you won’t need me at all then,” Sherlock said, pleased with this unexpected turn of events.

“On the contrary, dear brother. The Thomason Centre is some three hours outside London. I cannot possibly spare my assistant for half a day. You will be taking the young man.”

Mycroft, clearly in the office on Saturday, probably did consider seven hours only half a workday. “Why can’t he go tomorrow?”

“Residential treatment facilities do not conduct intakes on the weekend, as you really should know by now,” Mycroft said.

“I’ll need a car,” Sherlock said grumpily.

“One will be provided, along with a driver.”

“Fine.” Did he have to say thank you? He’d rather cut out his tongue.

“I was…distressed…to see the extent of your injuries firsthand the other night,” Mycroft said carefully. “You are recovering, I trust?”

Sherlock scowled out of habit, but really Mycroft had been remarkably restrained throughout the whole affair. For Mycroft, anyway. “Yes. I am. Thank you,” he added after a moment, not too grudgingly.

“John is assisting your recovery, I assume?”

Sherlock did roll his eyes this time. “You already know he is, Mycroft.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Mycroft said with genuine warmth and then paused. Sherlock understood the tiny silence as clearly as if Mycroft had shouted.

“Yes,” he said.

“Sorry?”
“You want to ask a question regarding Sebastian Moran, but are reluctant to do so because it touches on an incident which we would both prefer never to recall or discuss. I am answering your question.”

“Ah.” Mycroft sounded thoughtful. He also, Sherlock noted, sounded distinctly chilly. Sebastian Moran was not going to have a pleasant time in prison. “Well done.”

This unexpected praise was so startling that Sherlock gaped at the phone for a moment. Had he ever actually heard those words from Mycroft before? “Er. Thank you.” Twice in one conversation! True love was turning him into a nincompoop.

“Yes, well,” Mycroft said briskly, restoring the usual conversational balance. “I for one have items of great importance to which I must now attend, if I can be of no further assistance to you.”

Sherlock made a rude face at the phone and said, “Wouldn’t want to keep you from your elevenses.”

“It’s two in the afternoon,” Mycroft said irritably, and disconnected.

“Come on, I have something to show you,” John said that night, dragging Sherlock toward the bedroom.

“Proper lube?” Sherlock said a little snidely, but he followed willingly enough. Sex, after all, was the one area of this relationship where he felt confident.

“No, even better—look.” John held up a glass bottle, labeled in fancy script. Sherlock frowned at it.

“Massage oil?”

“I got it at the place where I took Nasir to get his things for hairdressing school. This is supposed to be for very sensitive skin.”

“I don’t like—“

“—fragrance, I know, it’s unscented.”

Sherlock eyed the bottle suspiciously.

“Massage, Sherlock. It’s a pleasant experience. Haven’t you ever had a massage?”

A shard of memory: Victor’s hands on his skinny shoulders, Victor saying, “Just relax, Sherlock, you’re so tense,” but he ruthlessly shoved it down. “No.”

“If you don’t like it, we’ll stop.”

Sherlock knew he meant it; John would never push him to do anything. “All right. What do I do?”

John took Sherlock’s clothes off and arranged him face down on the bed. He took his own clothes off too. Then he warmed the oil in his palms and spread it over Sherlock’s back. He avoided the places that were still green-and-yellow with bruising, concentrating on the tight muscles around Sherlock’s shoulders and scapulae. “Your back is so beautiful,” John murmured. “You have the longest, most graceful spine. Spread your arms out for me.” Sherlock stretched his arms on the bed and John ran his hands along them, kneading the triceps. “Like a swan,” John said appreciatively.

Sherlock felt himself loosening. It did feel good. John did not tell him how tense he was or try to force him to relax; he just worked Sherlock’s muscles and kept up a soothing litany of praise. John
worked his way down Sherlock’s hamstrings and calves and Sherlock melted into the mattress, so limp and boneless he did not even feel tickled when John rubbed his feet. He could not remember ever feeling so quiet and peaceful, even after sex.

“Turn over,” John said and Sherlock rolled obediently. He was too sleepy and comfortable to feel more than a twinge of anxiety. John poured more oil onto his palms and worked it into the skin of Sherlock’s chest, skirting the bandages. “We’ll take those sutures out tomorrow,” he promised.

Sherlock hummed approval and John moved down, massaging his quadriceps, Sherlock sighed and spread his legs as John worked his way inward, no longer quite so sleepy. He felt himself thickening as John rubbed the insides of his thighs with long, firm stokes. John was at the juncture of hip and thigh now, his slick thumbs rubbing closer…ah…rubbing at his perineum. Sherlock spread his legs wider. He heard John opening the bottle again, a brief pause, and then John’s fingers stroking lower. Sherlock sucked in his breath, arching, as John’s other hand closed over his hip. His fingers massaged Sherlock’s opening, firm but gentle, and then one oil slicked finger slipped smoothly inside. “Oh,” Sherlock gasped. John slid his right hand up to Sherlock’s chest, pressing him down to keep him from bowing off the bed. Sherlock’s hands clenched on the sheets as John slowly, slowly worked his finger in and out, twisting just a little to massage the tight ring of muscle. “Breathe,” John said, amused, and Sherlock’s breath whooshed out. He hadn’t realized he was holding it. Inhale, exhale, following the rhythm of John’s finger, in, out. “Big breath, blow out,” John’s voice came again, and when Sherlock exhaled he felt a second finger breach him. This time he moaned, spreading his legs and planting his feet to lift his hips. “Shhh, I’ve got you,” John said, pressing down on Sherlock’s chest, and curled his fingers upward. Sparks exploded and Sherlock cried out, canting his hips again.

“Be still,” John crooned, pistoning his fingers with agonizing slowness in and out of Sherlock’s yearning body. Sherlock had no experience with this other than as a prelude to the main event, usually rushed and often abandoned altogether; he had no idea that John’s fingers inside him could feel so good. He tried to hold still, as John instructed, but his hips seemed to rock of their own volition. John spread his fingers, making Sherlock writhe, and stroked his prostate again. Sherlock was moaning, pushing back, seeking that touch, God, he was fucking himself on John’s fingers. A third finger opened him further and he arched up against the pressure of John’s hand.

“Does this feel good?” John asked, sliding his fingers deeper and making Sherlock whimper. “God, you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I love making you feel like this.”

“Please.” Sherlock felt he was no longer capable of coherent speech, was not even sure what he was asking for, but it didn’t matter. John would know. John would give him whatever he needed. “Please. Please.”

“Beautiful,” John whispered and then the hand that had been pinning Sherlock’s chest slid down and enveloped his cock, and suddenly it was too much, the rush of sensation and the loss of that grounding pressure tipping him from pleasure into panic. He could not breathe. Sherlock’s mind was suddenly, horribly clear, aware of being spread naked and helpless on the bed. His mouth opened in a soundless, desperate cry.

John looked at him and immediately let go, slipping his hand from Sherlock’s body as he slid up the bed. Sherlock lurched onto his side, curling into John and clutching at his skin. John’s arms were around him, John was kissing his hair. He was safe. He could breathe.

“Too much?” John asked after a while. His tone was gentle, but light—nothing we can’t handle here. Sherlock’s breathing slowed.

“No, just—can I, like this?” Sherlock bent his knee up and over John’s hip, still lying on his side.
“Oh, hell, yeah,” John said, grinning. He ran the hand that had been rubbing Sherlock’s back down to his arse, cupping and squeezing and bringing his leg up higher. “Let me get some more oil.” He reached over, fumbled, finally ended up rolling away briefly to park the open bottle on the bedside table, then wriggled his way down a bit so that Sherlock was left nuzzling his hair. “This still all right?”

“Yes,” Sherlock answered, breathing in John’s scent from the top of his head, and John’s hand slid between his legs. The hand stroked and fondled as he rapidly hardened again and then John’s fingers pushed back into Sherlock’s still-loosened opening. Sherlock arched his back and clutched John’s shoulders, seeking friction, and John made a tight sound and pushed back.

“Can I touch you,” John said, sounding strangled, and Sherlock gasped “God yes, please, now,” unable to thrust satisfactorily against John without dislodging his fingers. John’s slick hand took hold of him and he began to stroke in a rhythm with his thrusting fingers, his own breathing going harsh and ragged as Sherlock clung to him, body stiffening, the rush of pleasure building until John growled into his neck, “God you feel amazing, I can feel you getting tight, I can’t wait to be inside you,” and then he was coming, blindingly hard, banging his broken nose against John’s head and crying out again and again from the ecstasy and the pain.

When Sherlock’s vision finally cleared he found John tangled against him, languidly rutting against Sherlock’s oil- and semen-slicked abdomen. “No, not like that,” he said thickly, not feeling entirely coherent. He worked his way free, sat up, and pushed the pillows into a pile against the headboard. Then he flopped back, half sitting, and manhandled John with some difficulty until he had him where he wanted him, which was straddling Sherlock’s chest.

