Radioactive Trees In A Red Forest

by Maribor_Petrichor

Summary

John Watson is what happens when a man can no longer see a reason to go on.

John Watson is what happens when a man starts to let go.

"It is what it is."

John Watson is what happens when what "it is" becomes too much to bear.

This is a story of the life, death, and resurrection of John Hamish Watson.
John Watson knew London was full of the dead. All of them walking about, grayed-out versions of who they used to be, who they wanted to be, who they imagined they'd become.

He was one of them now. Not quite there. Not quite alive. Still moving, still talking but mostly just a shadow person who existed out of habit as opposed to any real passion.

He didn't know if it made him unique or not; the fact that he was a ghost that had its own ghost. But there it was.

"Mary" accompanied him.

Not always there but sometimes.

More often than not and never enough.

He wasn't quite stupid or mental enough to truly believe she was a ghost. But the language of his situation could be diced so finely, brought into such focus that it pained him to look at it straight on.

He was 43 years old.

He had a new daughter to whom he was having difficulty feeling any attachment.

He needed to pick up milk from the store.

He wished some days and especially some nights, that Sherlock had shot him stone dead when Eurus had given him the chance.

He needed to check the model on the car seat to make sure it wasn't one of those he'd heard was recalled this morning.

He needed to add funds to his Oyster card.

He was passively suicidal.

His wife was dead.

He had a toothache in that molar that was always giving him trouble.

These were the facts and no matter how he rearranged or reshuffled them they remained the facts.

It was easy then to dilute it. Not just easy, preferable.

You didn't even make it to your first anniversary, John.

Shit, does Rosie like the bananas or the pumpkin?

You failed. You failed just like you always do.
What about a nanny? How much would something like that cost?

She died. And to make things just a bit worse she died believing you were a good man.

How much holiday time did he have left? It felt like he hadn't been to work in ages.

You with your secrets and your secrets and your secrets and your secrets and your secrets and your-

Had he finished off all the wine or was there another bottle somewhere? Can't remember. Can't remember.

She died with praise for you on her lips and your lies in her head. Lies. Lies. Lies. That's all either of you ever gave the other.

What about moving? What about just leaving London? What about leaving the country, forgetting all of this, forgetting everyone?

What about your gun? What about dropping Rosie off with Janine, going back home writing a note - That's what people do, isn't it? Leave a note? - slipping that pistol between your lips and pulling the trigger? Painting the pretty insides of your big, pretty empty house with the inside of your skull. Bright and red and thick dripping down the walls-

But that wasn't "Mary's" voice. No. Not at all. “Mary’s” wasn’t the only voice that had been in his head, not by a long shot. But this one, the one that was decidedly not her, the reigning narrative was far darker, far more truthful and the only one left.

The cables of his existence were bound to snap and eventually they did.

His life was tied together like that now. Bundled up with cello tape, wires, strings, ropes, all of it binding him up like a scarecrow. He was stuffed full with the scraps and shreds of his old life. His insides had been scooped out, weighed and discarded. He had been autopsied alongside Mary. She had gone into the ground and he'd been sent on his way. He was an effigy of John Watson. An unconvincing dummy who wasn't fooling anyone, least of all himself.

Yes, the cables were bound to snap, however, he hadn't wanted them to snap where they did or in front of who they did.
Chapter 2

Two Months On

Things with Sherlock were slowly coming back together. The coldness had felt wrong but it was, in truth, the only emotion he could feel that wasn't debilitating. His fury at his best friend had been fueling him but even that was dying out. Exhausting itself and all he was left with was the morass of grief.

Still though, he'd missed him. Even in his rage he'd missed the comfort Sherlock could have provided. It was at moments like this when he realized he was almost as isolated as he had been when he'd returned home from Afghanistan. What was his life? Where were his friends? Where was his foundation? His support?

The answer to that was the same it had been five years ago; with Sherlock Holmes.

But Sherlock had been suffering too. The detective had wrung himself out at the behest of his wife on John's behalf. He had dragged himself on hands and knees through hell and had almost died in the process.

**He nearly died, John, another one you almost killed.**

John wasn't ready for things to return to normal but Molly had come to him in that determined way of hers and said "It's your turn."

"It's my turn for what?"

"To look after him."

"I can't see him. Not yet. It's different when it was a case...the pursuit and danger of it all but."

"Enough. I know you're hurting. I know. But he...you...the two of you, you make things so complicated all the time. I'm not sending you to sit with him just because he needs it, even though he does. Even those he's too stupid and stubborn to ask. I'm sending you because you need it. You're drifting away, John. We're standing on the shore and you're just floating farther and farther away."

He'd liked the sound of that. He wanted to badly to drift away.

"So you're going. You're going to take your turn like the rest of us and you're going to anchor yourselves to one another."

It was probably the most words Molly had ever said to him and in her earnest, quiet yet commanding way she humbled him. They weren't friends. Not really. Acquaintances at best. Aside from Sherlock, he didn't have friends. He realized that now. But that was no reflection on whether or not she was a good person

He'd nodded and agreed and that was how he'd found himself back at Baker Street.

Within fifteen minutes, he'd wanted to leave.

He recalled reading something not that long ago. The forests around Chernobyl had caught fire. They had turned red after the '86 disaster, hence the name, the radiation soaking into their bark and roots, killing them along with nearly everything else in the area. The funny thing was, these trees
weren't decaying, the microbes that would normally devour them having been eradicated in the accident. Even the ones that had fallen onto the ground three decades prior were largely unscathed, preserved in their death throes. An entire swath of land turned into waiting kindling. What scientists feared might happen did; a fire. All that debris, caught up in a blaze not simply dangerous because of the fire but because of all the toxins contained in those never-rotting corpses that might be released in the air. Eventually, the fire brigade contained it but the men emerged with a strange and unnerving tale. It felt like battling a regular fire, of course, but on top of that there was this tingling, itchy sensation, crawling over their skin, pins and needles all over their bodies. That was the radiation. Strong and sick and crackling and silent and very much still hanging in the air, coating everything for as far as the eye could see. The disaster never really stopped. Not really. The Red Forest was there waiting. Waiting to itch and scratch and scrape and claw at your skin. Ready to melt your insides and multiply your cells and burn you from within to without.

That story had given him nightmares.

That was what he had felt being this close to Sherlock again. Radiation. Danger. Not from the man himself. But from being this close to feeling something again. Caring.

He had finally come to agree with his mate; caring was a disadvantage.

As John scolded him about not biting the bullet and taking a chance with The Woman it occurred to him that perhaps they had finally traded places. Sherlock, reborn, maybe, just maybe on the verge of truly letting someone into that final place in his mind, his heart, his life and he, John Watson, willing to close up shop for good.

He hadn't really meant Irene. That was why he'd never said her name. For a myriad of reasons it shouldn't be Irene, not the least of which being, she was a lesbian. And though he wouldn't presume to know what was best for Sherlock he would prefer he be involved with someone a bit less likely to be targeted by a terror cell or cause an international incident. Also, actually being interested in men might be helpful.

But then again, what did he know about relationships or sex or love? He usually managed to fuck those things up quite royally.

But she was The Woman and in that way, John used her to represent any woman, every woman, every person, chance, opportunity. Sherlock wouldn't, didn't text if he wasn't interested. In fact, the only other person he texted with any frequency was John himself.

His friend, and yes, he was still his friend, was so close, nearly there, just on the edge. And if a push towards an entanglement was what he needed then John was happy to provide the shove.

He meant what he said. Neither of them were getting in younger. In fact, John felt old, terribly old and he imagined there were days when Sherlock felt the same. Life had recently taught him that time was running out. Time was always running out.

"Mary" had been there, through it all, encouraging him to stay, to speak and he had. He had cajoled his friend and he had confessed like a guilty penitent to the hallucination of his dead wife.

And the guilt and the pain and the anger at her loss had caused him to shatter.

And he crumpled in on himself and raised his hand to his face shielding his eyes.

And he'd cried, that weary cry where your limbs felt weak and your legs threatened to buckle because there was nothing inside you left, not really, not anymore, no frame, no skeleton, no heart,
only grief. Black and poisonous grief. That was all that animated you. That was the ghost in the machine.

He hadn't heard Sherlock approaching him but he had felt that tingling sensation rising on his skin.

He didn't have time to process the embrace as it happened. But later he would wonder at how stiff, it wasn't. How awkward, it wasn't. How it was natural and protective and how out of all those who had touched him after Mary had died, this touch was both the least and most painful.

"It's ok."

"It's not ok."

"No. But it is what it is."

That answer. So Sherlock. So unlike the platitudes that had been shoveled upon him until he felt he couldn't even breathe. But here was the answer that fit, like a key in a lock and he broke down even further against him.

How does one keep track of time in the middle of a total collapse?

He didn't know how long they stood like that. He was so tired and he felt he was shrinking underneath his own gravity, un-existing, de-existing, folding in on himself like time. Sherlock's hand on his back, his neck, encircling him, shutting everything else out and letting him disassemble in warm, loving privacy. He was even ashamed to cry in the loneliness of his house but he didn't feel that same shame here.

Sherlock smelled like clean clothes and a combination of that shampoo he used and the detergent Mrs. Hudson was fond of. He'd been smoking but somehow the scent was fresh and sweet, like new tobacco and not the ashes.

He hoped he wouldn't fling himself back into cigarettes or worse. And then there it was again, that prickling sensation, stronger. His mind and heart rebelled against being pulled in again.

You know where this leads. He warned himself.

But he was pulled in, in every way he could be. And it was working to calm him. The whole situation worked to calm him and finally, he pulled back to stare up at his mate.

Sherlock's face was tired. Even more exhausted than John had first noticed. The stubble, the circles, the bloodshot sclera. But he was smiling and his hand was resting kindly on John's cheek.

John mirrored the gesture.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Sherlock." He whispered. "I'm sorry, mate."

"I know you are." He said matching John's volume and tone. He knew what the apology was for. It didn't need to be said. Still, the images flashed through John's mind. The punches landing. Then Sherlock landing on the ground. Then kicking. Fuck. Kicking him again and again until he was pulled away. The worst bit not that he saw fear in his best friend's eyes; but acceptance. Acquiescence. Agreement.

"You didn't do this. You didn't kill her. I had no right."

"So you said and I heard you." Sherlock's eyes were locked with his. "John, I heard you. I accept
your apology without reservation and I thank you."

"Don't thank me. Please don't thank me."

"I believe you and I think we have proven time and again that we are larger than the sum of our parts and the sum of our actions. I say this not out of benevolence or martyrdom but because I mean it. I forgive you. I forgive you, as is my right and my right alone. All that's left is for you to forgive you."

John found it impossible to agree to those terms in that moment. He didn't have it in him to forgive himself.

They'd stood like that, so close, so pressed against one another. Their own event horizon. No light. No air.

John's hand had crept to the back of Sherlock's neck. It wasn't until later that he remembered kneading the skin there softly.

"Will you be alright?"

"You said Molly was coming round. I'll be fine."

"No. I don't mean right now. I mean...I don't know what I mean." He said with a sigh. He hadn't been able to pull away from the other man's eyes. There were nebulas bursting around the edges of his pupils. How had he never noticed that before?

"I'll be alright if you are." he answered and almost immediately a look passed across his features that he'd said too much.

"I need you to be alright, Sherlock." He said in a harsh whisper and that feeling of pins and needles was almost unbearable. "Someone has to survive all this."

He was pulling him in. Pulling him closer and encountering no resistance. "I need you to be alright...I need you..."

And then their lips were touching.

And there was less sound than no sound.

And less air than no air.

They were kissing and his hand was in Sherlock's hair and Sherlock's hand was on his cheek, the other on his waist just resting, only resting. It was like someone had paused every rampant thought in his head and he was only living in this kiss and the moments between each beat of his heart. This was all there was and he was existing without hating existence.

_I must taste like tears._ John had thought.

He pulled away just for a moment, just for air. Later he would wonder how far he'd intended to go. But it didn't matter because they could both hear Molly's footsteps on the stairs.

John stepped back and wiped at his face, _not_ his mouth, with his sleeve. Sherlock, for a brief moment, held his position, hand where John's waist had been, palm where his cheek had rested. Like a mannequin.

"Hope I'm not late." Molly said entering the flat with a voice a bit too bright and a smile a tad too forced. This had all been wearing on her as well. All of it. Jesus, she needed to get far, far away from
them both.

She stopped, sensing the tension in the room, the tears and perhaps something else she couldn't put her finger on even though they'd broken apart before her arrival.

"Everything ok?" She asked.

"Yeah. Fine. I've got to get going. Rosie..." He said vaguely. He couldn't look at Sherlock. All he could see was a new wave rolling in from the distance. A new guilt. Jesus Christ. Christ on his throne what had he just done.

"You could stay, John. I brought some takeaway, plenty for three." She said watching him as he quickly passed.

"No, sorry, gotta get going."

"John." Sherlock called from behind him. "Will you come back tomorrow? Please?"

"I'll try." He said shortly.

He was already out of the door and on the stairs.

He'd started walking. Fast. "Mary" had joined at his side easily keeping pace. But then, she would, wouldn't she?

"I hope you didn't cut that short on my account."

"It was a mistake. I'm sorry that happened. Oh, God, I'm sorry."

And he was. Sherlock was not a sexual being, not remotely. Not to mention the fact that John wasn't attracted to him. Not at all. Not in the least. He was straight. He was a married straight man. Widowed. Widowed straight man. He didn't know why he had kissed him. Now, after the fact, the move baffled him. All he could come up with was that it was just a strange part of what he feared was the start of a mental breakdown.

"John, I'll say this as many times as it takes for you to hear it. I'm dead."

"Please stop."

"There isn't time for this, John. No, look at me, you look at me now."

He did. Briefly.

"There isn't time." She reiterated. "Waiting out some sort of mourning clock out of a misguided idea of respect? Is that what you're doing?"

"You're in my head. You're not real. I want you to be but you are not real."

"No, I'm not real." She said sadly. "Mary is decomposing. Unlike your red trees. Mary's spirit, if such a fanciful thing exists, has gone on to the next step. I am a creation of your mind. But you know what? I'm a damn good one." She raised a wry eyebrow before continuing. "You may have cast me a bit more benevolent and forgiving about the texting than I would have been but you're not that far off. I have as much truth about me as she would. Far more truth, it seems, than you'd like to hear."

"Please...please leave me alone. Just for awhile. Please."
"Alright. I'll leave you be. I love you. But you listen to me, John Watson, if there is a hereafter, I would suggest you not piss me off by shitting your life away. I imagine I'd be a right bitch of a ghost."

In a way, he had been glad everything with Eurus had happened. He needed a distraction and she was a mighty one.

It had felt so good to come so close to sampling a swift death. Not the well. That creeping, slow moving danger had felt too much like his own regular life. The steadily rising water, the inevitability of it all.

No, but being in that room with Sherlock, with a gun in his hand. Having to make that choice. John using all of his will to not burst out with "Pick me. Please, God pick me."

It was good and fast and there was no time to breathe and no time to talk about anything, least of all a kiss.

He didn't want to talk about it or think about it. He only wanted to settle down with a drink in his hand and forget it had ever happened.
He had a dream.

Mary had sent another video.

Mary; warm and bright and smiling. Encouraging. So encouraging.

They, he and Sherlock, had rebuilt Baker Street together. Rosie was there in Sherlock's arms.

*Oh, there's Daddy!*

Lovely. So warm. A break in the clouds. A future to look forward to. Sunlight and promise and hope even in the face of all this.

And then everything muddled together, a mixture of the past and the never-was.

_I'm not the man you thought I was;_

Well, you listen to me: who you really are, it doesn't matter.

_I'm not that guy. I never could be._

I know you two; and if I'm gone, I know what you could become. Because I know who you really are.

_But that's the point. That's the whole point._

I know who you really are. Get on with it.

_Who you thought I was is the man who I want to be._

Get on with it.

He'd awakened with a start to find "Mary" sitting on the edge of the bed looking down at him with concern.

"I think what confuses me...her...me the most is that you think I didn't know. No, not confuses me. Saddens me. She knew. I knew. I knew it the first time you told me about him on our 3rd date. If you close your eyes and go back in your memory you'll see it. It passes over my face. A moment. A flash. But you learned observation from one of the best. From him. You saw it, John. You saw it register. And when he came back. You wanted to tell me, to prepare me. To explain. You _did_ tell me. I knew. And I didn't run. I loved you and I stayed. I knew. I know."

"Know what?" He'd asked feeling utterly confused.

"Oh, John." She'd replied but hadn't said anymore.

He'd gotten out of bed and gone to the kitchen. He grabbed a glass from the cupboard, the vodka from the freezer and a Coke from the fridge. After adding a bracing amount of alcohol which calmed the caramel colored fizz he'd downed the drink.
"Mary" frowned but he cut her off before she could say anything.

"Will you lie down with me, please? Let me put my arms around you?"

"You won't be able to feel me, John." She'd said sadly.

"I'll put pillows in your space. I'll close my eyes and pretend. You just keep talking to me and I'll pretend."

"Ok. Ok, love."

When Rosie cried he would pick her up.

When she was wet, he would change her.

When she needed comfort he would rock her.

When she seemed to require stimulation he would play with her.

But to his shame, to his horror, he was feeling less and less about his daughter.

He'd counseled new mothers on bonding, walked them through the steps to improve it, explained postnatal depression and tried to alleviate their guilt. Just because it wasn't spoken about didn't mean it wasn't normal or natural. It happened. Bonding took work.

But for him, this made no sense. When Rosie was first born he was enraptured, everything about her was perfect and worthy of documentation and praise. He loved her. He loved spending time with her. Showing her things. Kissing her, tickling her, holding her. He loved to imagine what kind of toddler she be, what kind of little girl, what kind of teenage and woman. So many plans. So many things he wanted for her.

But slowly the color and joy of it all had drained out of his world and he hated himself for it. He started passing her off to whichever eager woman in his life would like to take her for an afternoon, an evening, a weekend...or more.

It felt wrong but not as wrong as having her in the house.

He had had his fill of therapists, especially since the last one had tried to kill him.

So like everyone else he found himself turning to the internet

I'm finding it difficult to connect with my baby, what can I do?

I'm unable to bond with my new baby. What's wrong with me?

I feel indifference towards my child.

I'm worried I don't love my daughter.

How to proceed with giving up my parental rights

UK adoption.

He felt awful. Ashamed and awful. "Mary" was glaring at him. He chose to ignore her.
"What are you doing?"

"You know what I'm doing. I never signed up to be a single father, Mary. I can't do this. She'd be better off with someone else."

"She'd be better off with you. If you'd make an effort."

"Piss off, Mary. Piss right the fuck off."

He closed his laptop, ordered Chinese takeaway, ignored a call from Sherlock and opened a beer.

He'd cut down his hours at the clinic to the bare minimum knowing full well it was a shit thing to do. Now they were trying to make do without Mary or himself and he felt guilty for it. Then again, he felt guilty about a lot of things these days.

Working hours he spent with Sherlock. Which was good and bad all at the same time. Sherlock provided normalcy and stability. Things made sense in Baker Street like they did nowhere else. But there was still discomfort. His friend still stirred up so many things he would rather keep still and buried. It wasn't just the kiss. It was more the feeling of being anchored to this world in a way he no longer wanted. It wasn't the kiss.

Speaking of the kiss, they had never discussed it and John was glad. He didn't understand it and didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to understand.

The good news was that there were cases and cases and more cases. He felt invigorated by each one. He started taking more chances. He didn't want to wait until tomorrow to pursue someone, to check out a lead, to run someone down on foot.

He started carrying his gun with him as well.

In fact, Sherlock was now more often than not the person trailing behind him, calling his name, asking, demanding...pleading with him to stop.

He didn't get left behind anymore.

"John?"

"Hmm?" He asked coming back to himself having no idea how long he'd been gone. He was even a bit surprised to find himself sitting in his chair at Baker Street. Time was blending into itself again. One day bleeding into the next. That is when it wasn't backtracking to the previous one.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, sorry. Was that what you asked me?"

Sherlock frowned and studied him.

"No, it wasn't. But it's what I'm asking now."

"I am...like I always am. I'm managing."

"I don't think you are. You have circles under your eyes, along with burst capillaries. You're taking longer to answer questions, unable to concentrate or focus and-"
"Are you deducing me? Now?" He asked testily.

"And you're prone to emotional outbursts. Well, more than usual. You're fatigued, you've failed to notice you need a haircut and you've already worn that shirt once before this week."

"Well, I'm sorry if my fashion sense and grooming skills aren't up to par for you." He said rising to his feet. He was trying to keep his anger in check. Heading to the fridge he opened it and leaned in. "Want something to drink?"

"Tea would be fine, it's already made. I think there's just enough left for two cups."

"I'll put on a kettle if you'd like it fresh but I'm fine with a beer."

"We don't have beer."

"I brought some over."

Sherlock was likely on the verge of saying something but a knock on the door diverted his attention.

"Yes?"

In walked Lestrade and John immediately noticed the furrow to his brow.

"Good, you're both here."

"Did you bring the files I requested?" Sherlock asked holding out his hand with the assumption the answer was yes.

"Yeah and there's stuff we need to go over. But first, I need to talk to John."

John kept his face neutral as he stood in the archway of the kitchen eyeing the detective.

"What about?"

"We've got a bloke came down the station and said he was roughed up. Pistol whipped as a matter of fact. Says it happened the same night you both were chasing him. Says this is all a part of systematic harassment by law enforcement about the Gomes case."

"Well, I'm not law enforcement." He said offering a tight smile.

Lestrade paused.

"Are you saying you did it?"