John looked confused. “Is this a pearl necklace thing?” he asked. “Because, um…”

“You have to kneel up,” Sherlock said. John rose, and Sherlock adjusted his position a little so John’s cock was directly in his face, licked the head and said, “Getting the picture?”

“Sherlock,” John said with an endearing mix of excitement and trepidation.

“Fuck. My. Throat,” Sherlock said with his crispest enunciation and John’s cock jerked, whether at the thought or at his language, Sherlock wasn’t sure. John himself still looked uncertain. “Please. You can’t hurt me, see all the pillows?”

“But you—“

“I’m all right, doing this. I want this.”

John licked his lips, said, “If you want me to stop—“

“I know.”

John leaned forward to grasp the headboard and Sherlock raised his arms over his head. “Please,” he said again.

“Oh, fuck.” John dropped his head to his chest.

“It was your idea,” Sherlock pointed out.

“What? How did you—I didn’t—“

What was John babbling about? He was blushing. “You said,” Sherlock interrupted. “You said you wanted to drive all the other memories out of my mind. I assume you realize even normal brains
aren’t so finite, but I agree with the principle. This is our bed, now. When I think of being on this bed with my hands over my head, this is the memory I want.”

John’s face cleared. He breathed deeply, then lifted his head and gently grasped Sherlock’s wrists, avoiding the abraded areas where the handcuffs had bit into him, pinning them against the soft pillows. Sherlock looked up at him, mouth open and waiting, and John slowly slid his cock between his lips. Sherlock closed around him. “Oh, fuck,” John groaned again. Sherlock sucked encouragingly and John pulled back and pushed forward again, only about half his cock in Sherlock’s mouth, even though he knew Sherlock could take more. Sherlock was beginning to regret pinning himself down; if he had his hands free he could grab John by the hips. He had to settle for arching his head forward and sucking harder. Fortunately John was clearly already close; he was beginning to rock back and forth in a fast shallow rhythm. Sherlock sucked air through his aching nose, relaxed his throat, and shoved forward. The angle was bad, but the move had the desired effect: John made a high pitched sound and began to snap his hips in earnest. Sherlock let his head rest against the pillows and moaned around John’s cock. John was really pounding away now, gasping and grunting and tightening his fingers around Sherlock’s wrists and sending jolts of pain through his sore nose. It was…different, why was it different: just as good as it ever was to let everything go, to be taken over and emptied out, but there was more now, he wanted to be emptied so that John could fill him, he wanted John’s cock in his mouth, John’s hands on him, he wanted John’s pleasure, to see it, hear it, feel it, wanted above all to give himself over to John like a gift.

John’s fingers dug into his wrists and Sherlock opened his eyes to see John’s mouth drop into a perfect O as he gave a hard thrust. Sherlock’s mouth filled with thick bitterness and he swallowed around John’s cock, which made John thrust again hard as he pulsed, causing Sherlock’s nose to starburst with fresh pain. Finally John exhaled “Ohhh,” and pulled out, letting go of Sherlock’s wrists and collapsing to the side. Sherlock’s arms slumped, limp nerveless appendages, and John rolled onto his side and rubbed Sherlock’s wrists, stroking his hair and face with his other hand. “Hey,” he said softly and kissed Sherlock sweetly as Sherlock forced his eyes to focus. “Your nose is bleeding.”

“Worth it,” Sherlock mumbled, letting his eyes drift closed again. He felt John’s smile against his cheek as John gently, tenderly wiped the blood from his face.
Chapter 23

If John had ever let himself think about what it would be like, the transformation from his best friend into (he could say it in his own mind, surely, but not out loud, not yet, not yet) the love of his bloody life, he probably would have anticipated the transition to be a bit rocky. It was only to be expected. If he’d known what he was getting into with Sherlock—not just the lack of relationship skills but the emotional scars and baggage—well, he would have done it anyway, but he would have really expected it to be difficult. Astonishingly, it wasn’t. Partly this was due to Sherlock’s uncharacteristic (and probably temporary) desire to please, and even more to John’s care and patience, but most of the time things were unbelievably, blissfully good.

But not always.

“Sherlock, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.”

“Sherlock,” John said patiently. “We’re men. You’ve the same equipment I do, and it’s on the outside. It’s very obvious when you’re interested and when you’re…not interested, and you’re not interested.”

“It doesn’t matter, go on—”

“It doesn’t matter—” John clamped down on the words, but too late; Sherlock had already gone stiff.

John took a deep breath and fought it down. “I’m not angry at you, I’m not,” he said in the calmest voice he could manage. “I’m upset at the persons and circumstances that led you to believe that to be true. How you feel always matters.” He rubbed Sherlock’s tight back. “Look—if you’d said, ‘I’m knackered, let’s just cuddle’, what did you think would happen?”

“You’d be disappointed,” Sherlock said promptly. “I don’t like when you’re disappointed.”

“Well, a bit, maybe, but not at you.” At least Sherlock hadn’t said John would be angry. “It’s as if—what if Lestrade called you to a fantastic crime scene, and when you got there, the guy who did it recognized you and confessed? You’d be disappointed, but not in Lestrade, right?”

“Well,” Sherlock said, clearly thinking that he would, in fact, find some way to blame Lestrade.

“Oh, love, that’s not true,” John said, pulling him in tightly. “No, don’t do that, I don’t mean you’re not brilliant at sex, you know you are. Sherlock, we already have a relationship, we have had for months. And what about all those nights we spent just sleeping together before? Those are the parts
that really matter, like this right now, and you’re brilliant at this part too. I swear to you, if we never had sex again, I’d be okay with it as long as I had still had you with me, just like this.”

Sherlock wrapped himself around John and nuzzled into his neck. John kissed his head and was just starting to feel sleepy when Sherlock said tentatively, “But what if—sometimes—I don’t always know. If I want to or not. You know. I don’t always understand feelings, even my own feelings.”

The back of John’s neck prickled like a bomb dog scenting C4. “What do you mean?” he asked in a carefully casual tone.

“You said it was not good, talking about exes.”

“Well, generally, that’s true, but in this case I think it would help me to understand.”

“You already know, with Sebastian, sometimes…and before, at university, I had—I was seeing someone. I suppose it wasn’t a relationship the way you explain it. We didn’t do any of those things, the other things. I would have liked…but he was my tutor, and, so, it was just sex really. And…there were times when he wanted to and I didn’t, and he would always say I was too uptight, I should just relax and I’d enjoy it. So we would, and, sometimes I still didn’t, but other times, I did sometimes, enjoy it.” Sherlock had in fact become so tense relating this that his shoulders were up by his ears.

John thought it best to breathe slowly for several minutes while he soothed the shoulders down.

“That is not the same thing as not knowing how you feel,” he said carefully. “We talked about it before, remember? Your body responding to sexual stimulus is just biology. And you were, what, eighteen at the time? Nineteen?”

“Seventeen.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I could have been disemboweled when I was seventeen and still gotten off in the right circumstances. Listen to me, Sherlock: I want you when you are sure you want me. Only then. Understand?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said softly.

“I take it this guy was older?”

“Post graduate, so…yes.”

“Had you had much experience before then?”

Sherlock snorted. “None.”

John went quiet. It took him a moment to recognize that what he was feeling was relief. He hadn’t asked about Sherlock’s early experiences, but he’d wondered about it, about what kinds of things could have happened to Sherlock when he was young. A twentysomething taking advantage of a seventeen-year-old, while certainly not ideal, was a lot better than John had imagined. Maybe it was simply as John had assumed all along: Sherlock had no idea what he was doing, and believed that whatever his partner wanted was probably the right thing.

“I can’t believe I’m asking this, but where the hell was Mycroft? He picks me up just for looking at a flat with you but allows your tutor to take your virginity when you were seventeen?”

“Still in Hong Kong,” Sherlock admitted. “Luckily for Victor he got a faculty post in Melbourne just before Mycroft returned.”
They lay together for a while. John was thinking of Mycroft, undoubtedly already middle aged at twenty-four, trying to manage his obstreperous brother from halfway round the world. Not that it got any easier when he returned. Something crystallized in John’s mind. “Taking Stephen to rehab today,” John said. “That was difficult for you, wasn’t it? You’ve been quiet since you came back.”

Sherlock’s eyes flicked to John, a pale flash of surprise, and then away. He sighed. “I’d been there before,” he said slowly. “Years ago. The name’s changed, so I didn’t realize until we arrived.”

“Did you tell Stephen?”

Sherlock’s shoulder moved in a half shrug. “Not specifically. He knows I’m an addict, that I’ve been clean eight years. I told him getting clean was the worst thing I’d ever done, and that the thought of having to do it again was all that saved me from relapsing on several occasions.”

“Well, I’m sure he found that encouraging,” John said dryly.

“I also told him that rehab would work. If he wanted it to. And only if he really wanted it.”

“Ah,” John said. “How many times…”

“Three. No, two and a half. I checked myself out of the second place; it was horrid.”

“Was that this one?”

“No, this was the first.”

“What made you decide to stop?”

Sherlock was quiet, fidgeting restlessly. John said, “Here, wait,” sat up, and reached for their pajamas. Clothed, he gathered Sherlock to his chest and smiled when Sherlock’s fingers twined immediately into his shirt.

“After I was hurt,” Sherlock said finally, “I was intubated for two days, which was…unbearable, so I was sedated rather heavily, and by the time I woke up I had been without cocaine quite a bit longer than I had in a long while. It was clear to me that my lifestyle was unsustainable. Mycroft had cut me off some time earlier, which was why I had—why I was—“

“No. I know. You won’t.”

“But…” Sherlock’s fingers twisted in the soft cloth. “There has to be…I already knew I didn’t want to die, tossed out on the street like rubbish, before it happened; I never wanted to be a junkie; who does? It isn’t enough, do you understand? There has to be something to get clean for. I knew when I woke up that it was my last chance. If I wanted to be a detective I had to stop or I’d burn my bridges with the police and never be able to attract clients.”

“Do you think Stephen has a reason?”

“He says he does, his music—well, he calls it music.” A derisive sniff. “I know a producer who owes
me a favor…I can take him to rehab, I can make Mycroft pay for it, I can get him a job, but I can’t make him want it.”

“No,” John said very quietly. “You can’t. It always has to be Stephen’s decision.”

Sherlock scowled furiously. “Caring is wretched.”

“It can be, sometimes.”

Sherlock twisted to look into John’s face, frowning slightly, eyes darting, trying so hard to puzzle out the weight he could hear but not understand. “I’m sorry,” he said finally.

John could not help smiling. “That was good,” he told Sherlock, who nestled back down, pleased with himself.

“Imagine what it must have been like for Mycroft,” John said, thoughts coming full circle. He expected Sherlock to scoff, but Sherlock just said, “Oh,” in a small voice and went still. John was quiet, letting him work it out.

“I thought…I thought he wanted to control me. Make me just like him.”

Which, John thought, was probably still somewhat true.

“He used to write me at school.” Sherlock said, after a long silence. “My father never did. It wasn’t that he didn’t care,” he added quickly. “It just wouldn’t have occurred to him.”

John pictured an older, stuffier version of Mycroft, completely unequipped to deal with his high-strung child, shipping him off and forgetting about him in the hope that he would emerge at the end of ten years indistinguishable from Mycroft himself. He stroked Sherlock’s hair.

“When I was small I had a nanny.” Sherlock’s fingers were still motionless on John’s chest. “She always made me eat everything on my plate, even if—no matter what the housekeeper sent up. Mycroft used to eat my food when she wasn’t looking. I thought he was just greedy.” Sherlock took a breath, then let it out without going on.

For some reason that story saddened John in a way nothing that came before had. He thought of his own mother leaving peas out of everything because John hated them, the jam tarts his gran used to make just for him, the packages that came to Afghanistan with his favorite crisps and sweets—the Flake bars inevitably melted but still tasting indefinably of home. No wonder Sherlock couldn’t be arsed to eat. All his life food had been only a burden, something forced on him by housekeepers and boarding school dining halls with no care for his sweet tooth or his aversion to crunchy things. He derived greater pleasure from brushing his teeth, for God’s sake.

“He left work to take me,” Sherlock said in a very small voice. “Three times.”

John hugged him tightly. “He would have done it as many times as it took,” he said. “That’s how it works.”

Sherlock hugged back just as tightly and then frowned again. “I hate feeling grateful to Mycroft.”

“Yeah, well, I doubt he’s waiting for your thank-you note. Now go on and tell me what you really want tonight, as you’re doing so splendidly with feelings.”

“I want you to affirm my status as your mate through simulated grooming and reiteration of my desirable qualities,” Sherlock said in a rush.
John worked that out. “You could just say cuddle.”

“Too vague.” Sherlock settled himself contentedly into the hollow of John’s shoulder and curled his fingers into his favorite patch of shirt. John stroked his hair—simulated grooming, honestly, where did Sherlock come up with this stuff?—and Sherlock made a pleased noise, flexing his fingers a little. John had a sudden memory of Satsuma the cat kneading his trousers.

“Hey, Sherlock,” he said drowsily. “What’s your favorite food?”

He was expecting a sweet, maybe Mrs. Hudson’s mince pies or some fancy French pastry, but Sherlock said immediately, “Welsh rarebit, but only when you make it.”

“What?” John asked, surprised.

“Because you do it just right,” Sherlock said as though it were obvious. “And also toast,” he added as an afterthought.

John had, in fact, tweaked his recipe to please Sherlock: the cheese a little sharper, the bread slightly softer, less mustard in the sauce. Without even realizing it, he was giving Sherlock something he’d never known to want. He smiled into Sherlock’s hair. “Any toast or just mine?”

“Yours, of course. When you remember the jam.”

“I’m a good mate too, then?”


So, it wasn’t all perfect. But sometimes it was.

It took nearly a week to find Lyudmila Valanova, who as it turned out was not Lady St. Simon after all. As Sherlock rather cryptically informed his Lordship, no such person legally existed. Lyudmila had been secretly married at sixteen to her childhood sweetheart back in Russia, though her brother Anton, who accompanied her when she departed for London, never knew of the marriage. Anton’s subsequent rise through the ranks of the Russian Mafia had been aided by his sister’s connections and when he saw the chance of a rich husband, he told Lyudmila her sweetheart was dead. Lyudmila, who was not as clever as she was beautiful, believed herself a widow right up until the moment that she spotted her late husband in the church at her wedding.

Sherlock tracked the frightened couple to a tiny flat in a polyglot neighborhood so dodgy that John was glad of the gun tucked in his waistband. Unfortunately Anton was half a step behind them and burst in with two henchmen, all three brandishing AK-47s. John was so amazed by this development he nearly overlooked being frightened. Had they been strolling around London—even this part of London—toting honest to God Kalashnikovs? Apparently they had. A tense standoff ensued. Sherlock, who of course spoke serviceable Russian, argued heatedly with Anton while Lyudmila wailed hysterically and the two henchmen waved their enormous guns about, looking menacing. John ended up pressed against the wall with Sergei, the husband, hoping not to get shot in a random burst of testosterone.

“He was always such a hot potato, even as a kid,” Sergei said sadly, tilting his head toward Anton.

“You speak English?” John said, astonished; Lyudmila clearly didn’t.

“I worked very hard in school, after Lyudmila came here. She wanted to send me money for
university but I wished to pay my own way. I am a certified interpreter back home.”

“Well done you,” John said. The drama in front of them seemed to have reached its climax: Anton threw both hands up in a clear expression of surrender and Lyudmila clutched at the hand not holding an automatic weapon, kissed it tearfully, then flung herself at Sergei. Sherlock caught John’s eye and grinned, looking enormously pleased with himself. John grinned back. Lyudmila had half an inch on Sherlock and was about a third as big around; draped over the shorter, stockier Sergei she looked like a vine growing over a fire plug.

There was a loud BANG and the door slammed open again. Two more men stormed in, raising their own Kalashnikovs, but before they could even aim Anton shot them both in a burst of automatic fire. There was a moment of stunned silence. Even Lyudmila seemed too shocked to shriek.

Sherlock snapped something at Anton, who responded tersely, tossing down his own gun and retrieving one of the dead men’s. An impatient exchange followed, and then Anton jerked his head at his men, who took hold of Sergei and Lyudmila, and they all vanished out the door.

“The fuck?” John said to Sherlock.

“Rival faction,” Sherlock said. He dropped to a crouch and rummaged through the dead men’s clothing. “Hoping to advance by eliminating Anton and retrieving Lyudmila. No great loss. Sergei and Lyudmila will meet us at Baker Street tomorrow, along with Lord St. Simon, and once the histrionics are out of the way we’ll craft a version for the press that makes everyone involved look good: Lord St. Simon standing up to the Russian Mob, star crossed lovers and so on. There’s no salvaging Anton, he’ll have to be the villain, but he should be out of the country by then.” He stood holding two wallets, which he tucked into his jacket. “Might as well buy him a little extra time,” he said.

“You’re a marvel,” John said. “Let’s get out of here before any more Russians show up.”

They stepped into the hall and were immediately greeted by a wash of red-and-blue light from outside. “Upstairs,” Sherlock said.

They went up two flights and out into another narrow hallway. Sherlock flicked his eyes along it, said “that one” and led John to a door halfway down. He had the lock picked in seconds and they ducked inside the dark, empty room.

“Well, that—“ John began and then Sherlock was on him, all feverish hands and hot breath and soft lips, crowding John back. Arousal shot through John like an electric shock—adrenaline alchemized into lust—and he grabbed Sherlock by the back of the head, pulling him down into a bruising kiss. Sherlock immediately yielded, his mouth opening to John’s, body going pliant even as he pressed John into the wall, sliding down a little to bring their mouths in line. John sucked at his lower lip and slid his tongue in forcefully, seeking that shocked-wanting sound Sherlock made when they kissed like this, when John took his mouth with such fierce possession, and there, there it was, needy and almost surprised. John could get never get enough of it, of his mouth; he kissed and kissed until Sherlock was panting and his lips were wet and swollen under John’s.