"Lestrade, don't be ridiculous." Sherlock said quietly but John's eyes instantly went to him. There was something in his tone. Something just slightly unsure.

"And you know he didn't do it?" Lestrade pressed.

"Of course he didn't do."

"And you were with him all last Tuesday night? That's when he says it happened."

"He was by my side the entire evening. Never out of my sight. You know my methods and you know his."

There it was. Sherlock had lied for him. They'd split up that night, multiple times to cover more
"John, I'm asking you straight, mate. Did things maybe get a bit out of hand?"

John stared at him for a moment, his fingers idly tapping the neck of the bottle he was holding. He was thrumming with anger, sharp and hot and for a moment he thought about cracking the lager over the other man's head. Instead, he offered him a tight smile.

"No, Greg, of course not."

"Yeah, yeah I didn't think so."

"Though if you expect me to shed any tears because a rapist got a few bones in his face broken you came to the wrong guy."

Both men stared at him but he only laughed in return. For a moment he wasn't sure if he'd be able to stop laughing.

"I didn't say anything about his face." Lestrade said.

"Well, where else would you pistol whip someone? You want to make a point. Hmm? You want to make sure it's seen; by them every time they look in the mirror and by anyone they associate with." His words came out more venomous than he expected but it was too late to pull them back.

"John." Sherlock said and there was a warning in it so subtle he was sure Lestrade hadn't noticed as he spoke at the same time.

"Thought a lot about it, have you?"

John shook his head before slamming the bottle down on the counter.

"You want to arrest me, Greg, go ahead." He said as he stalked up to the man and held his wrists out. He was daring him, daring him to do something; ready to rage if he tried or triumph when he didn't.

"Now because we're friends-" Lestrade began but John interrupted him.

"Are we friends?" He asked cocking his head to the side.

"Because we're friends," He reiterated. "and because I trust both of you and your work, your word means more to me than a felon who may have upgraded from rapist to murderer. And because of what happened with Mary but-"

"What happened with Mary? Oh, do you mean when she was murdered? Do you mean when you stood there and let a mad old bitch aim a gun at Sherlock and then shoot Mary in the chest without doing anything about it? Everyone always talks about "what happened" well, let me tell you what happened.

Mary was struck in the chest which shredded her pulmonary artery. Now as the bullet attempted to exit her body it essentially destroyed all the tissue within about a 4-5 inch radius before eventually lodging in her spinal column. After this her heart, in a futile effort to save her started pumping blood at a frantic rate which caused her body to flood with adrenaline as her lungs filled with blood. This, at least, gave her enough time to say goodbye to me. After those few seconds, she suffered catastrophic hemorrhaging and lost consciousness as her brain began to die from loss of blood pressure. Shortly after, she expired. That was the end of my wife. Oh, I forgot to mention a handful
of minutes after that blood began to pour out of my dead wife's mouth and nose. I see it every night. Every time I close my eyes. And I wish you could see it. I wish to God above you could see it, Greg."

He spat out every word, every syllable never letting his voice rise, never shouting or yelling. He was too enraged right now to shout. Too close to tearing this man apart with his bare hands.

The room was dead silent and Lestrade had gone about three shades whiter than normal.

"John..." Sherlock began again and the doctor was certain he would now be asked to leave. "Would you like to stay here tonight? Your room is as you left it. Perhaps if Rosie is taken care of for the evening you might be able to get some rest at Baker Street."

The invitation touched the part of him that could still be touched. Which only made him angrier.

"No. I'm going home."

"Let me call you a cab." Sherlock said.

"I can give you a ride." Greg offered and his voice sounded strangled and frankly like he'd rather do anything but.

"I'll walk. I feel like walking." He grabbed his bag and shoved his laptop in it before downing his beer and heading for the door. "Leaving now, you can commence talking about me in whispered tones once you hear the door shut."

With that, he walked out of the flat, down the stairs and away from Baker Street as fast as his feet would carry him.

He thought about walking, thought about hailing a cab and then noticed the pub.

That idea trumped any other and he went in.

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There were 15 text messages on his mobile when he awakened the next morning...more like early afternoon. Most from Janine but a few from Sherlock as well.

He crawled out of bed and swiped at the bottle of paracetamol that he kept nearby. He was just about to down it when he realized it would likely just come back up again.

After a thorough retching session in the loo he brushed his teeth, swallowed the pills and set out to retrieve his daughter.

He expected to meet with Janine's fury. He hadn't called or texted. He had left her completely high and dry.

But instead she was pleasant.

"There you are!" She said brightly. "Sorry to hear about what happened."

"Yeah..." He said having no idea what she meant.

"Are you sure you're ok to take her now. Sherl told me you got a bit of food poisoning and spent most of the night in the toilet."

Well done, Sherl.
"Yeah, last time I go for vendor food."

"You still look a fright, John." She said with concern. "I can look after her if you're still on the mend."

Janine. So pretty and kind. So good. She'd even forgiven Sherlock for what John felt was nigh unforgivable. Janine was a good person and John determined he should exit her life as quickly as possible.

"No, I've imposed enough. I'll take her."

Janine motioned him inside and he stepped into her foyer reluctantly.

"Can I make you a cuppa? Would you like to talk?"

'Would you like to talk' always meant would you like to talk about Mary. And no. No, he didn't.

"No." He said doing his best to keep the sharpness from his tone. "I've really got to go." He said adding a forced chuckle.

Janine nodded and left briefly to grab Rosie and all the bags and toys that were part and parcel of any visit.

"John, she is an absolute dream." Janine said giving his daughter several rapid-fire kisses on the cheek. Rosie squealed with delight in a way that she never did with him. Janine then handed her over. "Every time she's here I have half a mind to run away with her."

"Say the word and she's yours." He answered quickly. It was an off the cuff comment that was 100% true. She sensed it and he noticed the frown pass over her face. "Kidding, you'd have to pry her away from me."

"You know, if you two ever need anything I'm just a ring away."

"And I appreciate that. Thanks so much, Janine."

"Anytime, John."

He carried Rosie to the car. She'd been fussing and crying ever since Janine had passed her over. Strapping her into her car seat he then started to drive home.

He pulled out his phone at a stoplight and dialed a rarely used number.

"Hey, yeah...yeah it's me. I know...yeah, I know. Mmmmm. Yeah, good to hear your voice too. Listen, I was wondering if you might have some time later on in the week to get together. No, we can go out to dinner or I can make something. Yes, yeah. Alright great. Yeah, bye, Harry."

Harry didn't drink anymore. This time it seemed the rehab had stuck. With this in mind, John decided to have a glass of wine before she arrived for dinner...which turned into three.

They'd opted for something more casual, a meal at his house. After all, she wanted to see her niece. Which of course was perfect for his purposes.

"So I see you're wearing your ring again. You and Clara back on?"

Harry smiled a smile he hadn't seen in years. She was holding Rosie who seemed calm, friendly but
indifferent; neither put out by the new person nor mesmerized.

"Yeah, we're making a go of it. I've moved back in, I'm a year clean. I feel cautiously good. It feels good to feel good."

"That's great, Harry, it really is." He smiled and hoped it looked sincere. He was happy for this news but somehow it was hard to feel it.

His sister observed him in that way that always made him vaguely uncomfortable.

"How about you, big brother?"

"I'm...coping."

He propped his head on his fist as he rested his elbow on the dining room table. The wine was making his head feel just this side of swimmy, pleasant enough, coherent, relaxed but not drunk.

"I was really sorry about Mary. I should have gotten to know her better. I should have made it to your wedding-"

"Well, you made it to the funeral. That counts for something, right?" He said hoping to get off the subject.

Harry gave her head a little shake. He knew that shake, it was the Same-old-John, headshake. That was fine, it was all fine because he had a similar Same-old-Harry head shake of his own that he employed usually when he was getting some notice about her DWI's.

"And how about looking after this little dear?" She asked turning her attention to Rosie, her face softening. "You never exactly were the family type."

He inhaled through his nose sharply.

"Took care of you, didn't I?"

"What? Making me a cuppa every now and then and a bit of toast while we watched cartoons?"

He frowned and leaned across the table to stare at her to see if she was joking.

"How about making you breakfast, seeing that you had a lunch when you went off to school, tucking you in at night, reading you stories, making sure your homework was done and you had clean clothes and-...you don't remember any of this?"

"That weren't you, that was Dad." She replied like he was spinning the most outrageous tale.

"Dad?" He asked incredulously. "Dad was usually too off his arse drunk to put his key in the door."

"There you go, going in on him again."

"Going in on him...Harry? Jesus Christ, are you telling me you don't remember any of this?"

He needed to confirm this. He needed her to say it because she was starting to make him feel mad.

"You're going to get the baby upset." She said in a hushed voice holding Rosie closer. She did seem on the verge of pitching a fit. "What I remember is the two of you fighting all the time."

"Fighting, is that what you call it when he hits a 10-year-old so hard they go flying across the room."
"That never happened." She insisted calmly but she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"It did happen, Harry. It most certainly did happen, it happened a lot and you were standing right there almost every time. And I took it. I took it for me and I took it for you."

Harry purposefully kept her focus on the top of Rosie's head as she whispered soothing nonsense to her.

"Is that why you ran off and left me?" She asked.

"You left me long before that, Harry. And I was glad, I really was because you were out of the house and I thought out of danger. By the time I found out how deep in the bottle you were I was already headed to the Army. I wasn't going to stick around and follow you."

"Seems like you're about to follow me now." She muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, John."

He sighed, frustrated with her but more so with himself for having gotten so far from his point. He needed her to agree to this.

"Look, Harry, I know you think I'm a family-abandoning bastard and that's why we've never gotten on-"

"That's not the reason we never got on, John. But if it helps you sleep at night..."

"Nothing helps me sleep at night. But please enlighten me."

"Alright." This time she did meet his eyes, squarely and she spoke as if she'd been planning this speech for years. "You're black and white. Completely. You are a right and wrong adherent and there's no gray for you. No room for maybes, no place to allow people to stumble. You are the most unsympathetic, unforgiving man I have ever met. I lost your good opinion long ago and I don't ever expect to get it back. Even when you say you forgive and forget it's a lie. It's always there in the back of your mind and it informs every decision you make. You have no mercy in you, John. None. If Mary found it, if she cultivated it in you, then good, I'm glad someone could."

Her words hit him and hit him hard. They sounded familiar, terribly familiar but yet he couldn't put a voice or a face to them. He swallowed and tried to speak. His hand twitched. He wanted a drink, he wanted something to make the sharp edges of this conversation and this night dull and safe.

"Why did you invite me here, John?"

"I need your help." He said simply.

She scoffed but waited for him to continue.

"I have to ask, forgive me but I have to. You're sober, clean and sober? You're straight?"

She laughed.

"Yes, John, I'm straight." She looked at the twitching of his hand. "Straighter than you."

"And if I called Clara she'd give me the same story?"
"Yeah, what is this about?"

"It's about Rosie." He sighed heavily. "Because you're right. I'm not the family type I never wanted to do this alone. I can't do this alone."

Her features softened immediately.

"Oh...well, you need help? I can make myself available, take her a bit here and there. You should have said something sooner, John."

He scrubbed his face with his hands and groaned before continuing. When he removed them Rosie was looking at him with interest.

"Not here and there, Harry. Permanently."

Harry blinked, looked at the baby as if for answers then back at him.

"What?"

"I...don't...want her." He felt a pain in his heart as the words left his mouth.

"You don't actually mean that. Your wife died. You're likely still in shock, you're grieving. I think a bit of disconnect is only natural."

"This isn't a bit of disconnect. I look at her and I know how I'm supposed to feel but I just don't. I don't feel that way about her or anyone anymore. I can't...access anything anymore, Harry."

His voice wavered as he spoke and he clamped his mouth shut tightly.

"John I...what about your friends?"

"She's been bouncing back and forth with friends while I work and try and figure things out but she needs something permanent. If I can't love her at least I can do the loving thing for her. I am hard on you, Harry. I'm hard on everyone. I am a bastard. But I know you're a good person and so is Clara. I'm trusting you to do this. I looked into adoption but the process seems too daunting and I'd rather she was..." He trailed off as the tears threatened again.

"You're serious."

"Quite."

Harry sighed and looked at Rosie again.

"I'll have to talk to Clara. This isn't like bringing home a puppy."

"Yeah, of course."

"This wouldn't be permanent. I'm not going to take your child from you, John. There is going to come a time where you will want her back, need her back. If Clara says it's alright, we'll look after her until then."

He sighed a ragged breath of relief and rising from the table made his way over to hug her.

"Thank you, Harry." He whispered to her.

"Poor, Johnny." She said as she hugged him back.
"Maybe taking her with you tonight might help talk Clara into it? Could she say no to this face?" He said as he pulled back.

"No, I don't believe she could."

Within an hour he had Rosie and enough nappies and clothes and whatnot packed for an overnight trip and she and his sister were gone.

He took a bottle of wine from the fridge, walked past "Mary" where she stood in the hall looking devastated and crawled into bed. In the end, he cried and drank himself to sleep.
"Why you? Why are you my conscience?!" He asked her angrily one afternoon.

"Because I'm the only dead person you trust. You've only ever truly trusted three people, John. Me, Sherlock and Sholto. You have kept your life very, very bare. Spartan, I'd call it. Never too many possessions or roots or obligations. You dreaded having coffee with Mike Stamford that day. You play things close to the vest and you live like you are bivouacking. Sherlock and I let you persist in this fantasy that you were subconsciously drawn to us but it's not true. My life was littered with hints that I wasn't giving you the full story."

"You're blaming me for not interrogating you!?"

"No! I am blaming you for being so relieved that you didn't have to. I'm blaming you for saying one thing and meaning another. No...no, wait, that's not true. You said what you meant."

"What did I say?"

"The problems of your past are your business. The problems of your future are my privilege. That's all I have to say. That's all I need to know."

"What wrong with that? What was so fucking wrong with that? You seemed happy at the time."

"I was. Until I thought about it. And I'm sorry, John, but I'm not your conscience, I'm your tell-tale heart and I won't be here for much longer."

"Why is that?" He felt panicked at the idea which surprised him. He thought perhaps he'd have felt relieved.

"Because you're killing me."

"What? How am I killing you?" It hurt to even get the words out.

She laughed mirthlessly.

"Have another drink."

"Please don't think of this as a here's-your-hat. What's-your-hurry? Sort of moment but, don't you have to pick up Rosie from Janine? It's getting late. I can finish up here." Sherlock said quietly.

"Janine doesn't have Rosie."

John had been dreading this moment. Besides "Mary", there was only one person on earth whose words about this could pierce and hurt him anymore. He'd been leaving early from Baker Street under the pretense of picking up Rosie from one place or another. Or at least he let Sherlock think that. Anything to avoid this conversation.

"Where is she?"

"Harry. I gave her to Harry."
"Gave her? As in, she's looking after her for the night?"

John summoned his courage and raised his head to meet his mate's eyes.

"No, as in she is looking after her indefinitely. Perhaps...permanently. I haven't ironed everything out yet."

There were few times Sherlock was hit with something he didn't expect. This was one of those times and his face registered only shock as he blinked, trying to summon the words.

"Your daughter...you...?"

"Did what was best for her. What was best for the both of us. That's my job, isn't it?"

"Your job, I imagined would be to raise her." He replied narrowing his eyes.

"Are you giving me parenting advice? Calling on your vast experience?"

"I've kept my distance while you have taken your time and your space and juggled what I imagine is a very complicated schedule not to mention the demands I place on you, by having Janine and Molly and even Mrs. Hudson care for her. But it was always meant to be temporary. She needs you, she needs her father. For that matter, she needs her father sober. And I would hazard a guess that you need her as well. Not to mention-"

"Don't Sherlock."

"You promised Mary."

He gritted his teeth.

"Tread lightly, mate."

"You promised Mary. I was there and you swore to her."

"DON'T TALK TO ME ABOUT PROMISES!" He shouted and then shut his eyes. He didn't want to do this. He didn't want to scream at Sherlock. He leaned as far back in his chair as he could as Sherlock leaned forward. When he did, that prickly feeling started to rise on John's skin.

"I was always here to talk to. I still am." He said quietly putting a hand on his knee. "You can move back here and I will take care of you both."

"You don't know what you're saying, Sherlock. You have no idea the level of responsibility this requires." He said scrubbing his face both touched and frustrated at his friend's naivete.

"You're right. I don't. And I won't know fully until we've begun. Call Harry, tell her in a week you'll need your daughter back. Sell the house and come back to me."

Come back to me. John closed his eyes at the intimate language. Sherlock was barely speaking above a whisper. He could feel the heat of his hand and every hair on John's body was standing on end. The kiss came back with clarity.

"Can't do that." He said with a short shake of his head.

"John, I believe despite your reluctance and my hesitance we need to discuss what happened. We need to talk about the kiss."
"Sherlock..."

"If you believe that by moving in here I would try and force you to..." He faltered. Sherlock rarely faltered. "I wouldn't...things would remain strictly friendly and professional."

Fuck. He was blaming himself. *Fuck.* His parents were nice but bloody hell they'd done a number on him if he could twist this in his brain to be *his* fault. Sherlock, truly upper class, truly a posh boy, somehow managing to apologize even when he had been done the wrong. So very, very mannerly in the face of John inexplicably yanking him in for a-

"I am so sorry that I did that to you. Brought you into my madness like that. It was borderline abusive, mate. But that seems to be all I can dole out lately; abuse."

"The work made you happy. Come back and immerse yourself in the work. We'll hire a nanny, I'm sure we can find someone I can tolerate in small doses. We will break down each and every problem, grind it to dust until we find the solution."

Jesus, his sweetness about all this was starting to make John feel sick. It was too nice, so nice, so terribly nice and he didn't deserve it, not any of it.

"You lied to Janine about where I was and why. You lied to Lestrade...you know you did."

John hadn't been able to meet his eyes but now he did and was surprised by the layers of pain he saw on his best friends features.

"I did."

"Why? Why protect me?"

"I will always protect you, John. I promised that I would." He said as though it were obvious.

"Alright, I absolve you of any promise or vow you made at my wedding. How about that?"

"I made the promise long before your wedding." He said quietly.

John wanted, needed to put some space between them and so he stood and stepped away to stand by the fireplace.

"You've mentioned my drinking now twice."

"That's because I fear you are spinning out of control. I had foolishly believed that given time you might stop on your own. I let my esteem and affection for you cloud the fact that you too are an addict. And while alcohol was never a problem for you before an addict is always in pursuit of a new way to get high."

"It's just to sleep." He said far more feeble than he thought he would.

"It's always just to sleep until it isn't."

He couldn't talk about this with him. It was snowballing and he was feeling terribly trapped.

"I don't know that I should be doing this anymore."

"Doing what?"

"You know." John said quietly.
"Us?" Sherlock asked and the personal way of phrasing what they had created at Baker Street surprised him. He had expected him to call it "the work" or even "my work" or "your little helpful blog" but he called it us and John wanted to sob. This, this entanglement was everything he needed to get away from right now. It was too much, too thick, too deep. Oh God, how it hurt.

"I'm getting sloppy. I'm not sleeping, I'm not thinking. I'm not helpful. You're slowing down, you're doing most of it for me. My blogs have turned to shit." He concluded with a shy and bitter laugh.

"John, I cannot do this without you." Sherlock said and the pain and shock in his eyes was more than John could bear to witness.

"Sherlock, you could always do this without me. But I thank you for letting me tag along all these years. Mycroft was right. How did he put it? 'Nothing more than a distraction; a little scrap of ordinariness for you to impress, to dazzle with your cleverness. You'll find another.' He was right, Sherlock. You'll find another."

Swiftly John made the decision and walked towards the door. Sherlock was hot on his heels.

"He was acting...badly. Putting on a show. He admitted that. And even if he had been telling what he thought to be the truth he was wrong. I decide what you mean to me, your value to me. Your priceless value."

"He was still telling the truth. Look, mate, we'll still be friends. Best friends. You are my best and only friend. And I love you. But I can't do this anymore."

He put his hand on the side of Sherlock's face and both saw and felt his jaw working as he struggled to find the right words. John felt guilty on so many levels for putting him through this but it was all for the best.

"As you know, I'm terribly inadequate when it comes to expressing myself. I can't easily find the words people deserve to hear. There are things I want to say. Things I thought there'd be time to say. All I can say to you is please don't go. I swear to you I won't let you or Rosie down ever again."

"You never let us down, Sherlock, not ever. This isn't punishment." He tried to reassure him. "But I have to go, for your sake as much as mine. Maybe even more. Give my best to Mrs. Hudson. She was so angry the last time I didn't tell her goodbye." He mused.

"John?" And the helpless timbre of Sherlock's voice briefly made him want to take it all back.

"Hmm?"

"I...love you too."

"There was a time you couldn't say something like that." He said with a sad smile.

"There was a time you wouldn't do something like this."

He gave him a short nod before exiting what used to be his home, 221B Baker Street.

"Times change, Sherlock."
Six Months On

He'd dream of the forest at night, dry and silent. All around him are felled trees and trees so tall and sturdy that he imagines they're rooted to the core of the earth. But they're all still dead. Burnished red and dead and warm to the touch. The fact that they're warm disconcerts him more than it would if they were hot. Warm implied something slow burning and sustainable. Hot would mean flaring up but ultimately fading away. He starts to feel ill. He reaches up and runs a hand across his scalp and pulls back to find a handful of hair. His skin starts to tingle, then metastasize, then burn, then cascade off his limbs, he falls to ground, the forest closes in and he wakes up screaming.

His anniversary came and went. "Mary" had long since gone mute, as she promised, and then vanished entirely. He tried to summon her up on the 18th of May. He apologized and pleaded but it seemed as if she were gone for good and he used it as a reason and excuse to drink himself into oblivion.

Her voice may have been gone but the other one was still there.

He'd sit there sometimes, watching telly, the gun to his left side on the bed and whatever alcohol he'd gone with that day, he wasn't picky, to his right.

**Why don't you just do it? What are you waiting for?**

"I'm taking my time."

**Why? You have no reason to stick around. Are you afraid?**

"Of course I'm, afraid. Do it wrong you end up a vegetable or shoot off your jaw."

He placed a sign on the front door. "Concerned friends are kindly requested to please Fuck Off". But still they came. Like ants marching in a row, one by one they came to "help".

He kept the conversations short when he bothered to answer the door at all.

**Is this about goodbye notes? You only need to write one to him.**

"I know that."

And he did. But he couldn't. He didn't know how to say goodbye to him which was admittedly a very stupid reason to hang around.

He set himself laughing one night as he imagined standing at the top of Barts and calling him. Calling him to apologize for everything, saying everything that needed saying and then plunging off.

Wouldn't that be a fine coda to their dance? To his life?

No malice, truly, no malice at all. Though he realized plunging off the roof would probably send the opposite message. It was just a stupid fantasy, anyway.

He had no ill feelings towards Sherlock and that was what made it harder to leave and harder to stay. Someone, (Sherlock) was mysteriously paying his bills. He'd been fired from the clinic and with all
his pension money going toward alcohol or crap food or just sitting in his account the electricity should have been turned off long ago, as should his mobile and landline.

Sherlock called every night. Every single night. It always went the same. John feigned annoyance that was half real and half performative. And then once those preliminaries were over they just talked.

It was always late, very late, typically around 1 or 2 am but Sherlock always sounded wide awake and John, though piss drunk was always coherent enough in the beginning.

"John?"

"What is it, Sherlock?"

"How are you passing your evening?"

He always asked that and John sighed and gave him the standard answer.

"A bottle of wine and reality TV. Duncan is just about to confess to Marielle that he had a three-way with Trudie and Perpetua. But Marielle has secrets of her own."

"Are there no books in your home?"

"The words swim in front of my eyes."

"How much have you had?"

And this wasn't just a passing question that could be satisfied with a breezy, Who knows? No, John had come to learn that Sherlock expected an answer.

For some reason, John always did his best to give him one.

"Are you my Mycroft?" He would slur. "Shall I leave you a list?"

"How much, John?"

And he would tell him. The numbers stayed essentially the same. Enough to stop the pain of waking up, enough to stop the difficulty of going to sleep, enough to make it one more day. He would then translate that into bottle or liters or whatever his friend needed.

"Let me get you some help."

"Mmmm no, don't need any help. Just fine. Thank you for your concern."

"Is this what Mary would want?"

"Sorry, Sherlock, you told me repeatedly you don't believe in God or an afterlife or any such nonsense. Mary's wants are irrelevant because Mary no longer exists. Mary has long since putrefied. Do you know what happens to the body after death?"

"Of course I do."

"Of course you do."

Their conversations were much the same every late night and early morning. John wondered how Sherlock managed to set aside this time. It must have been a sacrifice, a disruption to his thinking
process. He wondered why he bothered.

"Am I meant to just watch you die?" Sherlock asked one night and it was one of the rare times John heard anger during their talks.

"No one is forcing you to call, mate."

"So that's a yes, then."

"Come on, Sherlock...watching someone die is easy. You just look up and you watch them fall to the ground. Then you rush up and you get to see all the bits of brain and blood on the pavement."

"In the train carriage...you said you forgave me. You said 'Of course I forgive you.' Did you mean it?"

John inhaled slowly before releasing it. He wanted to disappear into the tv show or the wine bottle, either would be fine.

"Course I meant it. I'm just having you on." He said dully.

"May I come by to see you?"

"You always come by and I never let you in. You come by every day."

"John, I haven't been to your house in two weeks."

John felt his eyelids grow heavy.

"Always here...thinking I don't see you." He slurred.

"That was your imagination, or the onset of paranoid hallucinations. May I please come by?"

"No."

"Please." He said and the plaintive tone made John close his eyes and rub his arm fiercely trying to banish away the tingling sensation.

"I gotta go. Tired."

"Alright."

"Alright then."

"I love you."

It still jarred John to hear it.

"I love you too." He replied. He always replied to that. And hung up.

Funny how much they said it now, now that they were farther away from one another than ever before.

He suspected that Sherlock felt freer saying it to a drunk man who wouldn't remember hearing it the next morning. And John supposed he felt safe saying it for the same reason.

But they both did remember it.
And if that was Sherlock's reasoning it didn't explain why he'd said it when they were both sober and John told him goodbye at Baker Street.

It didn't explain a lot of things.
Molly was a persistent little shit he had to give her that.

He had yelled, he'd roared when she came and the most she'd done was flinch before barging into his house.

While he'd stood there, unsteadily, she gone about flinging open the curtains and opening windows to, as she put it "Clear out some of the rot."

The last time he'd seen her this angry was when Sherlock had been back on the sweeties.

"Sit down." She said sternly and mostly because he didn't trust his balance he did.

In silence she went about conducting a brief exam.

"Well, your blood pressure is through the roof, your heartbeat is irregular, your hands are shaking and-" She unceremoniously poked his side and he cried out in pain. "Your liver is tender."

She reached for his arm and after swabbing it clean rather aggressively drew blood.

"Ow! Goddamnit, Molly!"

"I don't know why I'm even bothering with this. I know what the results will say. You, Doctor Watson, know what the results will say. You are still a doctor, aren't you? Or have they revoked your license? Doesn't matter. The test will say you're killing yourself."

"Did he send you?"

"Who? Sherlock? You think I'm here at the behest of Sherlock Holmes? He's not in a position to send anyone anywhere these days."

He frowned but she continued.

"I'm here out of respect for Mary. I may not have known her very well but I know she loved you. I'm here out of concern and care for that little girl that you abandoned. I'm here because even though you and I have never been close friends, I care whether you live or die."

"What did you mean about Sherlock?" He pressed trying to clear his muddied thoughts to remember what it was exactly she'd said. Whatever it was, it unnerved him.

But she wasn't looking at him anymore.

"Is that a gun, John?" She said motioning to the pistol that sat on the table nearest his chair next to a bowl of day old cereal and soured milk. He'd wondered where that cereal had gone.

"It's my gun. Now, what about Sherlock?"

But she was shaking her head and far faster that he could react she had grabbed it and emptied out the bullets. Vaguely he wondered where she'd learned to do that.

Without another word she stood and left the house. It was so abrupt he didn't actually know what to
"Molly, give me my gun!" He said hurrying after her. But she was fast and by the time he hit the pavement she was already in her car, windows rolled up and doors locked. "You've had your fun now, give it back and leave." He said arriving at the door and smacking the glass with the palm of his hand.

It was at this point he noticed she was on her mobile.

He could just hear her and made out that she was giving his address.

She had just said "Hurry".

He hit the glass again and she flinched for the second time that day but even as she hung up he knew the damage had already been done.

"GODDAMNIT, MOLLY!"

He turned away from the car, only now realizing he'd exited the house with no shoes or socks.

John knew all too well what was coming next. The neighbors were peeking out of their windows, some of the had already stepped outside. He decided to hurry back in and slammed the door behind him but not before flipping off everyone in sight.

He was sweating, breathing heavily and his chest hurt a bit, from anxiety or anger he wasn't sure but he slid down the nearby wall and drew his knees up to his body. Waiting.

Most of what happened over the next few days was a blur.

The police arrived along with the press and everyone got nice view of him being lead away in handcuffs. He already knew he was being sectioned so it was no surprise when they took him to the hospital as opposed to the station.

He met with a series of doctors and answered their questions as calmly and professionally as possible. He knew he needed to do this if he was going to be taken seriously. He addressed them as colleagues. He explained his recent troubles, he admitted to a dependency on alcohol and swore that he was researching treatment methods. He explained that his friend, Miss Hooper in her concern for his safety has seen his weapon as far more than it was. He presented himself as what he was a medical doctor, veteran, a grieving widower, a father trying to piece his life back together. Sad, yes, well of course, but not someone who was in any way in the throes of incapacitating depression or harboring suicidal thoughts.

It wasn't exactly easy. Molly was a respected and talented Specialist Registrar, a doctor in her own right and her opinion carried weight. That opinion was likely damning. If he were her he would recommend the patient be kept under a doctor's care, held for observation and placed under suicide watch. No way in hell should he be allowed to leave under any circumstances.

He worried he was likely not helping his case very much due to his appearance. He assumed he looked a fright but even he was surprised at just how bad things were when he finally stared into a mirror that night in his locked room in the locked ward. Honestly, seeing that made him doubt how his entire performance had gone over. He'd laid it on thick but it likely didn't look like the words were coming from someone in their right mind. Shit.

But, to his surprise and pleasure, he was rushed through the system, especially once his connection to
Sherlock was discovered. Think of the publicity. Far too much attention, nothing any hospital actually wanted. He was before a magistrate and released on his own recognizance before his DT’s got really bad. But they were bad enough. He stood there, waiting to collect his belonging from the desk agent, trying to hide the shaking and sweating and the painful surges in his body as it screamed for even a swallow of alcohol.

They even returned his gun.

All in all; a minor hiccup.

He had the cab from the hospital pull into an off license and wait while he stocked up.

He was dropped off at home and relieved to see no neighbors, press or other unwanted people.

He stepped inside, went to the kitchen and set down the bag full of alcohol.

John’s heart nearly stopped working when he noticed the man sitting casually in his chair in the living room. The man was, of course, Sherlock.

"Jesus...Sherlock...for fucks sake!" He paused clutching his chest. This had happened before, or at least he thought it had. It seemed that once "Mary" had left Sherlock would occasionally take his place. He'd see him. or think he saw him, just briefly, just a flash, sometimes just the whip of his coat as he turned a corner. It was disturbing and unnerving and it also made him feel terribly barmy and terribly lonely. How many nights had he spent talking to "Sherlock" only to discover he'd never been there at all. So many ghosts. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"I don't doubt it." He said before rising to his feet and joining John in the kitchen. 

He imagined the lighting wasn't doing either of them any favours but he could only see his friend and not himself, and his friend looked awful.

For a moment everything, absolutely everything was forgotten and he only stared at him. Sherlock looked pale, there were circles under his eyes. He was still dressed impeccably as always in those finely tailored clothes that John never actually saw him take to get tailored. He never saw him buy them as a matter of fact. But everything else about him looked faded, dry, tired.

"Is it really you?" he asked. He raised his hand to reach out and touch him but ended up faltering. Sherlock bridged the difference and grabbed John's hand before it dropped to his side, squeezing it with reassurance. "It's really me."

"You alright?" John asked. "You look awful."

His friend looked at him uncomprehendingly appearing both confused and exhausted by the question. In the end, he just ignored it.

"You were in and out of hospital before I could see you. I was coming."

"I know you were. But I'm a respected citizen, they couldn't keep me there." He said with weary amusement. "No matter what Molly told them. And if you came here thinking you could get my gun off me, you can't. I'll tell you what I told her. That's not why I had it out."

"Why did you have it out?"

Ignoring the question, John opened his refrigerator to slide in some wine and was surprised to see it full, practically bursting.
"You went shopping for me?"

"Yes."

"You found a store and went shopping?"

"Yes, John."

"You found a store, remembered where your bank card was, made selections of food, stood in a line and-"

"Yes, John." Sherlock said with exasperation. "I choose to ignore the dreary boredom of everyday life but I am not incapable of dipping a toe in when needed."

John closed the refrigerator door and leaned against it closing his eyes.

"Please stop being so nice to me."

"No one's ever said that to me before." He said with a chuckle and John joined him.

It was nice. He didn't laugh much anymore.

"Well, are you hungry?" He said trying to shake away the burning in his eyes and on his skin. He wouldn't cry and he would try not to recoil.

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

"Molly said something the other day. Said...you were in no position to send anyone anywhere or something like that." Before his mate could answer Sherlock's mobile buzzed in his coat pocket. "Your phone." John says motioning towards him.

"It's Mycroft."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's always Mycroft these days."

"What's he on about?"

"You."

John frowned.

"Me? What about me?"

"He thinks you're killing me."

John studied his friend closer a horrifying thought creeping into his mind.

"Are you back on-"

"No." He said with a dry chuckle. "Baker Street is addict free. Unless you count Mrs. Hudson. My brother has a flair for the dramatic. He sees any show of concern as a potential downward spiral."

"You look awful."

"So you said. May I stay for a bit?" He asked trying to keep the hopefulness from his voice.
John sighed. Sherlock's company was everything he did and didn't want.

"Yeah, sure, why not turn a B&E into a nice sit-down?"

"I didn't break and enter, your door was unlocked."

So they sat down and they talked and except for the alcohol and the location of the elephant in the room that was John's wreck of a life, it was normal.

He laughed and he laughed again and he listened to Sherlock's cases and interjected every now and then. It felt good, in a much purer way than the drinking felt good. Though this would bring its own hangover. It always did. His body reacted badly to Sherlock's absence, it revolted and protested and he was just as useless as if his organs were soaked in alcohol.

Sherlock made it so hard to fully escape this world, to truly disconnect. It was impossible to shake him from his head or his heart.

"I'm sorry I hit you." He said apropos of nothing sometime later.

"You already apologized for that, John. I already forgave you, long ago."

"You looked scared." He had his head propped up on a closed fist, it was a sloppy position and some of his hand muffled his words. "You never fought back. Jesus, Sherlock you should have hit me back."

"You want to make it up to me?"

John nodded.

"Go into treatment."

For a split second, he actually considered it.

Those tears he thought he'd battled back in the kitchen were starting to rally.

"I just...I don't care anymore, Sherlock. I wake up, I got to bed, I wake up the next day and it all just bleeds one to another to another. It's not just depression, it's not just being sad. I don't have any interest in my life anymore. I don't care." He said and his voice cracked.

Sherlock was sitting in a chair across from him, similar to their old Baker Street setup. He leaned forward now and grabbed one of John's hands.

"I'll care for the both of us. Until you come back to yourself again."

_Pins and needles. Red Forest._

He pulled his hand away slowly, regretfully.

"You should head back home, Sherlock."

"Alright." His friend agreed after a long and regretful pause. "But your gun, John. Give it to me."

"Molly took the bullets. You can ask her. It's just a conversation piece now."

"Just the same." He said and with irritation, John placed it in his hand. "Thank you."
"Really," he began and the word was punctuated by a sniffle. "You need to go."

And he did, but not before hugging him and not before lingering in the doorway and not before telling John that he loved him.

Sherlock promised to call him tomorrow.

John promised to answer.
Chapter 7

Ten Months On

What does it mean to put your affairs in order? John wondered.

People always said it but no one ever explained what it meant.

In the end, he wound up printing off a list from the internet which was as funny as it was pathetic. He and Mary had updated their wills prior to Rosie's birth. A few amendments and that was prepared.

What little money remained, of course, went to his daughter. He left the house to Sherlock, trusting him to see it would be sold and whatever funds could be gotten also left to Rosie and Harry for her care. He willed most of his possessions to Sherlock and few to his daughter. She wouldn't grow up knowing him so he saw little reason to leave her impractical junk. No need for sentimentality. No need to feign love for the man who left her.

He put down his advance directive notices ensuring that no extraordinary measures be taken to save his life. He gave power of attorney to Sherlock as well, knowing that he wouldn't allow sentiment, no matter how strong to get in the way of doing what John asked. As for a memorial service, he truly didn't care, but he'd rather people not put themselves out or kick up a fuss.

In the end, he just didn't want to be a bother.

He printed up a note and taped it to his front door.

Call 999 and wait for the police if you must enter.

I'd rather you not enter at all. There's nothing you need to see.

After they've removed my body call this number:

He'd then added a number for a local crime scene cleaner. The gun, the new gun that he'd gotten from a pawn shop, would cause a mess, there was no way to avoid that. He purchased tarps to help make things easier but...it was at that point that he'd started to realize it might be hard to sell a house with even a hint or memory of blood splatters no matter how well cleaned.

In the end, he'd stepped outside and rather than write a new note he'd just scratched out the second part and written;

After they've removed my body call this number

Never mind about the number. I didn't use the gun.

He'd gathered together all the pills in the house, old pills from old prescriptions for depression, for pain, for insomnia. He'd filled the prescriptions but never taken any of them. He wondered why then had he kept them?

Perhaps this was the way things were supposed to be.

Based on dosage strength, his current weight and assumed alcohol consumption he figured out what he believed would be the correct amount to do the deed.
His last act would be to write a letter to Sherlock but he still didn't know what to say. He decided to just sit in his chair with a pad and paper and wait for his call.

He felt a wave of relief, knowing it would be over soon. Knowing that he could finally close the book on the uneventful life that was John Watson.

He'd once, a long time ago, mused that nothing ever happened to him. Then something did. Then everything did. And all this destruction was the result.

He'd kept his drinking slow and steady this evening. The pills then the final push of booze but only after the call. Not before. He didn't want to be too drunk or too out of it to say goodbye or pen his real farewell.

Sherlock called not long after 1:30 AM.

"Hello?"

"Hello, John. How are you passing the evening."

"Very well, as a matter of fact. And yourself."

There was only the slightest of pauses.

"I'm well also. How was your day?"

"Surprisingly busy. Yours?"

"A bit dull, actually. Did some last minute shopping which I loathe. Though I would like to give you your gift in person. I'm off to Mummy and Daddy's tomorrow. You're, as always, welcome. I'd like you to come..."

"I'll be busy." He answered. Sherlock didn't often take the time to visit his parents. John wondered what the occasion was. Maybe he just needed to recharge and feel safe. That thought of course brought with it waves of guilt.

"I asked several times if I might come over this evening or if you'd like to join me at Baker Street, like the good old days. Both offer still stand. I realize it may sound a bit sentimental for me but I...I can't bear the thought of you being alone tonight."

John closed his eyes trying not to let the emotion of Sherlock's words seep in.

"No pending work to do bringing the criminal element to task?" He said pushing ahead.

After a deep sigh, his friend replied.

"There seems to be a shortage of cases nowadays."

"Maybe you've rid London of crime." He said with a fond smile in his voice.

"Couldn't have done it without you."

"Do you think you'll always do this? Will you always be Sherlock Holmes with the coat and the cheekbones and the mystery? I hope so."

"I don't ever see retirement in my future if that's what you mean. This keeps me sharp and I expect it will continue to do so well into my dotage."
"You do love it, don't you?"

"Who said I loved it?" He snapped and John was surprised by the venom.

"You said that, all the time. I thought it was your passion."

"Passion isn't love. Even I know that. What good does passion ever do anyone? Give me that man that is not passion's slave..."

John emptied the rest of the wine bottle he'd been nursing into his glass.

"That's a quote. I know that, what's that from? Finish it...how...how does it end?"

John squinted and then shut his eyes tightly after a moment. A peculiar sound had arisen and he couldn't place where it was coming from. He stuck a finger in his ear, moving it around a bit. There was a vague distant noise of ringing, like someone blowing a whistle a few houses down. Like a train or something...maybe.

"It doesn't matter."

"I..." he started to talk but seemed unable to force the words out. He looked at the bottle accusingly. He was trying to recall if he'd had more than he remembered. Bottles did tend to get lost, overlooked. This was all wrong. He was ruining it. If he passed out now then he couldn't do it tonight. If he passed out for too long the postman was bound to see the note on the door, call the police and he'd be back in the hospital again. It was unlikely that any slick talk would get him out this time.

"I..." he tried again but the ringing was louder, assaulting both ears and he couldn't make it stop. And Christ, but who was shining that light in his eyes? Was someone inside? Had someone broken their way in?

"Sherlock, stop fucking shouting!" He finally managed out with some effort because he only now realized his friend had been yelling his name over and over for probably a good 20 seconds.

"John, how much did you have to drink today?"

"Fuck, do you hear that? That clanging?!"

"How much to drink, John? How much?"

"Are you my Mycroft? Should I leave you a list?"

"What did you say?" There was a strange sort of horror in Sherlock's voice that John couldn't understand. But as he noticed the tremor in his hand his interest was diverted.

"I said, are you my Mycroft, should I leave you a list?"

"You said note. John? John!"

But he'd already dropped the phone, it became too difficult for him to hold as the convulsions started. He pitched forward from his chair landing on the floor, his body tight, alternating only between contracting and contracting harder. His legs shot out knocking into the table sending the empty wine bottle and the glass crashing to the floor. The ringing in his ears, now accompanied by a pain in his head was unbearable and he might have whimpered if he could but his throat was tight and dry.

There were no visions of his life flashing before his eyes. It was too fast. Too immediate. Too final.
The world grayed, then pinpointed and just before it blackened for what he assumed was for good, he did have a final thought.

It had been ten months since Mary died. It was Christmas. December.

The ringing. The noise.

Maybe they were jingle bells?
He awakened to the sound of Sherlock's voice, angry and hushed.

"No, you will do this Mycroft and you will do it today."

"Sherlock, as I am forced to remind you repeatedly, neither I nor the British government is your personal valet."

"No, but I believe both you and the British government owe me multiple favours. And if you choose not to believe that then at the very least, you owe him. He has kept me alive as you requested of him on your first meeting. He has looked after me and ensured my safety and we have both ensured the safety of London and the realm. Please, Mycroft..."

John frowned. Even in his groggy state, he realized he had never heard Sherlock take such a conciliatory tone with his brother.

"Please, as I said to you once, he is family, just as much as you are."

Silence followed.

"I'll make some calls." Mycroft stated and John heard the sound of his footsteps as they retreated.