John wrapped his other arm around Sherlock’s slim waist, under his coat, and pulled him in close as they kissed. Sherlock rocked against him, hard and purposeful, and slid one knee up to brace high against the wall, opening himself. Oh, that was—John growled at the feel of it and ran his hand over the curve of his arse, under his thigh, massaging him through his clothing, feeling the dip there with his fingers, God. Sherlock moaned, head going back in John’s hand, sliding his leg higher. John latched onto his neck and sucked, completely heedless of any marks he might be leaving, just wanting to have him, every inch he could reach. Sherlock suddenly lifted his arms and shrugged off
his coat and John heard it hit the floor behind him as Sherlock wrapped himself into John again.

“We should do this after every case,” John panted, coming up for air after sucking a bruise under Sherlock’s collar.

Sherlock arched to press himself against John and gasped, “Four and—done—you said—four things —”

“Oh Christ,” John said, heat surging in his groin. Sherlock was now actually rubbing himself against John, pulling his leg impossibly higher. John had a sudden and extremely vivid visual of taking him, of fucking Sherlock with his legs wrapped around his waist, and he clutched at Sherlock’s arse with both hands, instinctively trying to spread his buttocks. Sherlock slid his hard cock against John and moaned. Jesus, Sherlock was right there, only their clothing between them; the way John’s cock was throbbing he was surprised it didn’t simply burn through both their trousers and fuck Sherlock with or without John’s cooperation.

John had a vague memory that he had reasons for postponing this particular activity, but at the moment only one of them actually seemed to matter. “We haven’t got—”

“In my coat,” Sherlock said breathlessly, “I’ve been carrying around the proper lube since we started this case, John, please.”

“Oh well in that case,” John said, yanking at the back of Sherlock’s trousers, “get these off.”

Sherlock disentangled himself and stepped back as John crouched to root through his coat. He found the lube and tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. He looked up and nearly choked: Sherlock, wearing only his shirt and bare from the waist down, had knelt and was dropping his forearms to the floor, bracing his hands against the wall, head down and legs spread wide.

Every coherent thought in John’s head shorted out into static. He jerked his own trousers open, moving forward and gripping Sherlock’s hip, rubbing his cock over, under, between his buttocks. Sherlock shuddered and made that wanting noise again. God, his skin was like silk. “I could come just from touching you, I could, just like this,” John breathed. After so many days without, he thought he could probably come just from looking at Sherlock’s arse.

“You promised,” Sherlock hissed and John groaned, “I know, I know, just—” He thrust forward once—fuck—and then pulled back before he lost control completely. He reached forward and fisted his hand in Sherlock’s hair, pulling him up and around for a kiss, Jesus, fuck, this was—this was all his fantasies and then some, Sherlock on his knees, his luscious arse pressed against John, John’s hand in his soft hair, and now Sherlock was sucking on his tongue and moaning for John to fuck him. Christ. As miracles went, this was up there with not dying in Afghanistan. How had he got this lucky twice? “Just, let me touch you, please let me touch you,” he said desperately, and without waiting for Sherlock’s response he slid his hand between his legs, stroking the heaviness of his bollocks, the rigid length of his cock, running his fingers back to circle and spread him open, without clothing in the way now. “Oh, God, I want you so much, I want you, I want you—”

“Oh, God, I want you so much, I want you, I want you—”

“Please,” Sherlock begged, trying and failing to get his legs open wider.

Okay, okay.” John fumbled the lube out of his pocket, slicked his fingers, and was inordinately pleased when he managed to drop it back into his pocket instead of on the floor. He took Sherlock’s hip again and slid just the tip of one finger in, very slowly. He could see the pallor of Sherlock’s skin glowing white in the gloom, pale hands starfished on the wall, the curve of his arse. “This is how I’m going to take you,” he whispered, leaning forward so his breath would reach Sherlock’s ear. “Slow, like this, or it will be over too fast.” He pushed the finger all the way in. Sherlock shuddered. John
pressed his finger in and out, slow and steady, not trying to work the muscles but just fucking Sherlock relentlessly with his finger, palm up, making Sherlock adjust to the rhythm. Sherlock tried to push back but John gripped his hip firmly. “None of that. I set the pace.” Sherlock shivered again, hard, and kept shivering, and John, who had become very adept at reading Sherlock’s warning signs, slowed and rubbed his free hand up his back, soothing the knobby ridge of his spine. The trembling eased.

John looked at his hands, at the slim pale body bowed under them, the marks still visible on his back, and felt a wave of possessive tenderness so fierce it bordered on fury. He felt a sudden rage at everyone who had had Sherlock before this, who had taken him without care or love. He pulled his finger back and added a second, still keeping his palm up, and pushed back in. “You’re mine now,” he said in a low, fierce voice. “No one will ever touch you again, no one will hurt you, no one will have you, not as long as I live.” He turned his fingers and deliberately stroked over Sherlock’s prostate. Sherlock cried out softly, dropping his back to push his arse higher. “You are mine.”

“Yours, only yours,” Sherlock moaned in a broken voice. “Always yours.”

John took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. His fingers were digging into soft flesh, but Sherlock was undulating on his fingers, trying for more friction as best he could with John’s viselike grip holding him still. “I want you so much,” John said, surprised at how raw his voice sounded. “I want you too, I want you inside me.” Sherlock raised his head and arched his neck as John stroked over him again. John added a third finger and Sherlock made a low, desperate sound that made John throb with desire. He pumped his fingers, making sure Sherlock was thoroughly loosened, and Sherlock dropped his head and moaned, tremors running up his legs. John pulled his fingers free and reached for the lube, pausing as his brain sent up a last ditch warning—was Sherlock really okay? Was he really ready for this? Sherlock read his mind, of course. “Oh God, I’m fine. Just do it,” he snapped, and then whimpered when John leaned forward and ran his lube-coated palm over Sherlock’s cock.

John slicked himself, hissing at the cold touch of the lube, and dropped the bottle. Done with hesitation, he guided the head to Sherlock’s loosened entrance and pushed slowly in. The tight grip of Sherlock’s body—shockingly hot without a condom—was the most blissful thing he had ever felt. “Fuck, fuck,” John gasped, now shaking himself, leaning over Sherlock and clutching hard to keep from thrusting wildly. Sherlock clenched around him, tensing a little for all his bravado, and that helped John to focus. He looked down their joined bodies, at Sherlock with his back curved and legs spread wide for John to take him, John inside him. He pushed just a little farther and oh, God, it felt incredible. “So good, you feel so fucking good—tell me you’re okay—I—“ I love you, he wanted to say, but he knew better: not then.

Sherlock had turned his head and was biting down on his own sleeve. “Okay, yes, more,” he gasped. John pulled back, as slowly as he could, and pushed all the way back in. Sherlock pressed back against him and panted “harder,” and John saw stars. He thrust, heard Sherlock’s bitten off “ohhhhh,” and somehow that did it, snapping his mind of all restraint. He drew back and slammed into Sherlock, pushing him forward, immediately wanting it again, that velvety grip around him, back out, in, back out, in, it was fireworks and electricity and everything, the soft skin under his hands and the sounds, those sounds, Sherlock crying out muffled into his own arm as John fucked into him like an animal, heedless as his orgasm rose and rose and finally exploded, pulsing into Sherlock’s body. He thought he might have been shouting, but all of Scotland Yard crashing through the door could not have made him stop at that moment.

John stayed draped over Sherlock’s back a minute, getting his breath and his balance, then threaded
his fingers into Sherlock’s hair again. The kiss this time was sloppy and, on Sherlock’s part, a little frantic, panting incoherent need into John’s mouth. John reached down and took hold of his cock, and Sherlock broke the kiss, neck arching. John let go of his hair and wrapped an arm around his chest to pin Sherlock to him and gripped, sliding his hand and twisting, one, two, three, and Sherlock came with a cry, spurting onto the grimy carpet.

They collapsed forward, a slumped tangled mess, and then Sherlock pushed against the floor and John pulled out slowly, trying to be careful, and landed backwards on his arse. Sherlock sat up on his heels, said, “Oh, ugh,” and grabbed for his pants.

“I told you it would be messy,” John said.

“Well, the carpet can’t get any worse,” Sherlock answered, wiping himself off and tossing the pants away. He looked around for his trousers.

John handed them to him, decided he had a point, and wiped his own hand on the carpet. He felt the teensiest bit guilty. He’d vaguely envisioned something a lot slower and gentler, but then Sherlock seemed none the worse for wear. Quite the contrary, actually. He pushed himself to his feet in an unfairly graceful motion and stretched, reminding John, once again, of Satsuma the cat, curled possessively on John’s jumper and purring smugly. “That was excellent,” he announced. “Come on, John, get up. Let’s find a dry patch of floor.”