John tried to move his arm and winced before he'd raised it half an inch, the IV needle stabbing from inside. He felt awful, his entire body ached, his head throbbed, his throat was sore, the lights were too bright and he had the most awful sour taste in his mouth. He could go on and on and on but at that moment Sherlock, wearing a sling on his right shoulder, entered the room and froze in his tracks his eyes going wide. Seeming to regain his bearings he rushed towards the bed and smiled.

"You're awake." He said sitting delicately on the edge of the mattress. "Hello, John."

He tried to smile in return but couldn't quite do it. The realization was suddenly hitting him that he was still here. He'd failed in the most absurd of ways.

"I had a seizure." He said, his voice craggy. He tried to raise an arm, the one not attached to the IV to touch his throat but something stopped him.

"Yes, two seizures, actually. One whilst we were on the phone. Another on the ambulance ride. Don't struggle. You're strapped down." Sherlock said quietly.

"Why?" he asked more embarrassed than offended.

"Because you tried to kill yourself, John." As he spoke his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat and John felt a horrible pang of regret. "They weren't sure how many pills you took so they pumped your stomach on arrival." His friend looked awful, worse than when he'd last seen him. His hair was dirty, his face, that which wasn't covered by a full beard, was mottled, his eyes were red and accentuated by the circles and bags beneath them.

"Did you find me?" He asked ashamed, unable to look him in the eye.

He nodded.
"You saw the note I left?"

He nodded again.

"You broke down the door with your shoulder. That's why the sling."

"Excellent deductive skills." He said his face blank but haunted. "Was our phone call your goodbye?"

"No." He said forcefully. "I was going to write you a note after we hung up. A note explaining everything and apologizing for everything and begging you to go on and have a good life. One full of passion and happiness."

"And then you were going to do the Dutch. How thoughtful," Sherlock said shortly and John watched as his anger flared. "Mrs. Hudson and several others are waiting outside to see you. They'll be pleased that you're awake."

"Wait, Sherlock, I don't want to see them yet. I'm not finished talking to you, please." He said raising his head off the pillow and inclining it towards his friend. He hoped they were still friends. He tried to reach for him with his limited mobility but Sherlock made no effort to bridge the distance.

"I believe you meant to say all you wanted to say last when we last spoke. You meant for all of us to go about our day today not wondering where you were because you have strategically removed yourself from all of our lives. You meant for me to call this evening and get no reply. To call again and still get no answer. Then to rush over, see that ghastly note, break your door down and find your corpse, rigor mortis already well set in, some 20+ hours in, I imagine. That was your intention, John!"

He spat the words and the doctor recoiled as much as he could on the bed. He felt helpless, small, frightened, and so, so stupid. He couldn't deny any of Sherlock's words and he was entitled to his anger. He was entitled to his wrath.

"Sherlock, I'm sorry." He said brokenly.

"You're sorry you were unsuccessful in your attempt to end your life. You're sorry you're still here. You're sorry you now have to face the consequences of your actions. You're sorry you have to bear witness to the pain you've caused m-...us all. Or would you like to tell me my deductions about you are wrong?"

There was nothing in his words John could deny. And so he didn't.

"Yes, well that would have been a first." Sherlock stood there, chest rising and falling rapidly before he exhaled harshly through his nose. "Well, I'll be off."

"You're leaving?" John asked incredulously.

"As I said, you wanted a farewell between us. Perhaps you'll have it." Sherlock took several steps back, eyes focused on John. "Goodbye, John. Swift recovery. I'm sure you'll be back on your feet diving to the bottom of a bottle in no time flat."

With that, he left the room.

John lay there in muted silence too stunned to do or say anything.

He closed his eyes.
The tears came later.
Chapter 9

Day 03

As it turned out he had been unconscious for well over 48 hours and in that time he'd gone through the worst of the DT's. Thank God for small miracles.

He had several visitors over the days that followed his return to lucidity. Harry and Clara had called and asked if he'd wanted to see Rosie but he immediately said no. Other than that he hadn't said much. Mostly he just offered apologies.

He'd spoken to doctors and psychiatrists and had test upon test both psychological and physical. Eventually, the straps had come off and again he'd presented himself as a normal, semi-functioning man. Or at least he'd tried. He admitted to severe depression. He admitted that he was passively suicidal but that it wasn't serious stressing he hadn't actually taken the pills. Though, that argument was lessened by the note he'd left on the door. He claimed this was a wake-up call and he intended to seek out treatment and he was grateful to still be here. Of course it was a lie but in the end, they couldn't keep him. He was no longer a danger to himself. He was sober-ish. He was free to go. He was alive.

Now he was left to contemplate what exactly "alive" meant. Did it mean anything more than it had before? His situation hadn't changed. Except, the seizures had frightened him, truly frightened him which was silly when you considered how badly he'd wanted to die. Death sure. Convulsions, well, now hold on just a second.

They'd given him his phone and he'd immediately gone to the Daily Mail to have his worst fears confirmed.

_Sherlock Sidekick Nearly Kicks Bucket_

Pictures of him. Pictures of Sherlock. His busted down front door. The note, they had a picture of the note.

_Jesus...no._

They were harassing his friends, his ex-co-workers and worst of all, Sherlock.

Picture after picture in paper after paper of him avoiding the press, looking tired, looking angry and sleepless and sad and just a little ill.

John had tried to plan for every eventuality but he'd been stupid enough to miss this one. What this would do to Sherlock's career.

As he sat on the edge of the hospital bed he watched the blood thicken and dry on his arm from where the nurse had removed his IV.

He was so lost in thought he didn't hear the man approach.

A sharp rap on the open hospital door made him jerk his head up.

There stood Mycroft looking ever so _Mycroft._

The elder Holmes carried himself with a similar air of confidence as his younger counterpart, thought
while Sherlock's confidence seemed cultivated, Mycroft's was inborn. He moved through the world as one largely untouched by the emotional trappings of mere mortals. His only vulnerability was Sherlock. Just beneath the surface of their petulant bickering was the obvious truth that a good deal of Mycroft's machinations, no matter how hamfisted were to protect his little brother. Which also meant that if he was here now, it was likely in some way, at Sherlock's request. Still, seeing him in this context, this normal setting was oddly surreal.

"Doctor Watson, might I have a moment of your time?" Mycroft asked the question but like everything he said beneath the smooth tone, there was a command and not a request.

"Is Sherlock with you?"

"No, I told my brother I was coming and he declined to accompany me." He said pulling up a chair.

"Oh." John said in a small voice. Sherlock's absence was cavernous; there was no way around it or through it. Instead, he was sat in the middle of it, unsure and barely caring which way to go.

"I'm here to offer you an opportunity, Doctor Watson and as it turns out a very hard wrangled opportunity at that. You have waiting for you now a private room at the best and most exclusive treatment facility in the Western Hemisphere. I attempted to get Sherlock to go to The Location several times in the past but to no avail. So, you'll have to tell him all about it."

"Exclusive sounds expensive. I couldn't afford a place like that even if I wanted to go. Which I don't." He said.

"Let's just say it's been taken care of out of petty cash. Everything, in fact, has been taken care of including all pertinent information, your medical history, etc. which has already been shipped to The Location."

"You keep calling it "the location". Why won't you name it? I'm a doctor I've likely heard of it."

"No, I doubt you have, because if you did you would know it is simply called The Location. I am going to admit something to you, Doctor Watson. My brother's affection for you has at turns baffled me and...admittedly made me jealous. When he cares he cares fiercely, recklessly. In that way he hasn't changed much since he was a small boy." John noted the fleeting look of reminiscence and regret on Mycroft's face before he continued. "So very careless with his heart."

He cleared his throat before continuing.

"In any case, he is, at the moment, both wounded and loyal. He asked me to secure your residence at The Location and it is in all sincerity that I suggest you take it."

"Why do you care?"

"I don't. I only care for my brother. And I have seen him embark on a dizzying spiral downwards since your own decline began. In some ways, I find it more frightening than his usual addiction. That asserts itself in bursts, it is chaotic but in its own way controlled and can be predicted. Though it can rage it can also be doused and subdued until the next episode. This is entirely self-contained, it is a slow burning fire with no release, no conclusion, no relief and I fear in the end it may kill him."

John swallowed, it was everything he'd feared and thinking back to what Molly had said, how Sherlock had looked in the kitchen and how he'd looked days ago, thin, pale, eyes rimmed red, it made perfect sense.

"We have never been what you might call friends, John. But I have respected you, your limited
talents and your place in Sherlock's life. You had value to him and so you had value to me. When you lost your wife and your grip, your value to my brother held steady but for me it began to depreciate. It now sits at zero. I do not care if you choose to take your life. I do care if you choose to take my brother with you. This is your opportunity to right what you have wronged."

Mycroft leaned forward, narrowing his eyes as he spoke.

"He called me from the ambulance in near hysterics as they were bringing you in. He was demanding that I wake the best doctors available and summon them here. And I did. He further demanded that I procure for you lodgings at The Location which boasts a 98% success rate. And again, I did. Favours are not unlimited, nor is my ability to redeem them. It would be the height of foolishness and hubris for you to decline this offer. Your life is not your own. Keep your hand off it. It is rather a series of lessons, with the greatest for the last. Only the dullest of men rush toward that end when it is already moving toward us all so expeditiously. I do not believe you to be a dull man, Doctor Watson."

Mycroft gripped the handle of his umbrella and John saw conflicting emotions play out on his face. He seemed...to perhaps be regretting some of the harshness of moments before.

"I avoid the entanglements of which my brother has grown so fond. The web of human interaction. Not simply because I cannot bear the majority of people infesting this planet but because of how it all ends. You, your wife, Moriarty, Eurus, Sherlock. What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? What is the point? And why on earth would anyone become more ensnared in it than need be?"

"For once, Mycroft, you and I are in agreement," John said his voice gravelly, weary and mostly unused. "Why would anyone become more ensnared?"

Mycroft observed him briefly then clearly feeling he'd been far too candid he quickly rose from his seated position and handed John a card with a number on it. No name, no other information. Just a number. "Soldiers today." He concluded and with that, the elder Holmes swiftly left the hospital room.

"What is the meaning of it, Watson?" said Holmes solemnly as he laid down the paper. "What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from an answer as ever."

-"The Adventure of the Cardboard Box"
John stood outside of a McDonald's across the street from the hospital. They'd insisted on wheeling him out in that damned chair and as soon as the nurse had let him be he darted away.

He was staring at his phone and had been for the past 10 or so minutes. He hovered between calling the number on the card Mycroft gave him and calling Sherlock.

He honestly wasn't sure the detective would answer and he thought it might break his heart to find out for certain.

He'd heard two competing narratives in his life when it came to addiction, mostly about his sister. The first, the oldest, the one most tried and true, let them hit rock bottom and realize they need help. The second one, newer, but compelling; create a false bottom and get the person into treatment whether they admit they have a problem or not.

He supposed he should feel he was at rock bottom. But he didn't. He supposed he should feel that now was the time to get help. But he didn't. He supposed he should regret what he had tried to do, wanted to do, but again, he didn't. He only regretted what it had done to Sherlock.

Which brought him to the idea of a false bottom.

Maybe...he just had to go. Maybe he didn't have to mean it. He didn't have a plan beyond that, but he needed, at the very least, to distance them both. It was the least he could do.

He'd made a few friends at the papers over the years and he called a contact he was sure would answer.

"Yeah, it's John Watson. Yeah, I know. I'm infamous these days. Look, can I dictate something to you?"

Once done that left two options then.

He decided on the hardest one first and phoned Baker Street.

"Hello?" The voice that wasn't Sherlock said.

"Hi...um...Mrs. Hudson?"

"John! Oh, John it's so good to hear from you. I was going to come to hospital to see you today, are you out?"

"Yeah, yeah they let me go."

"John, I was so worried, you must promise to never, ever do something like that again. I know I'm not your mother but if I had lost you..."

She then went off into a wave of tears and unintelligible speech and he felt the guilt swell in him again.
"Mrs. Hudson...Mrs. Hudson...I'm sorry, I really, am sorry. I didn't..um, look is, Sherlock there?"

She sniffled and he could still hear her breath hitching but there was the subtest of pauses.

"No, dear, he's not here."

That, of course, meant he was there. Sitting at their, his, mess of a kitchen table. Or sitting in his chair opposite from what once was John's chair. If he hadn't moved it, thrown it out with the trash.

"No, no of course not." He sighed. He made a decision. After all, what was the worst that could happen? It's not like he couldn't check himself out. "I hate to ask you this but, I think I left some clothes there in my old room. Would you mind packing a bag for me. I'm...I think I'm off to get some help."

"He told me to tell you if you called that it's all settled."

He frowned.

"Who told you?"

"Mycroft. He was here and he told me that if you called to say everything was taken care of even clothes. I didn't know what he meant. Oh, John, are you really getting treatment?"

"Seems so." He said.

"I'm so proud of you."

"Well...let's see if I can hack it first, eh?"

"You can! I know you can."

"All right, I should get going, I suppose."

"I understand, dear. Nothing but the best of luck. You're a very good boy."

"Thank you. I'm sorry for scaring you. And...if...when you see Sherlock tell him...tell him thank you."

"I will, John. All my love."

"Love you too."

Hanging up with Mrs. Hudson he immediately pulled up Google Maps on his phone and typed in "off license". There was one not more than a block away. He walked there and bought two smallish bottles of Jack Daniels, slipped into an alleyway just behind the shop and took several, long satisfying gulps.

With a shudder of pleasure, he wiped his mouth, inhaled, pulled out the card and dialed the number before he could change his mind.

He heard the sound of someone pick up the line almost instantly.

"Thank you, Doctor Watson. A car will be there presently."

And then the line went dead.
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

To anyone it may concern I would like to announce that I am entering treatment for alcohol dependency coupled with depression.

Since the death of my wife, I have had difficulty coping and this past Friday morning, Christmas Day, I sought out an extreme solution. Thankfully, I was unsuccessful.

I would like to convey my gratitude to all those who have expressed concern for my health and well-being.

I must now ask for privacy for myself, my friends and my family during this difficult time.

I would also make it clear that I am no longer partnered with Sherlock Holmes and haven't been since the start of January 2015. I would hate for my behavior to cast a shadow on his work and talents. His value to London, to Britain and the world, cannot be overstated.

To prevent any further unintentional damage to his good name I wish to publicly disassociate myself from Sherlock Holmes.
Chapter 12

Day 05

He had been wrong, as it turned out, with regard to the DT’s. The cramps, headaches, nausea and vomiting he suffered after just a half hour in the back of the limo made him think he had been coasting on adrenaline. More than once he’d had to request that they pull over to a rest stop or worse just on the roadside so he could do an undignified evacuation from one end or the other. Just another layer to the disaster that had become his life. The remaining Jack Daniels helped a bit and though he sipped at it clandestinely he knew A) the driver was aware and B) didn’t seem to care.

Though he hadn't provided the voice on the phone with an address of any sort soon after the call disconnected a limo pulled up alongside him. The driver got out, opened the back door and smiled at him as he dithered about getting in.

"This is, um...setup by Mycroft?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is going to take me to The Facility?"

"The Location, yes, Doctor Watson. If you'll just get inside, sir, we can be on our way."

Against his better instincts, he did just that.

Since The Location was a mystery he wasn't sure how they'd arrived. He hadn't been too surprised when the limo had arrived at an airport. He slept on the plane ride, exhaustion hitting him like a hammer. A respectful tap on his shoulder what felt like five minutes after he closed his eyes let him know they'd arrived.

He disembarked and it was back into another vehicle, this time an SUV and he promptly went back to sleep again. When he did finally arrive he was surprised to see snow, surprised to see mountains and surprised to see that it was just about sunrise.

The driver, a different one, came to his door and opened it. The chill of the air struck his face and he squinted as he stepped out. He was stiff and sore and an attempt to stretch only brought on a muscle spasm in his back so bad he wished he hadn't tried.

Near the door of what looked like an enormous resort was a woman.

"Hello, John." She said striding towards him and greeting him with a firm handshake.

"Hi."

"My name is Nora. Welcome to The Location. I'm sure you must be exhausted from your trip. We just have a few questions and formalities and then we'll see you to your room. I'm sure you're eager to get to bed."

He nodded and as she started walking fell into step at her side his feet crunching in the snow.

"We're very happy to have you here." She said with a practiced smile.

"I can't say I'm overjoyed to be here." He looked around. "Are we in Switzerland? Somewhere near
Zurich, maybe?"

She smiled again but offered no reply.

"The mountain range..." He said gesturing essentially all around them.  

Still, she didn't reply and instead held the front door open for him to enter. 

"You don't happen to have a mysterious sister named Anthea, do you?" He joked as he stepped inside.  

The facility looked more like a chalet than a place for drunks and druggies to get treatment. Outside the lights shined brightly into the rosy darkness, reflecting off the snow. Inside was reminiscent of a ski lodge, spacious, clean and impersonal. 

This place was expensive. Posh, secluded and expensive. The sort of place Her Majesty might come if the royal We were suffering from a nasty addiction. He immediately felt out of place. 

"Just in here, John." She said motioning to an open door. 

He wanted to tell her "Doctor Watson". He wanted to cling to his title because it felt like all he had left. He wanted to hold it out in front of him like a shield. God, but did that sound pathetic. He kept his mouth shut. 

He entered the room seeing a desk, two chairs and a very large man in the corner. His hackles were immediately raised. 

"It's alright, John, this is Frank and he's just going to give you a pat down, inspect your pockets, that sort of thing. It's standard procedure. If your bags hadn't already been shipped we'd have done that too. But it's all taken care of. If you'll just step towards Frank."

John cleared his throat and did as was asked of him. Frank wasn't the gentlest sort but at least it was over quickly. Nothing in his pockets but some gum, a tissue, and his hospital bracelet. Without comment, Frank removed the two, now empty, Jack Daniels bottles from his pocket. John silently cursed himself for not leaving them in the limo or asking the driver to dispose of them but it was done now. 

That done Frank nodded to Nora, exited and John took a seat. 

"I understand that can feel a bit intrusive." She said as she started to shuffle through paperwork. 

"Well, at least he warmed his hands first." He said trying for a joke and not sure if he succeeded. His head was starting to ache again and that sour taste in his mouth was returning. 

"Now, we're a residential inpatient treatment facility specializing in substance abuse, PTSD, depression, mental illness, and trauma. This program is 90 days and you are expected to remain in the facility on the grounds for the duration. Is all that clear to you?"

"Yes, yes it's clear."

90 days. Jesus. Three fucking months in this place. he was already starting to feel antsy and despondent."

"Good. I'll have some papers for you to sign at the end. But first, I just need some basic information. Employer name?"
"Rossmore Clinic. Or rather, that is my previous employer."

"Job Title?"

"GP."

"Emergency contact?"

He paused...he wasn't sure how to answer that question. Or rather, he wasn't sure if the answer remained the same as it had been.

"Can we come back to that one?"

"Of course." That practiced smile again that revealed absolutely nothing. "Is this your first treatment program?"

He nodded.

"I'm sorry to be so rigid, John, but I'll need a yes or no. A bit like court."

"Yes, yes it is." he said and cleared his throat.

"What is your longest period of sobriety?"

An answer immediately sprung to his lips and he was horrified at the truth of it.

"Um...well, since I started drinking regularly, I suppose a few hours. I mean, prior to this year, alcohol was never a problem for me. I'm sure that everyone who comes in here probably says some variation of that."

She nodded confirming that was indeed true.

"What helped you to remain sober?"

"I was generally sleeping at the time." He replied.

"Does your family have a history of addiction?"

He bristled. The answer was so predictable, so typical he felt embarrassed by it but he answered anyway.

"My sister is a recovering alcoholic and our father was a raging drunk."

"Do you have any current legal problems?"

"None that I know of."

"Are you on any sort of pain medication or are you in a pain management program?"

"No, I was prescribed pain medication because of an injury to my shoulder I suffered in Afghanistan but I never took them."

"And what were they?"

"Oxycodone and Hydrocodone. But, as I said I didn't take them." He watched as she typed on her computer not looking up at him. "You're typing an awful lot just to say I never took them."
"Are you on any other medications?"

"No, I am not on any other medications. I'm not on any medications at all. Are you listening?" He snapped. He was already growing tired of this line of questioning. They'd promised him a bed and if he couldn't get a drink then he at least wanted to retreat under the covers.

"Have you experienced any of the following while drinking or when you attempted to stop drinking? Falls?"

"No."

"Blackouts?"

"I...no. No, I don't believe so." He paused and frowned. "I guess. I'm not sure."

"Hot/Cold sweats?"

"Yes."

"Hallucinations?"

He didn't really consider "Mary" a hallucination and the truth was she was there before he really started drinking. But there were other instances. Times when he was sure Sherlock or someone else had been by. Times when he was sure he heard someone knocking at his door, peeking in through the windows but when he checked no one was there. But it felt extreme to call them hallucinations. Crazy people had hallucinations.

"I've never seen bugs crawling under my skin if that's what you mean."

She looked up from her computer and eyed him and for a moment the veneer dropped.

"John, you are a medical professional. I think you know precisely what I mean. Hallucinations?"

"Yes." He answered feeling small and chastised.

"Nausea and vomiting?"

"Yes."

"Seizures?"

"I had two seizures four days ago."

"Was this due to withdrawal symptoms brought on by an attempt to stop drinking?"

"No...no it was an alcohol consumption induced seizure." He said finally feeling the shame of those words wash over him.

"We'll make sure you're monitored by a doctor just as standard procedure. Are you currently under the care of a psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist or counselor?"

"No."

"Have you ever thought about, planned or attempted suicide?"