John hauled himself, a lot less smoothly, to his own feet and they settled against the wall on the other side of the door. He was suddenly exhausted, thinking longingly of their bed back in Baker Street. “How long do you think they’ll be?” he yawned.

Sherlock slid down lower, curled his legs under him, and settled his head on John’s shoulder. “If they aren’t gone in an hour, I’ll create a diversion and we’ll go out the window.”

John smiled into the dark. “Fucking marvel.”

“Of course I am. You’re rather marvelous yourself,” Sherlock said, which took care of John’s remaining guilt. An actual compliment…it was a night of miracles. They would do it slowly next time: at home, in their bed, no nasty carpet, John taking his time, making sure everything was perfect. He would hold Sherlock in his arms and stroke every curve and plane of his body, slowly, tenderly, until Sherlock moved against him and John made love to him properly, drawing it out, cherishing him, showing him what sex could be when it was an expression of love. And then maybe after John would take his face in his hands and tell him everything that was in his heart, say the words he had never yet spoken to anyone, safe in the dark.

Or maybe he would wait a little longer.

John kissed Sherlock’s hair and settled himself more comfortably on the hard floor. “Have I told you lately how wonderful and amazing you are?”

“You can tell me again.”

John smiled. They had all the time in the world.
“Do I love John?” Sherlock asked.

Sally Donovan goggled at him. “Why are you asking me?”

“Well, I can hardly ask John,” Sherlock said. “Lestrade would be the obvious choice, but asking would make him uncomfortable, and besides he would almost certainly go on to say that he knows nothing about love and then to wax maudlin about his ex-wife.”

“Yes, let’s avoid that scenario by all means,” Donovan agreed. “What about making me uncomfortable?”

“But I’m not,” Sherlock said. “Women have greater emotional intelligence and are more at ease discussing interpersonal issues. You’re not uncomfortable in the least.”

“If you were one of this lot, I’d say you were setting me up to give someone bad news,” Donovan said. “But as it’s you I think I’m flattered. Anyway, yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, you love him. **Obvious.**”

“How do you know?”

Donovan sighed. “Look, Freak, I’ve seen the way you look at him. No one’s ever looked at me like that in my whole life, including my mum. If that’s not love, then there’s no such thing and I might as well give up right now and get a cat.”

“A cat would be an improvement over some of the other dumb beasts you’ve let in your bed.”

“Shut up,” Donovan said without any real heat. “How long have you two been, ah…”

“Engaged in a sexual relationship?”

“Ugh, do **not** go there, I do not want those pictures in my head.”

“Three months, two weeks, three days.”

“Has he said it to you then?”

“A week ago.” John had then put his hand over Sherlock’s mouth and said, “No, don’t. I know you need some time. You’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

“Okay, you should tell him.”

“Is a formal declaration required?”

“Is a what?”

“I asked Mrs. Hudson first,” Sherlock said with some disgust. “She felt that I should inform John of my feelings in some sort of dramatic scenario. They involved sunsets, flowers, kissing in the rain, and so on. I thought it best to seek a more level headed assessment.”
“Was that a compliment?” Donovan looked astonished.

“Just answer the question,” Sherlock said with asperity.

“I don’t think so. How did he say it to you?”

“Er…you said you didn’t…”

“Okay, stop, I get the picture. No, I don’t think any of that stuff is necessary.” She considered.

“Never hurts though.”

Sherlock thanked her and set off, thinking it over. A formal declaration was not necessary, but it sounded as though even Donovan thought it was a good idea. How to do it though? When John had told Sherlock that he loved him, John had been clear and unambiguous and had ensured Sherlock knew that John wanted to be with him forever. John had made sure that Sherlock understood, and now Sherlock wanted to do the same for John. What else had Mrs. Hudson suggested? Long walks on the beach, candlelight dinners, hot tubs. Definitely not. A gift. A gift would be good; gifts were always good, weren’t they? Sherlock felt obscurely that John should have a gift. It seemed to him that John was due some sort of…compensation? Bonus? Dowry? After all, Sherlock had always assumed he would live out his life alone, whereas John had envisioned settling down, with a family and little house in the ….

Sherlock stopped dead in the middle of the street, the solution coming to him with the clarity of a puzzle falling into place. “Oh, the cleverness of me,” he murmured, oblivious to a startled look from an elderly man walking a corgi. Maybe this relationship thing wasn’t so impossible after all. Sherlock looked around, realized he was going in entirely the wrong direction, and headed back to the main road in search of a cab.

It took months, even with Mycroft helping. It nearly drove Sherlock mad. And then once things were finally, finally ready, the weather refused to cooperate. It rained for two days during which Sherlock refused even to answer the phone, in case he got distracted, and on the third the sky remained stubbornly, hatefully grey.

“It’s not clearing,” Sherlock said furiously as he stomped into Mrs. Hudson’s flat. He had been outside for ten minutes, stalking up and down Baker Street whilst glaring at the weather app on his phone. “It was supposed to clear by evening, but sunset is in ten minutes and it’s still cloudy.”

“Well, it’s winter, dear,” Mrs. Hudson advised. “Just skip the sunset.”

“We should have gone to the beach. But that would have tipped him off, and I hate the beach, there would be sand in my shoes, and I’m not kissing in the rain, we’ve done that already, it was too wet, why do people like that, and besides it isn’t raining—“

“It will all be fine,” Mrs. Hudson said patiently. “Just go ahead. John doesn’t care about the sunset. Besides, as much as I’ve enjoyed having these roses, they’re in full bloom now. They might not be as nice tomorrow.”

Sherlock scowled harder. “Oh, all right,” he said crossly, gathered up his things, and marched up the stairs.

John was in the kitchen. “Are you planning on—oh, hello, what’s this? Are they from a client?”

“Of course not. They’re for you. Don’t be an idiot,” Sherlock snapped rudely. He was half hidden
behind the enormous spray of roses.

“I’m your idiot,” John said cheerfully, not in the least put out. “Let me just put them in—oh, you’ve got a vase already.”

Sherlock had inadvertently stolen Mrs. Hudson’s vase. Damn it. “I need you to come in here,” he blurted desperately.

“Okay, just let me turn this off.” John cleared a space on the table for the roses, turned off the gas under a pot of water, and let Sherlock tow him to his chair. His smile was affectionate and perhaps a bit…amused? Sherlock dropped to his knees before the chair—a bit harder than he meant to—and the amusement vanished.

“John.” Sherlock grabbed John’s hands. Oh damn it again, he was meant to have gone on one knee, wasn’t he? Or was that just for proposing marriage? Too late now. “John, I love you. I love you more than anything. I want to be with you forever.” He had more planned out, but suddenly his mind—his! Sherlock Holmes’!—had gone completely blank. “This is for you.” He shoved the heavy envelope into John’s hands. Mrs. Hudson had wanted to roll it up and tie it with a ribbon, but had dropped the idea when Sherlock started flapping.

John pulled out the papers and stared at them. Sherlock peered desperately at his face. Shock? Surprise? Confusion? “Sherlock,” John said slowly. “You bought me a house?”

“A house in the country,” Sherlock said rapidly. “And in any case it’s a cottage, you see, it’s on the documentation, The Beekeeper’s Cottage. It’s quite close, it’s in Sussex, we can go on weekends, and then later we can retire there. Maybe I will keep bees. Bees are fascinating. And you can grow things in the garden or—be a doctor or go to the pub or—whatever you were going to do.”

“Going to do where?” John said in some confusion.

“In the house in the country,” Sherlock said. His hands were beginning to clench. “You always said that’s what you wanted. To settle down. With a family and a little house in the country.”

“But that was back when—” John looked at Sherlock’s face and stopped. “Okay, up, over here.” He got Sherlock to his feet and dragged him to the sofa. “Breathe in.”

Sherlock inhaled a long slow breath, the way John had taught him, feeling John’s strength, smelling his familiar tea-wool-soap scent. He breathed it in, slow deep breaths, until the tingling in his hands receded. He sat up.

John was smiling. He cupped Sherlock’s face and kissed him softly. “This is the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me. I love it,” he said sincerely.

Sherlock’s heart lifted. “You do?”

“I do. I’m just amazed. I never imagined you would leave London. And where did you get the money?”

“I don’t want to leave yet, not for good,” Sherlock admitted. “But bees are fascinating, and anyway, I want to be where you want to be.”

“I want that too, you know.”

“The money is mine. I have a trust; Mycroft has control of it, he always has done; I was not, ah, reliable when I came of age. I used to have an allowance until he stopped it. After…after I got clean,
he wanted me to come and work for him, but I didn’t want to, and I wanted to prove to him I could look after myself, so I told him I didn’t want the allowance anymore.” Sherlock shrugged. “I haven’t touched it for years. There’s still a fair amount left.”

“I can’t wait to see this,” John said, looking at the papers. “Can we go this weekend?”