"Yes to the first two. I had intended to kill myself four days ago. But the seizure put a spanner in the
works." He rubbed his forehead, the headache was bad now. He closed his eyes to stop the sudden swaying motion of the room but it didn't work. Sweat started to bead on his skin and his mouth felt like it was coated in paste.

"I'm sorry...I think I'm going to..." He couldn't finish his words and instead reached for her waste bin and retched into it violently. His stomach clenched and he dry heaved again. He hadn't eaten anything and the alcohol had long since soaked into his system. It was mostly thick, repugnant bile and he heaved once more before he felt slightly confident in lifting his head from the garbage. Tears were streaming down his face and that vile flavor was in his mouth and nose.

"I'm so sorry." He said again but when his red and bleary eyes met hers she looked completely unfazed and though this happened every day. Perhaps it did.

"Seems to me as though that was a well-timed seizure."

He shrugged his shoulders in no mood to agree.

"If you say so."

The door to her office opened and Frank wordlessly stepped in, grabbed the waste bin from his hands and exited.

"We hope by the end of your stay here, John, that you'll agree with us. Now, are you currently suicidal?"

"I ask this, in all sincerity," He began as he reached for the tissue box on her desk then paused to silently ask for permission. He had a feeling this was going to be his life for awhile, asking Mother May I? Raising his hand like a child in school. She nodded and he took one and blew his nose.

"What does that mean?"

"It means, do you wish you'd succeeded? If given the means and opportunity would you try again to end your life?"

"Yes." He said after a long pause.

"And why is that?"

"Because I have nothing to live for. Because I don't want to be here anymore."

"Why are you seeking treatment today?"

"I honestly don't know. I don't expect this to help me, I don't even know if I want it to help me. But it may help my best friend...my emergency contact...we used to be best friends, at least."

"And who is your emergency contact? And if necessary, may we contact them."

"Sherlock Holmes. And no, please don't."
Chapter 13

Author's Note: Just a bit of a warning, in this chapter I reference a very controversial 1932 pre-code horror film by Tod Browning called "Freaks". As Wikipedia states "the eponymous characters were played by people who worked as carnival sideshow performers and had real deformities." "Freaks" was a box office bomb which ruined Browning's career but in the past 85 years, it's become an odd classic. I wanted to stress John's horror for a moment and this came to mind. But, without reference, it may go over some readers heads. Now, you have the choice not to watch the original film clip. If, after reading this or the Wikipedia description you decide not to watch it, that's totally cool. It is not integral to the plot.

I'm giving you fair warning as some people can find it disturbing and as I really don't want complaints afterward about no trigger warnings.

If you'd like to watch it, click here. If you do watch, you'll likely notice quite a few similarities between "Freaks" and the characters in American Horror Story: Freak Show.

However, as this is a cult classic it has been parodied multiple times and you can see a non-disturbing supercut of many of those parodies here.

Ok, consider yourself sufficiently warned.

Day 07

After he'd left Nora's office he'd been escorted to his room which he was too tired to even give a once over. As he was getting undressed someone knocked on the door and with irritation he invited them in.

As it turned out it was one of the staff doctors there to give him a look in. He took his blood pressure, performed a brief physical and drew some blood. Before he'd even left John was lying on the bed arm stretched over his face to block out the sun.

"John, the room does have blackout curtains."

John had removed his arm to look at him barely understanding what his words meant. The doctor approached and reached for a remote on the nightstand. "See, you just tap this button and..."

The doctor pressed the button and a slight whirring accompanied the movement of the curtains and soon the room was plunged into blackness. John sighed with relief, the tightness of his headache already loosening.

"Thank you." He said softly.

"My pleasure. Most new patients sleep for the majority of their first day. Someone will bring in food a bit later. Your private bath is just there." He said and having taken out a small flashlight he used it as a pointer in the darkness. "Your clothes are in the cupboard there and the bureau there. And if you need anything there's a call button just there. Pleasant dreams, John."
That was basically the last thing he remembered. A full 24 hours later he was awakened by someone lightly touching his shoulder. The someone introduced themselves and for the life of him, he couldn't remember her name a few seconds after. He was politely but forcefully urged out of bed and given a polite but forceful tour. He feigned interest as best he could but he was still nauseous and exhausted.

He'd never visited Harry in rehab. They had been long estranged by the time she'd checked herself in some place. He had seen places on TV but they looked nothing like this. In the end, he'd been dropped off in a meeting already in session. He took a seat in a metal folding chair and quietly observed.

He looked around his group and was surprised to see a few faces he recognized, some from the crap telly he'd watched and others quite a bit higher up in the celebrity echelon. Again he felt out of place. He didn't belong here and not because his addiction was so unique. But because these people were bloody stars; some of them a bit B or C list but there were a few A's as well. This was absolutely barmy. He didn't belong with people whose publicists reported to the news they were being treated for exhaustion. He was ordinary and wasn't this experience supposed to at least put him with his peers. But why the fuck was he freaking out about this? He didn't care about their good opinion or what they thought of him? And still, if it was meant to be a support group how could he expect support from and to trust people who so clearly weren't similar to him at all? There were also a handful of faces he'd never seen before, definitely not celebrities, quietly sitting, perhaps trying to stay anonymous. He thought for a minute perhaps they were like him but then he looked at their shoes, easily calculated the price and decided they weren't. His mind and his anxiety felt all over the place and he swallowed hard, tugging at the collar of his shirt which suddenly felt too tight.

"Alright, before we get continue we have a new member. My name is Reggie, I'm the group leader. Would you like to introduce yourself?"

"No, but I will," he said shortly. "Um, hello, my name is John."

"And?" Reggie prompted. "We believe in honesty here, John and that means you need to admit your problem."

He cleared his throat and looked around at them all staring at him, some dumbly, some keenly.

"I'm John and I'm...I'm an alcoholic." It sounded strange to say it out loud. Was this the first time he had? It felt like someone else's words and not his. Alcoholic? Alcoholic.

"Holy shit, it is you." A skinny young man said leaning forward, cigarette in hand. "John-Fucking-Watson. I've seen you in the papers."

"Carl, we don't use last names." Reggie corrected him.

"Yeah, me too. With that shaggable looking tall bloke, Sherlock Holmes." A woman with an enormous amount of hair extensions said. She was also smoking. It seemed like everyone there was smoking except him. "Not that you're not shaggable. Hi, I'm Jenny, big fan of meth and a bit of a sex addict. Nice to meet you."

"You tried to off yourself. Saw it on the news. Not so easy is it?" Another man said.

"I tried reading your blog. It's better than his blog but still a bit boring. I was following your mate on twitter for awhile but he mostly just likes slagging people off. He stopped tweeting a few months back so I unfollowed him." Yet another woman said. This one was a bit older than the first and he recalled seeing a trailer for a movie she had coming out next month. "Do you have an Instagram. I follow back."
It didn’t stop there and he found his gaze ping-ponging back and forth as person after person related seeing him on the news, in the papers on the internet. The group leader tried to regain control but it wasn't difficult to tell that authority was fairly lax.

"Glad you're here, mate. I'm tired of stories of people falling out of their limos or forgetting to put their knickers on and showing up at Cannes with fresh powder under their noses."

"That was one time!" The actress with the upcoming movie shouted. "You're a fucking cock, Rob."

"I'm just saying, finally we've got an interesting celebrity instead all us boring lot."

Celebrity? Celebrity, him?

John thought back to the old Tod Browning horror film from the 30's, and the chant the characters break into "We accept her! We accept her! Gooble-Gobble-Gooble-Gobble we accept her! One of us! One of us!"- started playing in his mind.

He felt like screaming.

*One of us! One of us! One of us! One of us!*

Celebrity.

That was when it hit him, much to his horror...they were right. For better or worse they were right.

He had been wrong. He wasn't any better or any different.

He was exactly where he belonged.
Chapter 14

Day 08

His second night was spent much like his first; in the silence of room nicer than any hotel he'd ever stayed in.

He'd been in firefights, been wounded in battle, had explosives strapped to him, almost been burned alive and on and on and on and on. And still, right now, in the apparent safety of this place he was terrified.

There was a certain sensory deprivation to this experience. No outside influence. No phone. No newspapers. Nothing to distract and he knew that was, of course, the point. This was solitary confinement in the nicest of confines. He was meant to think these thoughts, let his mind wander down these dark paths.

At least he had the privacy to cry. Which he did. He'd never been much a crier. He'd gotten smacked around for it as a kid and one certainly didn't cry in the army. You also didn't cry around Sherlock Holmes. Well, not the Sherlock Holmes that he initially met. He wouldn't not credit his rather amazing growth when it came to emotion. But still, John had kept them to a minimum until it was as if they'd dried up.

He supposed, when he thought about it, the tears had returned with the "death" of his mate. Before he lost Mary, he couldn't recall a time when he had wept that hard or that long.

The nightmares that plagued his sleep for those long two years were a special kind of horror. Picking up a ringing phone and just hearing "Goodbye, John. Goodbye, John. Goodbye, John." Over and over and over again. Some nights it's was just the thud. The rough, wet, flat smack of a body connecting with cement.

Then those horrors broke free from his dreams. He'd start to sweat and feel ill if he saw anyone standing on a roof or washing windows. He'd once walked past some men unloading heavy bags of cement from the back of a lorry on a rainy day. Smack-smack-smack the bags hit the wet ground. He'd had to break away from Mary's hand and duck into an alley to vomit.

So close to breaking down there, he was so, so close. But he'd held it in and held it together.

Mary was nothing but sympathetic but he'd still been embarrassed. He used to be awakened by memories of the war, shots fired, shouting, running, chaos, injury. He'd shoot up in bed, heart racing both panicked and from and desperate to return to the action.

Then it became memories of Sherlock that woke him up. The only wish was to reverse that day, to stop him before he did it. And maybe to finally understand it.

When Sherlock came back the dreams stopped. And for awhile, for just a bit, but not nearly long enough his sleep was untroubled.

Then, of course, they switched to Mary and some of the things he dreamed up may have been far worse than what was likely on the A.G.R.A. drive. Horrible imaginings of whoever was likely had to be after his wife coming for her, tracking her down. Magnussen. Others. A never ending line. Too many for him to defend against. Killing Mary, the baby, Sherlock.

No matter the nightmare, though, no matter the scenario; it's never him. It's only the people he loves.
the most who suffer, who are punished. He always lives. Always. They die and he is left alone, mourning and frightened out of his wits.

It was the same now with the red forest. Then endless Red Forest with it's humming and tingling and death and it's inability to decay.

One night, mid-dream he realized it was like him, the forest. Alive but dead. Dead but unable to die.

And he woke up screaming.
Chapter 15

Day 13

Everyone smoked here but he'd never developed a taste for the habit and he didn't intend to start. There were teas and fizzy drinks and milk and juices and bottled water and just about everything else under the sun. And while his taste for coffee had always been take it or leave it, here it suddenly became much more take it. His body ached and itched and creaked and clenched and demanded alcohol and though the caffeine was nothing of the sort it did soothe, just a tiny bit.

"John, there's acupuncture, later on, today. You might be interested in that as a stress reliever."

"John, don't forget about recuperative horse riding later this afternoon."

"John, can we interest you in creative art therapy?"

"John, Thai Massage?"

"John, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing?"

"John, Neurofeedback?"

They wanted him to participate but quite frankly none of the things that had been offered to him on his arrival had seemed like a good fit. But he had to pick something so he was told.

He flipped through the glossy brochure and finally made a choice that was admittedly solitary. The facility had a full-service fitness center and that seemed like as good a place as any to start and maybe disappear for awhile.

His days were structured and he found the familiarity of it both annoying and comforting. The army had taught him the value of having a carefully planned out day and he wasn't exactly opposed to disconnecting into that monotony.

8:00 AM was deemed Reflection Time.

He was usually up around 7:30-ish so this gave him time to shower and shave in his bathroom and prepare for the day.

He wasn't exactly sure what to do during reflection time. They'd provided him with a journal and pens so he could write down his thoughts.

"I hate this. I should have used the gun." He wrote and closed the book, lying on his bed with his clothes and shoes on until it was time to head to the commissary.

8:30 was Breakfast with a dizzying array of food. Pancakes, toast, eggs any way you wanted them, regular sausage, veggie sausage, porridge, tomatoes, pudding, beans, every kind of fruit etc. etc. ad infinitum.

John usually just settled for some milk, a few slices of toast and a soft boiled egg.

9:30 was Active Lifestyle and taking out his map, and yes, a map was required given the scale of this place he set off in search of the gym. John noted on his first day there that everything, as expected was state of the art. He'd made his way to the locker room and changed into workout clothes but not
before stepping on the scale and then having a good long look in the mirror. He'd avoided this and it
turned out he had good reason. He looked flabby, out of shape, the alcohol having taken its toll
around his middle. His skin looked dry, patchy. He'd even put off looking at his face except what
was required when he shaved. It seemed even worse. Pale, drawn, bags and circles under his eyes,
the lines on his forehead standing out. He looked old. He looked like he'd aged about 7 years over
the past 11 months.

He'd decided it might be a good idea to grow a beard.

John attacked the treadmill like he hadn't spent the last 300+ days destroying any physical fitness
he'd built up. Running next to Sherlock, scaling buildings and hustling down staircases seemed like a
lifetime ago. His body let him know how foolish he was being by forcing him to rush off the
treadmill before he vomited all over the machine.

Consequently, he'd spent 11:00 Morning Processing Group in a foul mood.

Lunch was just as opulent as breakfast and following that it was time for one-on-one therapy
sessions.

The second day he'd met Hanah who was to be his psychiatrist. She was American, board-certified
in both general psychiatry and addiction psychiatry, she preferred to be called Hanah as opposed to
Doctor Beckett and she always had sweets at her desk "More for me than for you." She'd said with a
smile.

"Now, John they've told me a bit about you and I've looked over your file, your medical history,
your military service, and everything you mentioned at intake."

"I'm sorry, who is they?"

"The people who considered your candidacy."

He looked at her blankly.

"Of course," She said with a nod. "You didn't actually apply yourself this was done on your behalf.
In any case, I think I have a good solid foundation with which to start things off. I'm just going to
begin with some questions. You take your time and answer them as fully as you'd like. You
mentioned upon arrival that you didn't know why you were seeking recovery. After a few nights
sleep, which I'm not foolish enough to categorize as a good nights sleep, do you have an answer?"

He cleared his throat and looked around her well-furnished office, it was comfortable and far more
normal looking than any other room he'd been in since arriving. He had to admit, it was nice.

"No, not really. Or rather I haven't found a reason for myself. I don't expect to." He rubbed at his
temple trying to quell the ever-present headache.

"You have a reason, not for yourself?"

"My best friend...what I did, trying to kill myself it got a lot of publicity. His business, which I used
to share with him, I suppose for lack of a better phrase, might suffer. The least I owed to him was to
try and right what I'd done wrong. I took responsibility for my actions and made it clear that we no
longer worked together and that what I did had nothing to do with him."

She nodded and scribbled down notes.

"But no reason strictly related to you?" She asked.
"Nope."

"Do you believe you have a problem with alcohol?"

"I believe I'm an alcoholic. That's a quantifiable medical condition. But do I believe I have a problem, no. A problem would be a disruption to a life. I don't feel that I have a life anymore. There's nothing to disrupt."

“When did your drinking start?”

He flashed a bitter smile.

“If you have my file you know when it started.”

“I do. But that doesn’t mean I don’t need to hear you say it.”

“It started not long after my wife was shot and killed.”

“By Vivian Norbury.” She said with an understanding nod.

John frowned.

“That wasn’t in the papers.” He said sitting up straighter and suddenly feeling very on edge.

“No, but as I said I have your file. Your real file. I imagine you may have walked in here thinking you’d need to sanitize certain stories for me, John. That isn’t necessary.” She smiled, leaning back in her chair. “I’m guessing this place must appear cartoonishly opulent to you?”

“A bit, yes.”

“More focused on pampering than helping.”

“Absolutely.”

“It’s meant to give off that appearance. But the patients who come here know what they’re in for. You’re all a special breed and yes, I can see you cringe at being lumped in with some of the other patients. But, I don’t quite mean that. When public servants, politicians, people involved in the inner workings of your government or mine need help they have to come to a special place where they can be completely honest. That’s where you fit in. I have a suitably high clearance level that allowed me to be specially chosen to help you. I was hand picked by Mycroft Holmes.”

“Jesus.” He said rubbing at his temple. “You understand that makes me a lot less likely to trust you?”

“Why is that? Mr. Holmes set this up.”

He truly didn’t want to delve further into that at the moment.

“Are you saying that everyone here isn’t what they seem. That the coked up woman I know was from Real Housewives Of Wherever is actually a coked up, tortured super spy?”

Hanah laughed.

“No, most of the people here are exactly what they seem. Some of them are playing a part, unable to appear here under their own names so they only drop the facade in their therapy sessions. Some are so deep undercover they can't remember who they were. The point is we’re here to help everyone that we can and The Location has a damn good success rate.”
“So, your other patients-”

“I don’t have any other patients, John. I am here strictly for you.”

He sat back and folded his arms. On one hand, the idea of this woman knowing everything, the truth about Mary and her past, the real facts of the cases he’d solved with Sherlock. All of it, everything, was horrifying. But on the other, if he was to do this, actually engage, there might be no better time. The things he’d had to keep from Ella... After a while, he’d started to wonder if there was even a point to therapy. Ultimately he’d decided there wasn’t.

But maybe, now...

“Everyone who needs it deserves this kind of help, John. Everyone. It is focused and intense and it works if you work it. Unfortunately, we live in a world where even finding a place to get better not to mention affording it is an impossible task. Which is to say nothing of a facility the offers private rooms, catered food and horse riding lessons. You don’t feel it now, and that’s ok, but you’re lucky. You are very lucky to be here. I’d also like to add that Ella Thompson does good work. So your familiarity with this process will be helpful."

"You know her?"

"I know of her. I've read several of her papers. But no one can help you if you're not honest with them. And you won't let anyone help you if you don't trust them. I'm going to work to earn your trust, John. Hopefully, you'll feel comfortable being honest with me, eventually." She said with a smile. "Ok?"

"I'm not promising anything." He said shortly.

“Fair enough. Shall we continue?”

He’d never been the religious sort so the 12 Steps, or rather that one particular part about a higher power chafed at him. He sat silently in the meetings, listening to the others. Some of their stories were like his. Some wildly different. But he listened.

His thoughts did wander, though. He thought about Sherlock, wondered what had gone through his mind when he’d seen the press release. He wondered if he hated him. He wondered if he’d deleted him.

“John, would you like to add anything today?”

They asked him that every day and he would only shake his head politely. This level of public sharing was beyond his capability. He imagined it always would be.

After 12 Steps came dinner and after dinner, there were chores; the second set for the day. In the morning between group and counseling, he might be assigned to wash dishes or sweep up. After dinner, he might be in charge of stocking shelves or the cleaning out the refrigerator. He didn’t mind it. The order felt familiar and good and he could vanish inside his head during these mindless tasks.

After chores was social hour; everyone either huddling together in groups and disappearing into great clouds of smoke or lining up at the front office to retrieve their cell phones to call home.

Some privileges he still had to earn but everyone got phone time from day one.
He hadn’t made a call. There’s wasn’t anyone to reach out to and even if there was, what could he say?

Usually, he chose this time to head back to his room. Someone, Mrs. Hudson, maybe...Mycroft...maybe even Sherlock had packed at least a dozen books for him. All from his shelf, all things he’d meant to read and never gotten around to. Someone had even dug out his old iPod so he could have a bit of music. He was grateful for these creature comforts and returning to bed to read a book and wall out the world with music was one of the few things he looked forward to all day.

After a check by one of the medical staff, it was time for reflection then bed.

Then the next day it began all over again.

He didn’t sleep well.

His cravings felt worse than they ever had at home but logically he knew this was because when he was there he had always given in to them immediately. But that didn’t stop the pain, the discomfort, the frustration and that feeling that just made him want to scream.

Actually, craving sounded too mild, too minor, almost charming in its minuscule nature. There was nothing small about this...this roaring need and his inability to satisfy it made him want to climb the walls.

He wasn’t alone. At night there were disturbances. The sudden clatter of something being overturned, fighting, shouting, screaming, crying. It was like being stuck inside a madhouse. Sometimes he covered his head with his pillow, sometimes he joined his voice with the noise yelling for them all to kindly “Shut the fuck up!”

Sleep was elusive.

He missed the predictability of passing out.
“I’d like to talk a little more about structure,” Hanah said as he sat stiffly through another therapy session.

John cleared his throat. “Ok.”

“Would you say that your life as a child had structure?”

“Absolutely. There was no chaos to my father’s drinking mostly because it was constant. There was a pattern to it. I could predict it so I knew how to behave accordingly.”

“And how did you behave?”

“I started off thinking that if I just did the right thing, said the right thing. Made sure the house was clean and dinner was made and the beer was cold and Harry was quiet then things would be alright. I learned that wasn’t true. I adjusted accordingly.”

“How did you learn that?”

“The fastest and clearest way possible, a smack to the face.” He said with a short laugh.

“John, when we talk about your father and the fact that he was physically abusive to you, well, you say it very casually.”

“Yes. I’m not sure how else to say it.”

“But when we talk about Harry, there’s a heightened emotional component.”

“Harry was a kid. She needed someone to protect her. He scared her so badly, so, so badly she would just cry inside this cupboard. Our mother had this enormous cupboard with sort of an armoire top and these three shelves on the bottom. After she died I kicked out the bottom of the first two top shelves and when things got bad, Harry and I had a signal. If I gave the high sign, she was supposed to run and go hide in the drawers.”

“But you didn’t hide? Weren’t you afraid too?”

“I didn’t have time to be afraid. That was a luxury. When I dawdled or waited...there was this one time-” But John stopped short. His mouth was starting to run away to a place his mind had no desire to go.

“There was this one time..” She prompted.

“I hung around after class with some of my mates. I just got distracted and I got home too late. I was always supposed to be there. I made sure Harry was out of the way by the time he got home but this time I hadn’t. He came home and he picked a fight with his eight-year-old daughter. By the time I got there she was under her bed. I coaxed her out and saw she had a bloody nose. I asked her what happened and she said he backhanded her in the kitchen. She was shaking. I’d never actually seen anyone shake before. I’d read about it in books, you know, someone trembling in fear... Anyway, I cleaned her up and I said I was sorry over and over and over again. Thank God, nothing was broken. And I told her I’d never leave her alone again. I made her dinner, tucked her in. Dad was gone down
the pub and when he got back I made dinner for him. Spaghetti. And when he sat down at the table I poured the boiling water on his hand. I told him that if he ever touched her again he’d get worse. I told him next time it would be his dick while he slept.”

Hanah looked troubled but the memory actually brought John some comfort.

“Did he ever hit her again?”

“No, he did not.”

“But what about you?”

“Oh yeah, once his hand healed he hit me all the time. Way more than before. It was like the last barrier between us had fallen. I’d usually lose at that age but he knew it was going to be a fight and he started having to ask himself if it was worth it. The older I got, the less worth it, it became.”

“Did you or your sister ever receive counseling for what you experienced?”

“I didn’t. I know that when were kids, she didn’t. Can’t speak to what’s happened since.”

“How do you feel that you resolved these issues, John?”

“I grew up. Went to med school, went to the army, never looked back.”

“How do you think relations with your father colored the rest of your life?”

“It hasn’t. It didn’t. It was a point in my life that happened, I lived through it and now it’s over. I learned how to survive it. I knew what certain days meant, what certain drinks meant. I could tell you by the way he slammed his car door whether it was going to be an ordinary night, a bad night or one that ended with the police being called.”

“Did you have to call the police on your father many times?”

“I never called. The neighbours did every now and then.”

“Can you tell me why?”

“Because my father was a cop.” He said crossing his arms.

“Did you ever speak to your father once you joined the military?”

“No, we never spoke again.”

“Did you attend his funeral?”

“No, I paid for it though.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Nothing about that man frightens me now and not just because he’s dead.”

“But he terrorized you as a little boy.”

“I’m not a little boy anymore.”

“But that little boy is you, John. He’s still inside you.”
“Childhood trauma is predictable and boring.” He said quickly.

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

She was right, of course. It didn't. It sounded like someone else entirely. Someone who had wheelbarrows full of his own childhood trauma that he'd ignored and deleted.

“Who else would it be? Look can we just...can we be done for today?”

“Does this make you uncomfortable?”

“Yes.”

“That means we’ve hit something. I have some assignments for you. First off I want to write down every time you feel the urge to drink and what you think brought it on. Second, I want you to write a letter to your father. What you should have said, what you needed to say.”

He shook his head slightly.

“There’s nothing I have to say to him. There’s nothing I have to say to the past.”

“The past is talking to you each and every day, John. I think you should start listening. I think you should have a conversation. Now, I’ve given you homework before and you haven’t completed it.”

She was right, she had given him assignments here and there and despite his outward petulance, he did leave her office intending to do them. But once he sat himself down before the notebook, pen in hand...he just couldn't.

“Don’t...don’t talk to me like I’m a child.”

“Then act like an adult and do the work.” She said with finality. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”
Chapter 17

Times I Wanted A Drink

7:32 AM - Moments after waking up

8:19 AM - Listening to the chatter in the commissary whilst trying to read. Could have used a shot of vodka in my orange juice

11:50 AM - Joann unironically used the word "Hashtag". Her entire speech was rotten with it.

2:30 PM - 3:30 PM Before, During and After one-on-one therapy

5:45 PM - 12-Step Group

10 PM - until I drift off

I don’t find things to be any easier. I find myself wanting to change my mind, break out of here, leave this place.

Alcohol, want of it, need for it consumes my every waking hour. I am disgusted with myself.
Dear Dad,

I think this entire charade is bullshit but here we are, I was asked to write a letter to you so I will.

I'm in rehab. I am a worthless, drunken piece of garbage just like you were. All that talk, all those times you used to ask me "So, you think you're better than me, eh, Johnny?" Turns out, I'm not. I never was.

The truth is I’m glad you’re dead. Your influence on Harry’s life was nothing but disastrous. You turned her into a drunk who at 41 is only now getting her life sorted.

I don’t know what you did to me. I suppose that one of the things my therapist is going to tell me. I think I escaped largely unscathed. But I don’t know that I really want to know. I don’t want to learn what awful seeds have been sown into me. And even if I could handle what your nature has wrought, I don’t want to know what your “nurturing” has done.

What I hate the most is that I fear I’m seeing things in myself that remind me of you. You were a rigid, self-centered, inflexible subhuman man. Lower than trash. Someone who only dealt in lies, someone who physically hurt people you were supposed to care about, someone who couldn't make or keep a friend to save his life, someone who, from the stories I heard from family, was a lout of a husband. Someone who was a terrible, terrible father.

I did that. I hurt people, I lied to people. Maybe I lied to myself too. I can't make friends or at least keep them. I am recalcitrant, self-obsessed, violent and I was a miserable husband. I was a terrible father. In one way or another, I have failed at everything I have attempted to do.

You'd be so happy that I turned out just like you.

I don’t know what else I’d even want to say to you.

I think we're done here. I think we were done a long time ago.

I hope it was a painful death.

Your son,

John
Chapter 19

Day 16

John had stopped into his room after lunch to grab his notebook before therapy when a knock on the door surprised him.

"John Watson?"

He turned to see a man of an average height and average build with average dark hair standing in the doorway a box in hand.

"Yeah, that's me."

"Mail for you, mate." He said holding the package out.

John frowned. Other people got mail and care packages not him. Still, he walked forward and took the box from the man's hands.

"Thanks." He was both in a hurry to open it and no rush at all. Unopened it could be filled with anything, unopened it was perfect.

"I've seen you around. You always eat every meal alone. I'm James." he said extending his hand.

"Nice to meet you."

"John and James, ten more and we could have a full set of Apostles, eh?" James said.

John smirked at the joke. "I feel as though we'd have a hard time finding anyone named Judas Iscariot."

"And if we could would we want him to join?"

John smiled again, surprising himself.

"Well, I'll be off." James said. "More packages to deliver. Maybe I'll see you at dinner."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Is this when I hand in my homework?" John asked as he settled into the seat in Hanah's office.

"That assignment was for you. I won't be reading it."

"Well, how will you know I even did it?" He asked with confusion.

"You just told me. I trust you. You don't trust a lot of people, do you, John."

"That hasn't worked very well for me in the past, so no, I don't."

"Tell me about what you wrote and what, if anything, you learned."

"I...I learned that I want to drink all the time, apparently."

When he'd gone over the brief chart for the day that he had filled in so flippantly he didn't like what
he saw. Not that it surprised him, but, it appeared far more hours of his day were taken up by him wishing he had a drink.

"What were some of your triggers?"

"That's the thing, on one hand, it was people talking around me, and on the other it was the silence when I'm trying to sleep."

"Some people drink so they can socialize easier. Some people drink for just a generalize dose of liquid courage. Some people drink out of habit. When you drank, what was your goal?"

"To obliterate myself. To not have to hear people talking to me or at me. To not have to deal with my own thoughts anymore. To be unconscious."

He shifted uncomfortably in the chair. These memories were painful, unpleasant and vivid and going back to them always made him feel a bit queasy.

If he closed his eyes he was back in the church at Mary's funeral. The same church they were married in. He was sat alone in the widower's row, Rosie on his lap, screaming to high heavens. The previous days had been a blur of people gently hugging him, gently touching his arm, his elbow, his shoulder. He had feared the entire process might have been drawn out for days, perhaps even a month given the circumstances of Mary's death but someone, who he suspected to be Mycroft had expedited the process. Her death was registered, after what was likely the hastiest coroner's report on record. It was likely just to save the government from any possible embarrassment and not out of good will, but John was grateful whatever the reason.

He held it together for most of the service. The ridiculous service with the fake biography and the people in the pews who'd known her less than a decade. There was a point where he wanted to laugh. Wanted to jump up on his seat and proclaim his wife was an assassin and everything they thought they knew about her was a lie.

But that wasn't the truth. It wasn't that simple.

Ye gods, but death made everything seem so fucking trivial. He knew as much about her past as he'd wanted. All that mattered now was that Mary was gone. His Mary. Mary, the first person that had captured his attention since Sherlock's "death". Mary, the one he'd casually asked the clinic secretary about just to figure out if she was seeing anyone before he expressed interest. Mary, who he kissed in the snow. Mary who he'd pledged fidelity to and...

Sherlock, of course, wasn't there. John had barred him from the funeral as he had barred him from his life.

He held it together until the service ended. Then he stood at her casket and place his hand on the smooth wood of the lid. She was there, Inside. Sealed off from him forever. He burst into tears for a moment but no one rushed to his side. If Sherlock had been there...

John had pulled himself together and then he, David; the bloke Mary's used to date, Major Sholto, Mike Stamford, Greg and Janine wrapped their palms around the brass handles of the casket and lifted it up, carrying it at waist level. A female pallbearer was odd, but not unheard of. If things had been as they should have been Sherlock would have been the sixth. If things had been as they should have been Mary wouldn't have died.

He had made it clear that he didn't want people congregating at the house after the burial. He couldn't stand it. Couldn't imagine dealing with his home bursting at the seams with all these people and their
apologies and their sympathies and their bereavement tropes. Instead, he stayed at the graveside while they dispersed, while Molly took Rosie for the night and while he tried to understand how his wife was in a box in the mud. How this box was then going to have more mud shoveled upon it, then flattened. And how a stone was going to be erected month's later that would serve as a period to her life. Once and for all. This was death and that was the night that a drink no longer became an option but a necessity.

Less than a year ago he'd been choosing wedding invitation font. Now for the second time in his life, he had chosen a tombstone for someone he loved.

"Everything can't be my trigger. Silence and noise, company and solitude, it doesn't make sense." He said to Hanah. "So maybe it's me. Maybe I trigger myself." The idea of that terrified him because how, exactly, could he divide himself from himself. It felt hopeless but his therapist smiled.

"Now, that's what I call a breakthrough. Congratulations."

"Well, are you going to enlighten me?"

"I want you to think about it after our session today. We're going to come back to it tomorrow. Now, the letter to your dad, how did that go?"

She had thrown him off by bringing up the entire issue with triggers only to leave him hanging but he moved forward.

"Um...as I expected it to go. It was a chance to tell him to piss off, I suppose."

"Anything else?"

He frowned and shifted again in his seat.

"I told him he'd wrecked Harry's life and she was only now getting it back together."

"What about your life?"

"I told him that...that I worried we shared some similar qualities. That disgusts me. It truly disgusts me."

"Which qualities, John?"

"He was short tempered, he was always angry, prickly, solitary except at the pub. And this is all, of course, besides the alcoholism and the violence. Even sober, stone cold sober there was just something about him that people didn't like. He rubbed them up the wrong way."

"And you think that's you?"

"Yeah...yeah, I mean I've heard it enough, you know."

"Do you blame your father for your sister's alcoholism?"

"Everybody...everybody is responsible for their own actions but...yes, yes, I blame him."

"Do you blame him for yours?"

"No."

"Why does your sister get a pass and you don't?" She asked curiously.
"She doesn't get a pass. Every time she chose to pick up a bottle that was her hand, not our father's but...he created a life, an environment that necessitated escape hatches. She used alcohol as a way to escape."

"What was your escape hatch?"

"University. The army. My escape hatch was literally escaping."

"Was that all?"

"I'm not counting the drinking because it happened decades after I left. I may have taken more quickly to booze because my genetics started screaming out for it once I started but it wasn't him."

"So, would you say that you were sober from childhood on, essentially up until your wife's murder."

"Yes, of course." He said with a disbelieving shake of his head. "Do you think I'm lying to you."

"No, John, I think *you're* lying to you. I have a short quiz that I want you to take, ok? It shouldn't take more than 15-20 minutes. She handed him a piece of paper and a pencil as she rose from her chair. "I'm going to grab a cup of coffee, would you like one?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine." John was surprised that she was actually leaving. He couldn't help but compare her to his experience with his last therapist. His last real therapist. Ella hadn't exactly been one to let him get away with things but she was far less combative than Hanah. Maybe combative wasn't the right word. Forceful. Direct. He couldn't dodge answers with Hanah, he couldn't put things off until later. She kept him on unsteady ground, trying to maintain his balance and he found himself almost forced to answer lest he tip over.

"Great, I'll see you in about 20."

And then she left the room. Taking up the pencil he inched closer to her desk to take a good look at the test.

1.

A. I like "wild" uninhibited parties

B. I prefer quiet parties with good conversation

*Oh God, but this was ridiculous.*

He chose B and moved on.

2.

A. There are some movies I enjoy seeing a second or even third time

B. I can't stand watching a movie that I've seen before

*Why would anyone want to watch the same movie over and over? B.*

3.

A. I often wish I could be a mountain climber
B. I can't understand people who risk their necks climbing mountains

*I don't want to be a mountain climber but... "can't understand people risking their necks" is painting with a bit too broad of a brush.* A.

4.

A. I dislike all body odours

B. I like some of the earthy body smells

He recalled a time when he'd spent the day at the beach with Mary. A long, warm day, in and out of the water, running through the waves, rolling in the sand. She'd smelled of salt water and sweat. By the end of the day any trace of that sunscreen scent had been stripped away and she just smelled like her. The smell she left on their sheets, warm and enticing and so bloody sexy. They rolled around a bit on the blanket and he'd copped some rather obvious feels that made her giggle given how public they were. To give the appearance of propriety, under the guise of watching the sunset they wrapped up in the blanket. In reality, he'd really just wanted and taken the chance to slide his hand into her swimsuit and bring her to a shuddering orgasm just as the rosy sun dipped into the water. He'd brought his fingers to his mouth and licked them salaciously. They packed up their things quickly, rushed back to the car and he'd gone down on her in the back seat. There was another scent he loved; sweet and fragrant and heady and all his. He'd driven as fast as the law would allow and they'd jumped into bed and fucked spiritedly at home and then after a breather opted for another go and that time they'd made love. And he'd laid there after they were done happy and relaxed and feeling decidedly lucky as he breathed deep of a life that was perfumed by ocean water and Mary.

He then remembered holding Sherlock or rather being held by him. Sweat again, salty and clean, the drugs having finally worked their way out of his remarkably efficient system. That shampoo, the detergent, fresh tobacco, the tea he could smell on his breath. Sherlock, everything that was Sherlock. Everything he couldn't describe but just knew to be him. He just knew. He could walk into a room and know he'd been there. Blindfolded. He knew him blind. He could tell anyone how he moved, how he sat, how he walked. How the skin around his eyes crinkled, how he pulled his head back when he laughed. The constellation on his neck. Orions Belt, just there, just below his left ear, three little freckles and when he was close enough to see them, to smell him, no cologne, just Sherlock. Sherlock never wore cologne he just smelled like himself...

B. Yes, of course, only some sort of lunatic would pick A.

5.

A. I get bored seeing the same old faces

B. I like the comfortable familiarity of everyday friends

A.

6.

A. I like to explore a strange city or section of town by myself, even if it means getting lost

B. I prefer a guide when I am in a place I don't know well

A.
7.
A. I dislike people who do or say things just to shock or upset others
B. When you can predict almost everything a person will do and say he or she must be a bore

*Non-sequitur; A has nothing to do with B. But B, nonetheless.*

8.
A. I usually don't enjoy a movie or play where I can predict what will happen in advance
B. I don't mind watching a movie or play where I can predict what will happen in advance
A.

9.
A. I have tried cannabis or would like to
B. I would never smoke cannabis
A.

10.
A. I would not like to try any drug which might produce strange and dangerous effects on me
B. I would like to try some of the drugs that produce hallucinations
B.

The questions went on like that, some ridiculous, some not nearly as cut and dried as they might seem. All in all he finished and waited for her to return.

"All done?" She said as she re-entered with coffee in hand.

"Yeah...is that Starbucks?" He asked motioning to her drink.

"Yes, there's one on the third floor. Haven't you been?" She asked with surprise.

"I..."

"I'm teasing you, John. It's a ceramic cup." Hanah replied giving it a resounding flick with her finger before adding, "There hasn't been a Starbucks here in years. Now, what did you think of the test?"

"It was...fine. Bit simple, I guess."

"Good." She said picking it up. "Mind if I go over it a bit?"

"Be my guest."

He watched her even though he tried not to as she scanned the page, her eyes moving rapidly down the paper.

"Ok." She said after a few minutes. "Good, well done. So, that was a test created by a man named
Marvin Zuckerman and it's called the Sensation Seeking Scale. It's a psychological instrument used to measure a patient's sensation seeking behavior."

"A personality test to determine who is and isn't an adrenaline junkie and how much of a junkie they are."

"Exactly." She smiled.

"So, how much am I?"

She exhaled and her eyebrows darted up briefly.

"A pretty damn big one. But I already knew that. And what's more, you already knew that too. Now, I think has been a pretty full session. You're free to go for today. Keep noting the things that trigger you to drink and we'll talk more tomorrow."

He nodded and made to stand up, both eager and hesitant to leave.

"I want you to sit with some of these thoughts, John. It looks like you have a lot of questions but you're not exactly sure how to ask them. It'll come, alright? Give it some time. I'll be here for you tomorrow. But, in case you ever need me sooner..." She reached into her drawer and gave him a card. "This is my direct number. You can call day or night. And you're right on schedule, this is about the time during treatment where patients ask how they can reach me if they need to. We're starting to dig deep into some stuff that's been long undisturbed. It might bring up unsettling memories and thoughts. That's what I'm here for."

"But I didn't ask." He said.

"You were going to."

She was right. He had only been trying to work up the nerve.

When he got back to his room for the night he'd completely forgotten about the delivery.

For five solid minutes, he sat on the bed just staring before deciding to open it. The first item was ensconced in so much bubble wrap he could barely make it out. Once he finally tore through he discovered it was a lovely electric tea kettle along with his favorite kind of tea. She'd also included his favorite mug with the Royal Army Medical Corps insignia. It came of course courtesy of Mrs. Hudson with a note attached.

Wishing you all the best, dearest John! We're all thinking of you and hoping for your health and happiness. We love and miss you and we'll be waiting when you get home!

It was signed by all the people he had so recently hurt and assaulted with his behavior...except one. The rest of the box was filled with snacks and sweets and a few books.

The gesture did not go unappreciated, however, no matter how he turned the box over and searched inside there was nothing to be found from Sherlock.

So, it was to be like that. Better to understand it now, to grasp what he had apparently lost than to persist in the idea that their friendship was salvageable.

Surely Mrs. Hudson had told Sherlock she was sending a package and asked him, likely pleaded with him to add something and he had declined.
Well, it is what it is. He thought.

He went to bed listless. No forest dreams that night. Instead he was back in his childhood home, standing in the kitchen. Facing the stove, his back to the small table where they ate meals. His father was behind him, seething. He wasn't speaking. He didn't have to. John could feel him, boring holes into the back of his head, practically huffing, like a bull pawing at the ground before a charge.

"Always thinking you're so much better." Came the voice from behind him.

"I know I'm better." He replied before he could stop himself.

John couldn't tell if in the dream he was a child or a man. Sometime he felt like one or the other but by the time the blows came it didn't matter.

His father hit him hard in the back and his knees buckled, slamming into the linoleum floor tiles. He tried to scramble to his feet but a kick sent him over onto his side. He knocked into the stove disturbing the pot full of noodles on top which then fell wetly onto the floor. There was a small space between the stove and the wall and as a child he'd scooted in there many a time. It was just out of his father's reach and he could usually ward him off with kicks to the shin until the sot got tired.

But this time he didn't or couldn't make it to the space. Instead, his father grabbed him by his hair yanking him forward and out into the open. No protection, no help, no footing because of the wet, starchy floor. His father, however, was quite sure footed and with nothing standing between them now he continued his assault. Blow after blow landed on his face. He tasted blood before he saw it spray out. He felt his cheekbone fracture, then his jaw, he felt the cuts in his mouth from the shards of broken teeth, he felt his left eye go blurry then black.

Through his right eye, he was able to discern something he hadn't noticed in the dream before.

His father looked a lot like him.
Chapter 20

Day 18

"How are you today, John?" Hanah asked as he seated himself in his chair.

He ran his nails through his beard. He was in the itchy stage but it was sure to pass soon. At least he was a bit better able to bear looking in the mirror these days.

"Fine. Good. Yeah."

"Alright, good. Anything you'd like to talk about? How are you sleeping at night?"

"Fine. Uneventful, you know."

"I don't know unless you tell me." She said with a smile. "Pleasant dreams? Sad dreams? Dreamless? Nightmares?"

He didn't want to tell her about the forest. He couldn't put his finger on why but somehow it just felt incredibly private.

"I always have nightmares." He said casually. John picked up the bottle of water he brought with him and took a long swig.

"When you say always do you mean since you've arrived here?"

"No, I mean, always as in always. For as far back as I can remember. My favorite nights are nights when I don't dream." He frowned a bit as he realized how that must sound but Hanah didn't recoil so he tried to put it behind him.

"What did you have a bad dream about last night?"

"My father. I was back at our old house. I'd done something to set him off and he came at me."

"Did you physically fight?"