“Of course…there’s no furniture though. It’s a house for you, I rather thought you’d like to furnish it.”

“We’ll camp out the first time, and then we’ll buy a really excellent bed with all this money you have.”

“There’s a large window. I thought you’d have a desk there, where you could write your blog,” Sherlock said shyly.

“Only if it looks out onto your beehives…Maybe I’ll learn to bake bread. For the honey.”

Sherlock had not thought of this. He liked honey. He smiled, then lay his head on John’s shoulder. “I think I’m going to lie down for a bit whilst you cook your dinner. That was exhausting.”

“Oh, sod my dinner. It was just pasta anyway,” John said. “This is an occasion! I’ll take you to Angelo’s later, all right? Just now I’d rather lie down with you. However you like,” he added quickly. “We can just cuddle and you can tell me all about how you love me again, because I know you practiced and I didn’t get to properly appreciate it the first time. Or we can, you know, take our clothes off and you can tell me again that way, with me inside you, which would be, um, quite nice.”

Sherlock felt a pang of sadness. He knew what John really wanted, although John would never say it. They had tried face to face sex exactly once, Sherlock on top astride John, which really should have been all right. It had not been all right, and Sherlock had panicked so badly he’d nearly been sick. He’d hated himself afterward: for his weakness, for his bad choices, for making John so sad, for all the ways he had never been normal and never would.

They had not tried it again.

The worst of it was that Sherlock wanted it too. Now that he was with somebody he actually cared for, he wanted the intimacy he’d always shunned, wanted to see John’s face when he entered Sherlock, when he climaxed. He’d started working at it, in secret. Sherlock knew the principles behind cognitive behavior therapy—he’d been to rehab three times, he hadn’t deleted everything—and had mapped out a plan he thought would work. So far he hadn’t progressed past lying on his back and visualizing, but it was early days yet.

Sherlock scanned John’s warm smile and relaxed: John meant it, both options were fine. “Cuddling now, I’ll fall asleep if we do anything else.”

“Oh—of course, this is why you’ve been pacing around the last few nights.”

“I had to practice! I had a much better speech, I’ll tell it all to you. And then after dinner we’ll do the other. You can pull my hair that way,” he added enticingly. John had never lost his fondness for this activity. Nor had Sherlock, but it left his hair a hopeless wreck.

“Say it again for me. Just one more time.”

Sherlock, who was so rarely sure of his own feelings, had no doubts whatsoever now. He took John’s face into his own hands, looked into his eyes, and said with total, soul-deep sincerity, ”I love you.”
Chapter 25

I Want You (Elvis Costello)
I want you
I’m going to say it once again til I instill it
I know I’m going to feel this way until you kill it
I want you

“Sherlock,” John said, leaning over Sherlock where he lay sprawled on the sofa. “Why do I have a message from a woman from the Borealis String Quartet on my blog? About a rehearsal?”

Sherlock frowned up at him. “Why is she contacting you?”

“Because you haven’t been responding, apparently.”

“Oh.” Sherlock closed his eyes.

“Oh, what?” John shoved at his feet until Sherlock gave up, turned around, and sat up. John sat next to him with his laptop perched on his knees. He tapped at the screen. “Borealis Quartet.”

“They contacted me some time ago. One of them had been following the discussion of my identification of the unattributed works of Lassus, and they expressed an interest in performing the composition I had done based on his motets.”

“Lassus…the polyphonic thing?”

“Yes.”

“Really? That’s great! Isn’t it great?”

“Music exists only when it is played and heard, John, so yes, it is ‘great’."

“So…?”

“So I sent them the score.”

“And they are planning to perform it…” John looked at Sherlock’s blank face, then typed on his laptop. “…next Friday. Sherlock, this is quite big! It’s in the papers! Can we go?”

“She said something about tickets,” Sherlock said vaguely.

“So it sounds like they want you to sit in on a rehearsal, but you haven’t responded. Why not?”

Sherlock shrugged. Music for him had always been a solitary experience. He didn’t really know why he hadn’t answered, any more than he understood why he had ignored the previous requests for a picture, composer bio, and press statement.

“Borealis Quartet,” John muttered, typing. Then, “Wow!”
Sherlock looked over his shoulder. Four sultry young women in low cut evening gowns held fingerboards to their cheeks as though planning to fellate them.

“Can you get Lestrade tickets too?” John asked.

“I’m not going,” Sherlock said, panicked.

“Oh, come on, Sherlock. They’re not going to look like that in rehearsal. Stop that.” John finally succeeded in pushing Sherlock’s knees down and loosening his fingers to take his hands. “I want to hear your music, and I want to hear it the way you want it played. Don’t you want that too? What if they aren’t doing it right?”

Sherlock allowed himself to be soothed by John’s warm arms. “I suppose so,” he said reluctantly.

“I’ll make you Welsh rarebit when you come back,” John promised, and Sherlock sighed. He could tell John wanted him to go, although his understanding did not extend to why, and besides John had a point: what if they weren’t playing the piece correctly?

“Fine.”

John was right, of course. The members of the Borealis Quartet turned out to be completely ordinary in person, not alarming at all: spectacles, ratty jumpers, hair pulled back any old way. The cellist, who had been the one to contact him, was a serious ancient music scholar who knew quite a lot about Lassus. They had a very enjoyable discussion. Finally the first violin cleared her throat and said a little shyly, “Shall we begin then? I’ve a score here if you’d like to make notes.”

They settled themselves in their semicircle, shifting a little and self-conscious in his presence, and then a stillness descended as they all focused at once. The first violin lifted her bow, and they began to play.

He had lived with this music for months, working it over for hours in his head on trains, in cabs, on long sleepless nights, without ever hearing it aloud. And now he knew. It was beautiful.

Sherlock was still feeling the high when he got back to Baker Street. His praise had been brief but unstinting, and the musicians’ delight at his evident sincerity had surprised him—he hadn’t realized they were worried about his judgment. The cellist, flushed and happy, had taken a deep breath and asked, “I know this isn’t your day job really, but if you should ever write anything else…” She looked at him and then stopped and said, “My goodness. You have already, haven’t you.”

“Not all of them are finished. But yes, a few.”

“Would you consider letting us perform them?” She was blushing now; it reminded him a bit of Molly.

“I would never let anyone else,” he said, and meant it.

Now Sherlock was thinking of all the forgotten music in the archives at the museum, all those melodies unheard for hundreds of years. Some of them were only fragments, many unattributed, like cold cases waiting to be solved. Someday, when he and John retired for good, he could bring them to life. They would live in the Beekeeper’s Cottage—which so far had acquired a bed, a table and a single sofa—and he would make music and honey, and John would make bread, and make things
grow, and maybe make people well occasionally, if he wished. It would not be crime, but it would be good.

Sherlock’s mind was so completely in Sussex that he walked right into John before he realized that John was trying to get his attention.

John put out a hand to steady him and said, “Sherlock.” He face was…not good: brows furrowed eyes soft mouth tight. Sherlock scanned his mental index: not concerned, not angry, not worried. Sherlock didn’t like it. His shoulders went up.

John took his hand and led him to the sofa. “Love,” he said and stopped. He cleared his throat. “Sebastian Moran is dead. He was found this morning in his cell. It looks like suicide but…he had to have help. Owen is investigating. He’s thinking it might be Moriarty, sending a message.”

“Oh Mycroft,” Sherlock said.

“Well, yes, although I doubt he’ll be pursuing that angle particularly hard,” John said dryly.

Sherlock’s head had filled with a very loud white silence. He watched John.

“They found a part of a letter. It wasn’t dated or left out, just in with his things, so…” John rubbed at his forehead. “Owen read it, obviously. He reckoned it was okay if you wanted to see it.”

“Have you read it?”

“No, I haven’t,” John said simply. “You’re an adult, Sherlock. I’m your partner, not your parent.” Or your brother, he did not say.

Sherlock took the piece of paper and looked at it. There was nothing to deduce: ordinary paper, ordinary black ink; the handwriting left-handed and unhurried.

Sherlock:

I’m not allowed music in here, so I play pieces over in my head so I won’t forget them. Lately it’s mostly Saint-Saens, the E major. It was never one of my favorites before. Now I would give anything to hear it again.

I think you know I took pictures of you. I hadn’t planned to, of you, but Moriarty wanted them. He wanted to see you like that, used and damaged. I told him he would have the pictures when he got me out. I lied. I deleted them so he would never have them. There are no copies.
I thought once I was brave, joining the army. I expected to be killed. I thought I would die a hero, and my family would be proud. I wasn’t brave.

Now I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had been brave. If I had become merely a good musician instead of an exceptional killer.

That was all. No more had been written, and the letter was unsigned.

Sherlock was still a long moment, looking at it. With the data available he would never be able to deduce whether Moran had been interrupted, or could not bring himself to finish, or simply had no more to say. He started to fold the paper, then stopped and handed it to John.