"Not exactly, I must have been a kid. I couldn't tell but I was mostly trying to get away from him. I was trying to hide but he grabbed me and pulled me out." He looked down at his hands and saw that he was miming the motions.

"Is there anything else unusual about the dream, John."

"You're going to read too much into this." He said shaking his head.

"That's my job. I read too much into things they even gave me a few degrees for it." She said with a chuckle.

John had decided she was annoyingly disarming.

"My face. My dad had my face. And if this is the part of the conversation where you tell me I need to forgive him so I can move on and get better I think we've hit a wall. I'm not going to forgive him. I'm glad he's dead. Some things you do in life...they're beyond forgiveness."

Hanah waited patiently as he finished his impromptu rant.
"I wasn't going to ask you to forgive him, John. If that's something you want to explore during our time here, I'd be happy to go down that road. But I think there are more important factors we need to address first. The truth is your father has physically been out of your life for over two decades. As formative as your time with him was, and we will be addressing that, mending your actual relationship with him is not essential to your recovery. Understanding how he factors into your life now, is. Ok?"

That hadn't been the response he'd been expecting and all he could do was give a silent nod of agreement.

"In the dream, were you frightened?"

He swallowed hard.

"Terrified. He was bigger, stronger than I remember him being. All the spots that I used to aim for to get him to let me go; his wrists, his shins, none of them were working."

"Are these dreams consistent? Do you often have nightmares about your father?"

"No, honestly haven't had them for years. I assume it's because we've been talking about him recently."

"So when you arrived here is when they started back up?"

"No..." He flashed back briefly to the morgue. "I don't want to talk about that just yet."

"Alright, not until you're ready."

"Thank you."

"Have there been times, recently, where you've felt that kind of fear?"

"I set out to make certain I never felt that kind of fear again."

"Is that why you joined the army?"

"I never really thought about it that way. " He said. "I wanted to serve my country."

"So, you were a staunch supporter of Operation Enduring Freedom?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning your wife, your best friend, your sister, your landlady and all of your girlfriends have all voted either Lib Dem's or Labour."

He frowned suddenly incensed at the violation.

"Voting in the United Kingdom is done by secret ballot. You shouldn't know that." He said and cleared his throat.

"No, I shouldn't. But, like I said, very high clearance. You and your sister, what sort of terms are you on now?"

"Only necessary terms. I asked her to take custody of my daughter."

"So you trust her."
John thought for a bit. Trust and Harry had not been two words that typically went together. It was odd to have them linked now.

"In a way, yeah I do. I trust her with Rosie, certainly."

"Do you think if Mary hadn't died that you might have felt like mending fences with her on your own?"

"Doubtful. We had a few false starts over the years but it ended up being one fucked up Christmas and one missed wedding too many for me. I was going to lie and say yes, we would have found a way to get back together. But... the truth is, no. I wouldn't. Harry and I are very different, we always have been. If we weren't family I don't think we ever would have been on the other's radar."

"What makes you so different?"

He laughed shortly.

"Where to begin, um...she's...she's just spoiled. She's always had someone to come around and clean up her mess. She always had this army of friends who would party with her and see that she got home alright. Then when they all got sober and she didn't they staged intervention after intervention to try and get her right. When she got her license taken away they’d drive her. When she lost her job and her flat they'd let her crash on their couch. Every hellish move of her life was backed up by someone ready to break her fall. Then somehow during one of those little corridors of sobriety, she met Clara. This amazing, saintly woman who stepped in and picked up the absolute mess that was my sister, set her right. And what did she do? She threw it away."

"You mentioned that she and Harry were patching things up."

"Well yeah, now. At the moment. But everything is always in flux with Harry. Plus...some things you do in life you can't undo. She's had these stretches of time where she was clean and looked like she was finally getting her shit together. She had a good job and a flat and that freedom. She had a little bit of money she was talking to Dad a lot less. Then it all goes up in smoke."

"What freedom did she have, John?"

"Sorry?"

"You mentioned that she had freedom and I was just wondering what you meant."

"The freedom that comes with being the baby of the family, I suppose. I don't know."

"I want you to be aware of something. It's about the language that you use. Clara = Saintly. Harry = Hellish. You do the same when you're speaking about yourself or Mary or your father. It's an incredibly binary speech pattern."

"Alright, so I'm slightly prone to hyperbole."

"No, it's not hyperbole, it's black and white thinking. It's actually something called splitting. People are either good or bad. Actions are either pure or sullied. Heaven or hell, devil or angel. The words we choose affect how we see the world, how we move in it and how we color it. What about gray?"

"What about it?"

"Is there a place for gray in this world?"
"I spent years in the army, my most recent job was hunting criminals in the heart of London and when I wasn't doing that I was telling people they either had cancer or they didn't. I don't do gray." He replied derisively.

"Why are you upset right now, John?" Hanah asked calmly.

He hadn't realized he was upset but when he looked down at his hands his right was curled into a fist while his left was flexing intermittently.

"I'm not upset." He lied.

"Your world view is being threatened and you're angry and I want you to explain why."

"Because gray allows for mistakes and deception and it leaves you unprepared!"

"So?" She asked calmly.

John looked at her in disbelief.

"W-what do you mean, so?"

"I mean, is a world full of mistakes and occasional deception and unpreparedness so unbearable?"

"Yes!"

"People are either good or evil? Situations are either win or lose. There is no in-between?"

He stood up from his chair suddenly unable to remain sitting. He felt agitated, cornered and lost as to where she was going with this line of questioning. The room was large enough that he started to pace a bit.

"What are you getting at?" He asked her.

"Your father, was he evil?"

"Yes." he said with an emphatic head nod. "Yes, he was evil. he was an evil man. I have no problem saying that."

"So if he was evil and your mother was already dead, what was she?"

John paused and thought back. Thought about the few pictures he'd seen of her. Tried to remember her face. He'd been five or so when she'd died. Everything he ever heard about her was good. Everything he ever thought about her as well.

"I always thought...I thought that if she were alive, she'd take us away from there. She'd gather us up in the middle of the night and spirit us away to somewhere safe." He inhaled sharply. "Yeah, she was good. She was very good."

"Ok, so with her gone that left who to be the adult? You, right? You were left to care for your sister and yourself."

"Yeah, alright, fine. I was the grownup."

"So you had to be a contrast to him, the exact opposite. Which meant you had to be good, saintly and good and make no mistakes. But what happened when you did make a mistake, John? What happened when you were 10 or 11 or 12 or a teenager or a young man and you made a mistake,
"What did you become?"

It was like the wind suddenly got knocked out of him. Pacing no longer felt good, in fact, it felt as though his legs might give out. He slowly walked back to his chair and sat down.

"Like him, I became like him. Faulty. Deeply, deeply faulty and flawed. Useless. Alright, so you're saying one of my problems is that I put these unrealistic expectations on people. I put them in a narrow box and punish them when they don't behave?"

"That is one of my points. But John, these sessions aren't just about how you treat the people in your life it's also about how you treat you. From a very early and impressionable age, you adopted the philosophy that only by making no mistakes could you be a good boy, a good man. That to do anything other than that made you faulty, broken and yes, even evil. I've been doing all the talking today, I want you to say something. Argue with me or confirm it but say something to this."

He went silent for a bit...thinking.

His sister, just a few months back had accused him of being a black and white thinker. Sherlock telling him a long time ago "Don't make people into heroes, John. Heroes don't exist, and if they did, I wouldn't be one of them." His own thoughts as he'd searched for his mate in the crack den among the "scum of the earth". He was that scum now.

"I think you're right." He said and swallowed hard. His throat had suddenly gone dry and he reached for his water again, drinking it down. "I...want people to be easily categorized. I like yes or no. I like an uncomplicated life." He stopped and started again, looking her directly in the eye, he had been looking at the palms of his hands. "You don't believe that."

"I haven't said a word. This is your time to talk. This is all your time to talk."

"You think I only want to want an uncomplicated life."

"Is it important to you that I believe you, John?"

"What kind of question is that? Who wouldn't find that important? Yes, it's important that you believe me but I'm not going to turn somersaults in here to make it so!"

"Alright, I'm sorry for upsetting you." She replied.

John shook his head dismissively.

"That's ok."

She was silent again before speaking.

"But it's not ok with you, is it?. Do you often tell people you've forgiven them when you haven't?"

"What?" He asked a bit dumbfounded.

"I believe you heard the question. People often say what to buy time when they don't want to discuss something uncomfortable."

"It's a societal nicety. It doesn't mean that you actually forgive someone it means for the sake of things you're letting it pass."

"A societal nicety. Interesting." She said and scribbled something down on her notepad. She'd been writing a lot during this session he noticed. "Ok, there's something I want you to read. I've marked
the chapters and I want you to really think about how it might have relevance to your life, alright?"

He nodded but didn't speak.

She handed him a book and he read the title aloud.


"Before you go, John, I need you to hear something. I understand it may be difficult to accept or even digest at this point. But that's what therapy is, digesting the hard bits."

"Ok, what is it?" He asked itching to leave.

"Do you understand that you were abused as a child?"

Before she'd even finished the sentence he'd started shaking his head.

"No, Harry was abused. She was a kid, she was helpless, she was hurt."

"So were you. Your father physically and mentally abused you and emotionally terrorized you. Now we're going to keep moving forward during these sessions but that is our starting point and we will always circle around to it."

He knew she wanted a reply but John didn't currently have it in him. He felt emotionally wrung and so terribly tired. He felt like he was coming down with something.

The best he could manage was to tuck the book under his arm, mutter a hasty "See you tomorrow." and hurry from the room.
Chapter 21

The Ego's Defense and the Defense of Ego

Chapter 10: Splitting: The defense mechanism of those who feel defenseless

It cannot be overstated that for the depressive the act of splitting is first and foremost a survival technique. The compartmentalizing of individuals and their actions are common in childhood, however, as the child ages, they typically develop the skills required to view the complexities of people and situations.

Children that suffer emotional, physical or sexual abuse are often unable to cultivate this skill which in turn skews how they view the world around them. Depression, which is common in such situations, if left untreated, rarely, if ever, resolves on its own. This can lead to the initialization of the defense mechanisms of Idealization and Devaluation. From the subject's point of view, people are either exceptionally good and worthy of praise or exceptionally terrible and worthy of ridicule. Splitting and idealization/devaluation allows for no middle ground.

The depressive adult is more likely to suffer from splitting and its associated symptoms. Splitting can affect all aspects of the individual's life including work relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships.

In addition, the damage to self-esteem often manifests in an emotional amplifying cycle. Thoughts that focus strictly on an all-or-nothing, black or white, good or evil philosophy repeat endlessly through an individual's head. This is especially dangerous when dealing with an unmedicated person on one not under a doctor's supervision and can lead to eating disorders, substance abuse, violence, self-destructive behavior as well as suicidal thoughts or actions.

When an adult struggling with splitting is faced with the dichotomy of individuals in their lives or a dichotomy within, they can suffer severe emotional distress sometimes resulting in a mental break, either minor or severe. Cognitive behavioral therapy including an exploration of the roots of the splitting as well as an understanding and merging of the divided sense of the external and internal is essential to both growth and healing.
"Mind if I sit down, mate?" James asked pulling John out of his musings unexpectedly. He'd been lost in thought at a table in the commissary, a forgotten book in one hand and an apple before him. He'd taken exactly one bite out of the fruit, apparently, though he didn't remember doing so. He couldn't even taste it on his tongue. The white flesh had already turned a dark caramel brown giving him a little insight into how long he'd been distracted. It was hard to eat here. He never really had an appetite. But at least he'd lost quite a bit of that beer, wine and takeaway weight he'd put on.

"Yeah, sure, have a seat," John said motioning to the empty chair across from him. Some people in the commissary paired up or ate in small groups but there were others like him who ate alone. He didn't really like being there it felt exposed, forced. It felt like primary school. The only reason he was there was because they didn't allow people to take their meals to their rooms.

"I'm not disturbing you am I?" James asked nodding towards the book in his hand.

"No, no, just um...therapy homework. I'm sure you know how it is. Honestly, I'd read through what she assigned me, I was reading ahead."

"Oh yeah? How was it?" James said cracking open a soda and guzzling it like water. That was another funny thing about being here, it was as if everyone's addiction saw that a place had opened up and they all moved one step up. Like the Mad Hatters tea party; fresh cup, move down! Sugar and cigarettes barreled to the front of the line and few patients were ever without a candy bar, cig or both.

John thought for a second. He wanted to be glib, a part of him was screaming to dismiss the question and the text with something clever and light. But he couldn't.

"I haven't made up my mind yet." He said neutrally.

James nodded and opened a bag of chips from his tray.

"So what are you in for?" The other man asked.

"Alcoholism...maybe some other things. Maybe depression."

"Why just maybe?"

"Because honestly, I'm not comfortable with the label. Not sure it fits. What about you?" John pushed the book aside, raised the apple to his mouth then put it down without a bite.

"Heroin addict. Not so comfortable with that label either but the shite shoe fits. Why do they think you're depressed?"

"Probably because I tried to kill myself a few days before winding up here." John said and for the first time in a while, he laughed at the absurdity of it all.

"That would likely do it." James said chuckling along.

"Yeah, it might do."
"You know we worked together before." The man said pointing a finger in his direction.

"We did?" John asked, trying to place the man by his features.

"Well, indirectly. Foiled terrorist attack in 2014. I was working at Box 500."

John's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Ah, you're one of them. My therapist said not everyone here was a reality star or celebrity gone wrong. I was starting to think she was kidding. You're with MI5?"

"I am...or I was. I hope to be again, if I can sort my shit, you know. Yeah, we were told we were coordinating with a "private office". I learned later that private office was Sherlock Holmes and John Watson.

"Well, nice to meet you finally," John said.

"Likewise. Does working as a private dick make you rich? Is that how you can afford this place?"

"No, um...let's just say I have a generous benefactor."

"Yeah, me too, it's Her Majesty's government. It's not the first time I've been in a rehab but it's the first time I've been in one as nice as this. I may come home clean and completely ruined. Bed sheets back at my house are going to feel like sand paper." He laughed before sobering. "If I still have a home. Her indoors...she's not too happy about all this as you can imagine."

"Yeah, I get you."

"You got a home to go back to?"

John thought for a minute about the house sitting empty but full of ghosts, milling about waiting for his return. Or had his absence exorcised them. He didn't even know if he wanted to go back there when he got out of here. And then he realizes...he was thinking about the future. A future. His future. It filled him with a certain portent of dread and he pushed the apple further away.

"I guess, yeah. Don't know that that's what I want, though."

"They say that you know?" James nodded. "Rehab can be this great storm that sweeps everything away."

"What do you mean?" John asked curiously.

"People come here sometimes not just to save their life but to save a relationship. But then they get here and realize they don't want to save the relationship after all. Or the person they left at home starts to get along just fine without them. So many people come in here with the wrong idea, assuming this place will mend their lives back together if they just fix themselves. Rehab can rend you, it can tear you and your life to pieces. Then you have to figure out how to put something new together with the scraps they hand you on your way out."

John inhaled sharply, a lot of James words were thoughts he himself had had.

"Well, there's a testimonial for their next brochure, eh?" He finally said and James laughed again.

"Oh God, sorry, I say things like this in group and people look at me in horror. Especially the new people. I made that girl from Britains Got Talent cry, I swear I didn't mean to!"
"But you're right this place...this place is a benevolent meat grinder. All of you just gets eviscerated and masticated and packed back together into some sort of meat patty. You get your certificate and you get called human again, but what are you? What are we going to be when this is over. What if by dredging the bottom of who we are, we come out worse?"

"Yeah...we should absolutely do the PR for this fine establishment," James said before slapping the table with the palms of his hand impatiently. "Christ, I'm not really even hungry. Have you been outside this place?"

"What you mean out there?" John asked motioning towards the huge windows that lined the wall of the dining area. They were frosted over in some places and fogged over in others. A few panes, however, remained clear.

"Yeah, out there," James laughed. "Just out in the snow. There are some chairs and stuff. It's cold but a coat will do."

"Why should we go outside?" John asked a bit perplexed.

"Cause it's pretty," James replied simply and with a smile.

The answer came from him so easily and was so compelling John to agree to join him. They parted only briefly to retrieve their coats. James also wanted to grab a pack of cigarettes and they stepped outside. It was a cold night, but every night here was cold. Sometimes it looked soft, (and John could only say "looked" because he hadn't been outdoors since his arrival) because snow was falling and everything was still. Sometimes it looked harsh because a light snow had turned into a blizzard strong enough to make the electricity above him momentarily dim.

Tonight it was clear. No snow, no clouds, biting cold but no wind. Still, the first breath he took out of doors seems to head straight to his lungs, irritating them with it's cleanliness. He coughed once or twice and so did James.

"We're the picture of health." the other man joked.

The sat down on the stairs to the entry way, lights shining behind them but not nearly enough to battle against the night sky above. And what a sky it was, more rich and full than he had seen since he'd left Afghanistan. London had too much light pollution, you could stare upwards until the end of time and never catch so much as a twinkle. But here, everything was bright and glimmering with splotches of color he imagined were nebulae, a dotting of planets and a dome of stars.

It was indeed pretty.

"That's Orion's Belt." James said pointing up. "That's about the only constellation I know."

"Yeah me too." John said gazing upwards.

"It's the only one that actually kinda looks like what it's meant to look like. I mean, you look in a book and it'll say; The ancients believed this grouping of stars clearly depicted a bear riding a lorry through a garden while shooting a bow and arrow. Orion is the only one that makes sense."

Orion is the only one that makes sense, John thought but didn't say. Instead, he asked;

"You ever missed a session? Therapy, I mean."

"Not so far. You?"
"Yeah, I skipped out on it today. I couldn't face it, or face her."

"You going tomorrow?"

"I guess. It's not like I got anything accomplished today."

John thought back to sitting in his room, watching the clock wondering what she was thinking as it became clear it wasn't just late but that he wasn't going to show. It was cowardly, nothing but pure cowardice and he wouldn't just show up tomorrow he would apologize. But the idea of dealing with another onslaught of questions and it did feel like an onslaught made him nauseous. There were no time-outs in her office. It was always just like jumping on a speeding train and holding on until it was over. He hated feeling that way or at least he hated it when he hadn't initiated it. The splitting thing...had really unnerved him with how close it had hit and he'd found himself reading the chapter before and the one after just trying to find something to disprove what he'd read. Something so unlike him he could point to it emphatically and say "See! *That's* not me!" So far, page after page after page had yielded nothing of the sort.

"How did you try to do it?"

"Hmm?"

"Kill yourself, how did you try to do it? If you don't mind my asking."

John thought about it. It embarrassed him but he didn't mind.

"I was going to use pills and a lot of alcohol. I thought that would do the trick."

"You were *going* to?" James asked curiously as he took a long drag from his cigarette.

"I had a seizure." John snapped his fingers near his head for emphasis. "Light's out. Didn't get a chance. Woke up in the hospital and was *persuaded* to come here. What about you? How did you end up in this lovely prison?"

"Bacterial endocarditis. I think I'm saying that right. Everybody around me had been fighting the flu, right? So I didn't think too much of it when I started to feel sick. Chills, fever, muscle aches, you know. But it kept going on and on. I started losing weight and getting these shooting pains in my abdomen. Finally one night it was bad enough that I had to go to hospital. It all came out then, of course. What I'd been doing...again. It was bad. They had to do heart surgery, replace some of my fucked up valves."

James unzipped his jacket and pulled up his shirt to show John angry and fresh looking scars.

"It hurt but not as bad as how fucking disappointed in me she looked. This is kind of my last chance with her, I think. It might be over anyways, who knows. I'll feel her out when she comes for a family day. You married?"

John swallowed.

"I was. She um...she died about a year ago."

"I'm sorry, mate."

John nodded and almost didn't say anything. This had gotten so real so quick but he forced himself to reply with concern and empathy he really did feel.
"I'm sorry too. I mean for you, what you've been through, I'm sorry."

"Thanks." James leaned back against the stairs and stretched out. "How much would you kill for a drink right now?"

John laughed.

"Fuck me...right now? I'd walk over those fucking mountains like I was a Von Trapp if there was proof of a pub on the other side. Climb every fucking mountain. Ford every fucking stream. How much would kill for a hit?"

"I'd walk over these mountains carrying you on my back, mate."

They shared a laugh which echoed out into the night.

"You think anyone has ever tried to escape from here?" John asked.

"Mhmm, I heard all about it at lunch the other day. The bird said that she knew someone who had been here way back when it first opened. It was much harsher back then. And this guy had been accused of smuggling in contraband and then trying to escape. So when the birds friend arrived for his stay they brought out the contraband bloke as an example, completely starkers and just threw him into the snow. She said that her friend said he died right there. I honestly don't know what to fucking believe. I mean, I have pretty exceptional clearance, right, and I had no idea a place like this existed. Who knows, crazier things have happened."

John was silent for a moment absorbing all James had said before he spoke.

"That's from Star Trek." He said after a moment.

James paused and looked at him.

"Fuck off, it is not." He laughed.

"No it is, Kirk and Spock and McCoy get sent to Rura Penthe, the penal colony...God help me I remember the name. I took my sister to see that movie a thousand years ago. I think it's VI? Yeah. Star Trek VI."

"Wait, that's the one with David Bowie's wife!" He exclaimed as he started to remember.

"Right. Iman. But she's a...a shape-shifter."

"Right! Well, fuck me, they're keeping us here with a fucking movie myth." James took another drag. "But you're wrong. Spock's not there. He's back on the ship with that bird from Sex And The City."

This suddenly struck them both as riotously funny and again they both laughed, loudly, happily. It was ridiculous. This was all so fucking ridiculous.