John’s mouth tightened as he read. Sherlock watched his face intently: anger, then. John, a soldier himself, did not forgive. Even though he knew the anger was not directed at him, Sherlock was grateful when John smoothed his face before handing him back the letter.

Sherlock stood and crossed to the desk. He tucked the letter into a drawer, thinking as he did that John would probably prefer that he burned it. He stayed there, looking out the window at the soft spring rain, static echoing in his head.

John was there. He took his hand and said gently, “If you don’t know what you’re feeling right now, that’s okay. I think maybe a lot of people wouldn’t. You might feel a lot of different things, and that’s okay too. They might not be what I feel, or that you think you should feel, and it’s still okay.”

Sherlock squeezed his hand but did not answer.

“Do you want some time to yourself?”

“I don’t want you to go. I might…” might what? Sherlock made a vague gesture. “…play a bit.”

John touched his shoulder and melted away.

Sherlock took out his violin, the feel of the wood and smell of rosin the oldest, purest comfort he knew. He played old pieces, things he had known for years, played as a child: Mozart, Bach, Corelli. No Saint-Saens.

He played for hours, until his mind was quiet and his shoulder cramped, then carefully put away the violin. He lay on the sofa and let his thoughts order themselves.

A long time ago, a lifetime it seemed now. The night Gregson had told Lestrade to go home and then proceeded to be tiresome: *condoms, clean needles, no cars.* She had then leveled her sharp gaze at him though her spectacles and said, “Mr. Holmes. People are going to hurt you.”

“I already told you, I—“

“No. Not because of that. Not because of the risks you take. People are going to hurt you because they can.”

Shocked into honesty, Sherlock had said, “I know.”
A pause, and then Gregson had said, “Well, then, you need to find someone who won’t.”

He’d rolled his eyes, said something flippant, but he hadn’t forgotten. Even later when he gave it all up, put away the distractions of his youth to focus on his work, he’d remembered her words. He hadn’t really understood then. He thought he did now.

Sebastian Moran had hurt him. Because he could.

Sebastian Moran had stood over Sherlock and said *he’ll never leave me, he’ll always come back,* and for a black despairing instant Sherlock had believed. But only for an instant. Then he thought, no. *No.* He let the thought brighten and fill his mind like an oncoming train, a blazing light of purpose, *NO.* And then he opened his eyes.

John wouldn’t hurt him. But he could.

John had killed a man the very first night, for threatening Sherlock. Sherlock had not been there, had not seen John’s eyes, but he knew what they had looked like. Sherlock still did not like for John to be angry, but sometimes he saw John’s eyes darken when someone looked at Sherlock, and it made his guts twist in a different way—not anxiety but anticipation. Sometimes, especially after a case, *especially* after a case where there had been danger or Sherlock had done something John considered fucking stupid, sometimes then when John had Sherlock bent over and was taking him, gripping his wrists and thrusting deep into his body, John lost himself. No *is this alright or are you okay* but a feral, furious pounding that made Sherlock hot from head to toe. Because John’s dark eyes, John growling as he shoved inside—it lit up all Sherlock’s nerves like wildfire, made him so hot and desperate he could come without touching himself. But if he said *stop,* John would stop. He knew it. He was sure. Almost sure.

John could hurt him, but he wouldn’t.

Sebastian Moran would never hurt him again.

Sebastian Moran was gone. Gone from the world. He could never escape now, never come for Sherlock—a worry Sherlock had not realized he carried until it was lifted. Whatever he was, whatever he might have been, he was gone. He, Sherlock Holmes, was alive. Consulting detective, musician and composer, perhaps a beekeeper, someday. Beloved brother—he knew that now—friend, partner. Sherlock Holmes loved and was loved. He was alive, and he did not want the ghost of a dead man’s violence to come between him and John any longer.

Sherlock sat up and looked around. The flat was dark and quiet; John had long since gone to bed. On the desk sat a cup of tea and piece of toast sodden with jam, both now cold. The toast, Sherlock knew, did not mean *eat.* It meant *love.*

Sherlock carried the plate and mug into the kitchen and drank a glass of water. He knew intellectually that he was ready. He had been ready for weeks, as ready as it was possible to be, but always the fear of failure had held him back. He was still afraid, but he would no longer let it hold him back.
John stirred and reached for him automatically when Sherlock slid into bed. Most nights John never really woke, just wrapped him into a secure embrace and fell back asleep, but now the touch of Sherlock’s bare skin surprised him into wakefulness. “Mmm,” John said, pulling him into a sleepy kiss. Sherlock kissed him back, letting his neck arch to encourage John to slide his arms around Sherlock’s bare torso.

“All right?” John asked, apparently all the way awake now. He slid his hands down to Sherlock’s arse and squeezed. “Tell me what you want.”

“You, always you,” Sherlock whispered. He wrapped his arms around John and rolled to his back so John was on top of him, curving his spine to rub up. He wished he had John’s gift for dirty talk. “I want you inside me like this.”

John stilled. His hands found Sherlock’s face. “Sherlock—you know, don’t you, I’d be happy the rest of my life just carrying on as we are.”

“I know. It’s not for you. It’s for me.”

John was still unmoving, thumbs tracing Sherlock’s cheekbones. Sherlock took a deep breath.

“This isn’t—I’m not being impulsive. I’ve been practicing. On my own. For months.”

“You’ve been…with…?”


John, improbably, began to giggle. “Oh, my God,” he said, tipping his forehead to rest against Sherlock’s. “When I was at the surgery, right? Thank God you wanted to keep it a secret, what if you’d texted pictures? I’d never have been able to finish a shift. I’d have got sacked. Go on, tell me what you did.”

Well, that was certainly an idea for another time. “You have above average observational skills when it comes to sex, you tell me,” Sherlock answered. If the way that John was beginning to move against Sherlock was any indication, John found this topic extremely arousing.

“Mmm,” John purred, working his feet between Sherlock’s legs so that Sherlock spread them obligingly. He felt fine, they’d done this much before, but it didn’t escape his notice that John was staying very close. “You lay on this bed, on our bed, and you thought about me, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Sherlock groaned, arching up to grind into John’s pajamas.

“And then what did you do?”

“I touched myself.”

“Where?”

“Here.” Sherlock took John’s hand and guided it to his cock.

“I have got to get these off,” John said hoarsely and rolled over. He was back in an instant, slotting his own hard cock against Sherlock’s. “So, like this?”

“Yes…”

“How long?”
“Not…Oh God, slow down. Not long. Just until I was hard.”

“Then what?”

“Then I got the lube.” Sherlock spread his legs wider, thinking hazily that John was very clever, making Sherlock direct the action like this.

John slicked his fingers and stroked, slowly. “Like this? Did you bring your legs up?”

“Not yet.” Sherlock planted his feet and angled so that John’s fingers circled him easily. “Oh, that’s…it’s so much better when you do it.”

“I wouldn’t mind watching you though. Just to give you some pointers, you understand. So you got the lube…”

“And then I pushed one finger in, oh, like that.” Sherlock arched involuntarily. “John, go on, just do it. Like you would any other time. Don’t ask if I’m okay. I’ll tell you if I’m not.”

John rotated his finger, making Sherlock forget what he was trying to say, and whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you,” Sherlock whispered back.

John worked him open slowly, maybe a bit more slowly than usual, but with the same sure gentleness, the same light loving words. He kept his face as close to Sherlock’s as he could. Sherlock moaned, rocking his hips up as John fucked him with his fingers, trying for friction on his aching cock. When he felt the third finger he exhaled hard and pulled up his knees. He could feel the cold trembling beginning in his stomach and focused on John’s breath, John’s voice, John’s lips, John, John, John, John, John. The trembling eased. “Now,” he gasped.

The actual penetration was hard, almost too much, but John breathed him through it, Sherlock gripping his shoulders with desperate determination. John moved slowly, so slowly, stopping whenever the shivering threatened to overtake Sherlock, Sherlock focusing every particle of his being on matching John’s deep, even breaths. “Sherlock,” he heard distantly. “Open your eyes.”

Sherlock focused. John’s face was above him, smiling tremulously, eyes wet. “I’m inside you, love, I’m all the way inside you.”

“I love you,” Sherlock said immediately, reaching. John was in him and kissing him, holding him tightly, salt in his mouth. They were as physically close as two people could be.

John was murmuring to him, words like amazing and wonderful and brave. Sherlock, his panic receding, made himself inhale and realized his hips were cramping painfully. He loosened his death grip on John. “All right,” he whispered.

John straightened a little and began to rock slowly, dropping back to kiss and nuzzle at Sherlock’s face. The motion rubbed his abdomen against Sherlock’s cock, pressed between their bodies, and Sherlock felt himself thicken as his arousal returned. “Good, more.”

“Can I—“

“Yes.”

John knelt up and began to move purposefully, very, very slowly. His forearms bracketed Sherlock’s head and his hands cupped Sherlock’s face. Sherlock pushed back, matching him, pleasure kindling
now. He began to lose himself in it, a slow rhythm building.

John’s lips brushed his face. “You are the most precious thing I have ever held in my hands,” he whispered. Then he pushed upright, gripped Sherlock’s hips, and thrust. Sherlock pulled his knees back up and straightened one leg to hook over John’s good shoulder, opening himself as far as he could. Oh, that was good. He arched his back as John pushed into him again, brushing his prostate this time, making Sherlock cry out. John’s head dropped back. “Oh God,” he said hoarsely, “Look at you, look at you—“ His hands tightened as he thrust. Sherlock opened his eyes, tried to focus on John’s face, his cored neck, his strong arms; he had wanted this so much, to see John’s face in this moment, but then their eyes met, hot, just as John struck again and Sherlock’s vision dissolved into fizzy sparkle.

“Touch yourself,” John commanded breathlessly and Sherlock did, gripping his cock with his right hand and bracing against the headboard with his left. John was snapping his hips in a hard rhythm now and this—this was exquisite, this jolting pleasure in his groin, the feeling of being totally open to John. John’s hands were on his thighs, pulling him back with every shove forward, so good, so good, so good.

“I want to see you come, I want to see you come with me inside you,” John gritted, gripping Sherlock’s hips to keep him in place. Sherlock’s back was arching now, his hand moving in a fast counterpoint to John’s pounding, the heat rising and rising. John gave a particularly hard thrust at exactly the right angle and then Sherlock was flying apart, exploding into a million fragments of pure sensation, hearing his own voice shattering.

When Sherlock came back to himself he found John sprawled heavily on top of him, snuffling into his clavicle.

“Did you finish?” Sherlock demanded in outrage. “I wanted to see!”

“Well, I didn’t really get to watch either,” John said. “I was just barely holding on there. Having you spread out in front of me like that? I’m lucky I lasted that long. As soon as you started to go that was it for me. I’m pretty sure you were spectacular, though, because there seems to be come everywhere.”

Sherlock huffed. “Then we have to do it again.”

“Oh yeah. Tomorrow.”

Sherlock smiled. He was pinned like a dissected frog and his thighs were cramping badly. Semen was trickling down his abdomen, and it was possible John had drooled on his neck. He was lightheaded with triumph and euphoria. To top it all off, he was suddenly, ravenously hungry.

“Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“No, we’re meeting with those people of Gregson’s about the embezzlement, remember?”

“Not until afternoon.”

“No…why?”

“Will you make me some toast?”

Sherlock felt John’s affectionate smile against his neck. “You know how to make toast.”

“But it tastes better when you make it for me.”
John pushed himself up and out, propping himself up over Sherlock, who groaned with relief and straightened his legs.

“You,” John told him, “are a lazy sod.”

“I thought I was a fucking marvel,” Sherlock protested.

“That too,” John said, smiling down at him.

“I,” Sherlock said, looking up. “I…” There was so much he wanted to say, so much love and joy and relief swelling in his chest, but the words weren’t there. His eyes stung.

“I know, love. I know.” John brushed his face with his fingertips. His eyes were soft, and Sherlock understood this expression without having to think. “I know.”

Sherlock exhaled shakily, and John leaned forward to rub his nose against Sherlock’s. “Toast?”

“And jam.”

“All you want,” John said cheerfully, and Sherlock smiled, because he knew that meant love too.

**Epilogue: Next Summer**

“Emmas” is the most popular reality programme in the country. Ema Anstruther had filmed the whole tea party encounter on her phone, and a clip of Sherlock saying disdainfully “Your name isn’t Emma” is featured prominently in the opening credits. It goes viral, and half of Scotland Yard has it as the ringtone on their phones.

Boffin Bill was committed to a long term psychiatric facility where his medications have finally been adjusted effectively. His letters to Sherlock have become much more sensible, and Sherlock is saving some of them to trade to Mycroft next time he needs a favor.

Sylvie is now dating the chef at the vegan café. She and John are still friends.

Harry is sixteen months sober, and she and Clara are thinking of starting a family. They approached Sherlock first, but he wants to think it over before broaching the subject with John. Secretly, Sherlock quite likes the idea of being a father—at least as long as Clara and Harry do all the actual parenting—but he sees the dark outline of Moriarty’s endgame now, and he won’t risk involving anyone else. (“We’re not getting any younger!” Harry snapped. “Give him time,” Clara soothed.)

Molly and Ciaran are engaged and have moved in together. Unfortunately Ciaran turned out to be allergic to cats, so Lestrade adopted Toby. Toby is a friendly, cuddly cat and Lestrade’s children adore him, to the great annoyance of his ex-wife.
Jason Tyler was convicted of kidnapping and sent to a juvenile facility. Nobody at the Yard thinks they have seen the last of him. ("If he were American, he'd have shot half his school," opined Dimmock.) Charges were dropped against Malcolm McAllister, who cooperated fully with the investigation, and who is doing well at his new school. Sherlock thought about emailing him, but he didn’t really know what to say, so he never did.

Charles Fuller dropped out of the football team. He and Simon started a father-son book club that meets at Café Milano.

Charges were also dropped against Tassie Phelps, but she could not find another nanny position and instead wrote a memoir which is due to come out in the fall. John and Lestrade both pre-ordered copies to give Sherlock for Christmas.

Owen got a commendation, and he and his team attempted to meet personally with the families of all Moran’s victims, including many they had not known of previously who were found on the scrapbook. They were not always successful. He and John keep in touch. Owen also became quite good friends with Lestrade, whose kids are about the same age, and sometimes the families get together on weekends.

Stephen is eleven months clean and working steadily. Sherlock checks in on him, and would be shocked to learn that the thought of disappointing Sherlock has kept Stephen from falling on more than one occasion. Nasir graduated from hairdressing school, turned eighteen, and with a bit of help from John got a job at Lady Fitz-Hugh-Curtis’s favored salon, where he is very popular.

No one knows what Mycroft is doing.

Lestrade has settled into his new life, although he still doesn’t feel like joining the dating world yet. His kids are his first priority, followed by his job, and he is surprised to realize that he is really quite happy with the way things are. He has his cozy flat and his cat and his friends, and it is enough for now.

The Beekeeper’s Cottage is still only about half furnished. It turned out to have an apple orchard, which Sherlock hadn’t realized because he wouldn’t know an apple tree from a giant sequoia. John wonders how hard it is to make cider, and imagines crisp fall weekends, possibly with Lestrade down to lend a hand since Sherlock will be of no use whatsoever.

After much careful research John has purchased a Beginner’s Beekeeping Kit for Sherlock to honor
their first year together. He wanted to get the Deluxe Kit, but he’s fairly certain Sherlock deleted anniversaries, and doesn’t want him to be too distressed at not having a reciprocal gift.

Sherlock did delete anniversaries, but fortunately Molly reminded him in time to change the name of his new piece, which the Borealis Quartet will premier at their sold-out concert three weeks later. Sherlock even got a lovely box to put the tickets in, although Mrs. Hudson wrapped it for him.

Sally Donovan still doesn’t have a cat. After all, if the Freak can find true love, anything’s possible. Right?

Chapter End Notes

1) Orlande de Lassus was a real person, a prominent 16th century composer who wrote the piece from which this fic takes its title. (Okay, he didn’t. That was Elvis Costello. Musical joke!) He wrote a great many motets, some of which actually are lost, and was known for his sense of humor and use of the unexpected in his music. The phrase "polyphonic motet" is completely redundant, since there is no other kind of motet, but in the canon story "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans" Watson describes Holmes having a fascination with the music of the period and writing a monograph on the "polyphonic motets of Lassus", so it's become a bit of a catchphrase. (The geekiness of this feat becomes even more impressive when you consider that Holmes would have had no access to recordings of the music and would have "heard" it by reading the score.) BBC Sherlock is shown composing in the episode this is very loosely based on, though, and I thought that would be a lot more fun. The piece he writes here is a fantasia; there actually are fantasias based on Lassus' work, although they are a bit obscure. Better known are the fantasias written by Ralph Vaughn Williams on some of Lassus' contemporaries, "Fantasia on Greensleeves" and "Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis". 
2) I can't end without an enormous, heartfelt thanks to all of you who read this story as it was posted. (And if you just now read the whole thing in one go, I'm totally with you--I'm the kind of reader who usually won't touch a fic until the last chapter is up.) I wasn't sure anybody would ever read this thing at all, or like it if they did. When I wrote this as a draft, I was writing for me, so I could throw in all the stuff I wanted, both big (plot twists! whump! protectiveJohn!) and small (hair stroking, Sherlock annoying Lestrade, Sally Donovan punching someone in the face). But then you wrote comments! And they made me so happy! And about the time I put up chapter 10, I wasn't writing it for me anymore, I was writing it for you. Sorry about the knitting needles...I'll have to find a way to use those next time. Thank you again, from the bottom of my heart.

Works inspired by this one

privileged guest by b_alleyn_dunn, cover for a waste of breath by chryse by gurkenpflaster, [podfic] a waste of breath by aranel_parmadil, consulting_smartass
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