"So, we're not going to escape, we're not going to scale the mountains and we're also not going to pretend we're in a Klingon penal colony. What do we do?" John asked.

James shrugged before pointing his second cigarette of the evening skyward.

"I guess...we just keep looking up." He said.

John agreed. It was as good a plan as any.
"Yeah, keep looking up. Cause it's pretty."

"Yeah, cause it's pretty." James agreed.

And it was.
Chapter 23

Day 21

He arrived at Hanah’s office the next day not just punctual but early.

He knocked, she said come in, he entered and stood awkwardly in the middle of the floor.

John cleared his throat, looked down and cleared it again.

“The first thing I want to say is I owe you an apology. I’m sorry for not showing up yesterday. You’ve been nothing but kind to me, hard but kind and you don’t deserve to be ignored like that.”

She smiled and nodded.

“Apology accepted, now have a seat.”

He didn’t know what he’d been expecting. Maybe to be scolded which he felt he deserved for his rudeness. But that didn’t seem as though it was forthcoming.

“I understand needing a break, John. This is an artificial environment in many ways. Not the least of which includes daily therapy sessions. That likely wouldn’t occur in the outside world. Now, I know it’s a harsh schedule and I completely understand that you might have to take a day or two off. I require two things; the first being, you tell me you’re not going show. You can knock on my door, you can slip a note under it or onto my desk. That’s all acceptable. OK?”

“Yeah, yes, ok sounds fair.”

“Good. The second condition is that in our next session we discuss why you couldn’t show up for the one you missed. We don’t gloss over it and pretend it didn’t happen. You’ve glossed over enough in your life. Deal?”

“Deal.” He said with a nod.

“Ok then, so let’s talk about what you couldn’t face yesterday.”

He took a deep breath. “There were parts of this book that made a lot of sense whether I wanted it to or not. And I really didn’t want it to.”

“You read more than just what I assigned you?”

“I always do.”

“I was counting on it. I figured your curiosity wouldn’t let you stop. So how far did you get?”

“I finished it. The whole thing.”

Her eyebrows darted up in surprise.

“Oh. Well, tell me what you thought.”

He tried to gather his thoughts on the topic but it wasn't easy. There was so much emotion swirling about but all he wanted to do was speak plainly. “I don’t like it. I don’t like that it’s me but it is. I guess I have this tendency to see things in black and white; people, situations, myself. The book
talked about how it was a survival mechanism. I guess that’s true. I mean, growing up there wasn’t a lot of room or space for nuance. I categorize people as friend or foe and that’s sort of it.”

“I don’t like it. I don’t like that it’s me but it is. I guess I have this tendency to see things in black and white; people, situations, myself. The book talked about how it was a survival mechanism. I guess that’s true too. I mean, growing up there wasn’t a lot of room or space for nuance. I categorize people as friend or foe and that’s sort of it.”

“When was the last time you found yourself doing that?”

“I do it all the time. I did it with you when we first met. I did it with James, this other bloke who’s in here. We had dinner together yesterday then went out and looked up at the stars.”

“That sounds nice.” She smiled and put her pen to her lips thoughtfully.

“Yeah, yeah it was.”

“So James is a friend?”

“I mean...yeah, in a basic sort of way.”

“How fast would you say you make that decision?”

“Pretty quick...I guess.”

“I’d like to talk about your friendships, have you had many close friends over your life?”

John cleared his throat and looked at his cuticles. Reading the book she’d given him had brought all sorts of memories to the surface. In certain ways, he was seeing his life from the outside. A lonely little boy turning into a lonely teenager and then young man until...

“Oh...no, not many. I always had acquaintances, mates, a group I hung around with even if it was just on the periphery. But I had responsibilities, I had to get home to my sister, eventually, I had a part-time job. Friendships, like any relationship, require commitment. I’ve never been very good at commitment.”

“What about adult friendships?”

“Well...for the longest time my best friend was a bloke named Duck. That was his nickname, that was what we called him. I didn’t find out why until later.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “I assume you’ve seen my CV?”

“I’ve seen all your forms, John.”

“Then I assume you’ve noticed the little gap?”

“Of course. Between secondary school and university. What were you doing during that time?”

“I was with Duck. He and I didn’t go to the same school we actually met at a park near my home. He was hanging out with a group of other blokes, clearly holding court. They were all older than me but it was one of those rare times where I had this powerful urge to just belong. By this time my sister was older and spending less time at home so I didn’t have to be there immediately. I think I was just skulking about, hoping to be noticed. God knows what they were talking about, I can’t remember, but I guess I made some smart comment, clever enough to get Duck’s attention and he asked me my name.”
John chuckled at the memory.

“I thought about making up something flashy, something dangerous but I froze in the moment and just said “John.” That wasn’t deemed too offensive and in that way that things sometimes happen smoothly when you’re 17 I was accepted.”

“Was this the first time you felt accepted?”

God, was it? That was a depressing little thought. “Yeah, I guess so. It was certainly the first time I had the means and space to put anything into a friendship.”

“Yeah, I guess so. It was certainly the first time I had the means and space to put anything into a friendship.”

“Did it change how you felt about yourself now that you had friends?”

“I guess it made me feel more normal. We weren’t a gang or anything but it did help once people started associating me with that group. I think maybe I felt safe? Even though I didn’t really think of myself as having been unsafe before.”

“You haven’t named any of the other young men you spent time with, only Duck.”

“Well, everything was only about Duck. He was the leader of it all. Tall, ridiculous head of red hair, handsome. He’d say the most inappropriate things. Could get any bird, had everyone’s respect. Not a bad student either, from what I heard, but he liked to keep that under wraps. He and I were the same age but he just seemed older, wiser, more together. I think I needed that, wanted it, maybe. I think maybe I was tired of being the older brother. I wanted someone else to do it for a change.”

“Do you think it’s your nature to want to take care of people, John?”

“Yes, but I think it’s also my nature to want to stop. I think I get easily frustrated which makes me a shit caretaker in the end.”

“That’s a bit harsh.”

John shrugged and continued.

“When we finished up secondary school I didn’t know what I wanted to do. University just didn’t have a pull, you know? I couldn’t imagine spending even more time trapped in some building with some professor droning on. That had been the majority of my life up to that point. I guess that’s the majority of everyone’s life at that point. Anyway, my sister had officially moved out so it was just me and my father. I didn’t think we could live there without killing each other and I didn’t want to find out. I knew Duck didn’t plan on uni either so I asked him if he might want to get a flat. He loved the idea. I was elated. We took what little money we had and got a shitty place together that day. I left home that night. Left my dad a note that said “It’s all yours now.” and that was that.”

“Tell me how that felt?”

John thought back to that moment. What little possessions he had and cared about shoved in one bag, his clothes in another. Grabbing the nearest sheet of paper which happened to be a receipt from a fast food place and scrawling the words on it. The rush of excitement which felt amazing, the little twinges of fear which, oddly, felt pretty good too. Effectively severing his relationship with the man he had long ago grown to hate.

“It felt wonderful. One of the best moment of my life. I got a job at a newspaper, doing little write-
ups of local events under the name Ormond Sacker. I chose the most ridiculous pen name I could imagine. I don’t know why. I even stopped introducing myself as John after a while. Went by just J. or that brief period where I thought Hamish might sound cool. No idea what I was thinking there.”

“Is the newspaper how you supported yourself?”

“Yes and no. I stayed there for a long while but I was antsy and so was Duck. We both wound up getting jobs at a pub as security slash bouncers. Throwing out drunks, subduing people until the cops arrived. Using a bit of force when necessary.”

“That’s a far cry from a newspaper columnist.”

“Yeah, it was, I was leading a double life I suppose.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“I loved every moment of it.” He said releasing a ragged breath. He never allowed himself to think of these times. Something about the pleasure he took from these memories disquieted him. “There was a repetition to this period that I liked. The owner of the pub was into some criminal stuff, pretty low level when we started. One night he calls Duck and me into his office and asks if we’d like to pick up some spare work on the side. Just running errands, he says. I was wary but Duck was all for it. God knows I would have followed him anywhere. So the next thing you know, well, we’re kind of enforcers for this guy, collecting cash, ferrying packages the contents of which I really didn’t want to know between people. All of a sudden we’re seeing more money than we’ve ever seen before in our lives. We move out of our flat into a better one on a better side of town.”

“What appealed to you about this life? It seems like a rather drastic turn.”

“Everything appealed to me. The money, the violence. I found that the more I hit things, the more I hurt people, the more I wanted to. I justified it by saying they deserved it.”

He rubbed his temples before continuing.

“I hate thinking of myself back then. I hate who I was but I enjoyed it at the time. I enjoyed it so much and I’d be lying to say otherwise. I was such an outlet. I went to veteran parades or dog shows during the day so I could do a write-up of it in the afternoon and submit it. I’d show up at the pub, work the door. The pub would close around 2 or 3 and I’d spent the following hour shaking down people for the money they owed our boss. Start the next day all over again, sometimes with a black eye or a sprained finger...”

“What was it an outlet for?”

“Anger, so much anger. If I think back to it I can feel it. I think...sometimes I wanted them to fight back. I wanted them to not have the money they owed. I wanted to have a chance to...to...”

“To what, John?”

“You must think I’m an awful person. Jesus, the things I’m telling you.”

“I’m not here to judge your morality. But if you want to discuss how you’re feeling about these memories we can.”

“I don’t like them. I don’t like the person that I was but at the time I didn’t have any regrets. Good money, fast living. Just adrenaline pumping 24/7 and yet I felt the calmest I have in my entire life. All that worry, all that nervousness, and anxiety, it was gone.”
“So how or why did it end?”

“Duck was working a bit more than I was. Taking some jobs he wouldn’t let me come on. I didn’t get why and at first, I was offended and then pretty hurt. It took me some time to understand he was trying to protect me. He was in a lot deeper than I was.

One night we went out, as usual. Just a delivery, like any other night. Cash, by the way, to the best of my knowledge I never transported drugs. Things just went wrong. Wrong people, wrong night. I’m still not sure if it was an ambush or something. Things escalated, Duck and I wind up face down in an alley with guns pressed into the back of our skulls.

Up until that point, I’d never been so scared. I’d never thought about how badly all this could go. I’d never considered myself much of a religious person but I was lying there, praying “Please God, let me live. Please God, let me live.” One of them hit me with the butt of the gun and I was out. I came to and Duck was lying beside me in his own blood. I thought he was dead but a little shove and he groaned. I picked him up and half dragged, half carried him home. I tried to get him to go to the hospital but he was too scared.

I still don’t know the whole story but I have my theories. Duck wouldn’t tell, still trying to protect me I suppose. Anyway, I let our boss know what had happened. He was livid but more so at the blokes who had attacked us and the breach of some underworld etiquette. He asked to talk to Duck. Their conversation was mostly just him saying “Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah. Uh-huh.”

Again, he just wouldn’t tell me. All he did say was that we shouldn’t go to work for a few days. That was fine. I figured whatever was going on would be fixed by people much higher up than us. I kept my head down and took care of Duck. He was pretty beat up, he’d clearly gotten the worst of it and by the third day, I only had a lingering headache while he was black and blue. A week came and went and he hadn’t left our flat. Then two weeks. I stuck close. I was so worried about him and he’d gone absolutely tight lipped.

Finally, one day he sent me to the store, actually a couple of stores, but I was happy for the errand. I was happy he was back to wanting things instead of being so listless. And when I got back he was gone.”

“How did you feel?” She asked with a frown.

“Scarpered. Cupboard cleaned out, clothes gone, suitcase gone, everything. The only thing he left was a note, a gun and a pile of money.”

“What did the note say.”

“He apologized for leaving but said none of this was going to blow over for him. He needed to get away and he wanted me safe. He left the money for rent and the gun for protection. He told me he loved me and that he was sorry.”

“How did you feel?”

“Is there something beyond devastated? That would qualify. Logically I knew he wouldn’t take such a drastic step unless he needed to but...but I was so hurt. I mean, maybe I could have helped. Maybe we could have left together, I thought. I loved him. He was the only family I really had left and he just abandoned me. At least that’s how I felt at the time.”

“And now?”

John chuckled mirthlessly.
“I know I should be over it but it still fucking hurts. Stupid really.”

“Did you ever hear from him again?”

“Yeah, he wrote me a letter some years later. It made its way to where I was staying when I was finishing up my time at Barts. He told me he had joined the army, that that was his only chance to be safe and get away. That he had done as many tours as they let him but overall he felt safer now. Might even consider coming home soon. He inquired about my health, how I was doing. He was surprised I’d jumped into med school and he hoped maybe I’d write him back if I wasn’t too angry. He apologized again and again.

I hadn’t cried in years before I got that letter, probably since he left but I took it back home and just wept in my bedroom. I was so relieved to hear from him, so happy he wasn’t dead. So fucking happy.

He signed it, Love, “Duck”. Now better know as Major James Sholto. You never asked but Sholto means “Teal Duck” in Gaelic. I couldn’t very well go around asking people to call me Teal, could I?”
"How would you describe your relationship with Duck?"

John settled back into the chair thinking of how to answer. What did that even mean? How do you describe a friendship?

"Exciting, dedicated, intense, I suppose."

"Why intense?"

"There wasn't room or time for anyone or anything else. But don't get me wrong, I liked it that way. We did everything together. No matter what else was going on neither of us would be able to even sleep if the other one wasn't safely back home in the flat. He became my family, my best mate, I...I loved him dearly. I'd have done just about anything for him." John said before adding, "He made me happy."

"Were you speaking to your sister at this time?"

"No, there was already a rift by then. She did a 180 with regard to our father...so um...we mutually decided it was best to maintain distance."

"Were you actively dating at the time?"

"I was sleeping around a little. So was Duck. No one steady, I didn't really have time. I also didn't really want the hassle."

"So he was your deepest relationship at that time. Your only relationship."

John shifted in his seat and eyed her.

"Just ask." He said tapping his fingers on the arm of the chair.

"I'm sorry?"

"I know what you're getting at, so just ask."

"What am I getting at?"

"You want to know if I fancied him. If we were sleeping together."

"Were you?"

"No, we weren't." He said testily.

"Why do you think I was going to ask that?"

"Because it's what people always asked about Sherlock. They always assumed we were at it."

"Does that bother you? That people might perceive you as bisexual?"

He paused at bisexual. He didn't recall people ever using that term with regards to him before.
"They...they always thought I was gay and no it doesn't bother me, but can't a bloke have a best mate anymore?"

"Of course."

"I wasn't sleeping with Duck and I wasn't sleeping with Sherlock."

"I understand."

"Good."

"Ok, good then. So, back to my question, he was your deepest relationship at the time."

"Deepest relationship ever up until then." John admitted. "I followed him around like a puppy. We argued and fought like siblings but usually made up by the end of the night. I made us sound like gangsters but the truth is we were just as likely to pick up some beer from the store, a pizza and rent a movie and just stay in. Women came and went but...no one mattered like him. I told him things about my father, my life, things I hoped for and wished for and wanted and he did the same. Whatever he meant to me I think I meant the same to him. It was...intimate. I hadn't been able to connect with a woman that way. I probably didn't try all that hard but I figured why bother when I had Duck."

"Did you think it would be difficult to divide your attention?"

"Of course, you..you can't split yourself like that."

"What happens?"

"You end up hurting people."

"What happened to you after Duck left?"

John thought back to the absolute hopelessness that had washed over him that day and continued for...well, he didn't know for how long. All he did know was that it was pervasive, heavy. He remembered it weighed down his limbs like ballast. When he came home and found the note and the money he'd just sort of collapsed onto their couch. He'd sat there, staring. The tears, as always, had come later. That was something to think about. It seemed the tears always came later, like he couldn’t ever cry in the moment.

"For awhile...nothing. I...felt directionless. I didn't have an appetite, I couldn't sleep. A part of me hoped he might still show up, change his mind, take me with him. I discreetly asked around about him but nobody had heard anything. I think I was the only person he'd bothered to offer a goodbye to. That mattered I guess."

Hanah had been scribbling furiously in her notebook as she did now all the time. She had a way of writing without looking at the page the same way that people typed without looking at the keys. Unlike Ella, she always kept the book at a tilt so he had no hope of reading what she'd written.

"When did those feelings stop?"

He knew the normal answer was, say a few weeks or after a handful of months. But that wasn't the truth. The clouds hadn't really parted until Duck had written and he'd written back. They'd gotten lighter when he enlisted and fully lifted when he had the distinct pleasure of serving under Major James Sholto.

"It took awhile."
"Ok," She said leaning forward. "Time for a little self-analysis. Do you think it would be going too far to say that you've dealt with depression for a lot longer than you've been willing to acknowledge."

"I-" He started shaking his head no as he scratched his beard. That was an added bonus to having a beard, it gave him something to do with his hands. "It's such a large, all-encompassing word. I think depression I think of someone who isn't able to get out of bed or function. I'll admit I was depressed, severely depressed after Mary died but..." He trailed off.

"You're right, John it is an all encompassing word and within that word is room for a lot of variations. People who are suffering from depression can manifest it in multiple forms, listlessness, irritation, violence, making sudden rash decisions. For instance, when did you choose to go to medical school?"

"About a month after he left. But you're not trying to say being a doctor was a bad decision are you?"

"I never said bad."

She had him there.

"You're right. You didn't. Sorry. Black and white thinking, good and bad."

"Exactly. Not bad, just rash, sudden."

"Ok...ok I guess I was depressed. I stopped working at the pub after awhile, it just didn't seem right after Duck left. I kept up at the newspaper because I could do that in my sleep. He left me enough money to keep the rent up for a while but I hated staying there without him. It was too quiet, too lonely. I just spent my nights in our...my flat drinking alone."

"Looking back would you say that you had a problem with alcohol then?"

"I don't know if I'm qualified to judge. In hindsight, it doesn't seem like too much. I was 19 and I'd just been dumped by my best friend."

"Fair enough. We don't have to relitigate that particular experience. But you did turn to alcohol in a time of crisis, in a time where you felt lost and that's noteworthy. So, med school?"

"Yeah, yes, spur of the moment decision. I'd always liked anatomy, done well in maths and science and one day I just said, I'm going to be a doctor."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. I applied, was accepted, got out of our lease and that was that. The next session was just starting up and I was in."

"If you had to step back and analyze that behavior what would you say?"

He hated analyzing his behavior but he was getting better at the exercise. "I guess...it was impulsive, spur of the moment. It was certainly ill conceived. I wasn't prepared to just jump back into that life again. Go from enforcer to student but I did a pretty good imitation of it. I got good grades and 5 years later I was a GP."

"Did you just gloss over 5 years?" She asked with a laugh, a laugh he returned.
"Nothing much happened, classes, tests."

"What about a social life, friends, dating?"

"I had a mate, Mike, we were pretty close."

"But not as close as you and Duck."

John shook his head.

"I didn't want to go..." He trailed off.

"You didn't want to go through that again?"

He nodded.

"I kept my distance. Purposefully. Once bitten and all. I had a steady girlfriend for about 3 years. We talked about marriage every now and then but we were young and it was mostly talk. In the end we wanted different things."

"What did she want?"

"The house, the kids, the dream."

"And what did you want?"

He scratched an itch on his arm as he thought back to Lucy with her dark hair and that crooked smile that he loved to make appear. Clever Lucy, kind Lucy, sexy Lucy. Lucy who played the piano and was good at darts but great at football because she'd been captain of her team at her all-girls school. Lucy who liked to sleep with her head on his chest. Lucy who loved to split a full English breakfast with him but would tease him and laughingly fight him off with her fork if he tried for a bite of her trifle or sticky toffee pudding. Lucy who liked to sleep late and shower in the morning and whose favorite position was reverse cowgirl. Lucy who insisted on commandeering the left side of the bed. Lucy who tried and tried and tried until one day she didn't want to try anymore because he wasn't worth it. And he agreed. Lucy who he heard had gotten her kids and her husband and her house without him, as it should be.

"Not what she did. It didn't take long for me to realize I wouldn't be able to stand the monotony of being a GP. Emergency medicine started to appeal to me so I shifted my focus, kept training, got a few jobs, Bachelors of Surgery, trained in Trauma and Orthopedics. When it was time to reapply again for a new position, that was when I got the letter from Duck. I felt like I'd been moving in slow motion. I was good at what I did. I was a good doctor...I hope I still am. But still I was so unsatisfied, so unhappy. I thought the letter came at the best possible time. A saw a chance to enlist in the Army's surgical training program and I took it."

"How were you feeling before you enlisted?"

"Stuck, stagnant, trapped, bored."

John went silent as his fingertips worried the bridge of his nose.

He could feel Hanah's frown without seeing it.

"What is it, John?"

"Things that I thought were the opposite of being depressed that book tells me aren't. The
impatience, the anger...I always thought of depression as something that slowed you down to a near halt. The way I was in the last few days and months before I came here. But if that's not true, if I've been dealing with this my entire life then...my concern is you're going to prescribe a lot of pills. That for me to live anything close to a normal life I'm going to have to spend it drugged up."

Hanah was silent and he finally looked up at her to see what she wasn't saying. He was surprised to find her smiling.

"What on earth is there to smile about?" He snapped.

"That is the first time in all our sessions that you've expressed any sort of thoughts or desires or worries for what might happen when you leave this place. That's a big deal, John."

He exhaled sharply through his nose, confused and angered by this sudden unbidden flow of emotion.

But she just nodded, knowing that some part of him wanted to go on and giving him space to do so if he could manage.

"I feel like...this is an artificial environment. The grief, that just overwhelming sadness is still here." He said touching his chest and stifling a completely unexpected sob. His eyes started to burn but he went on. "But it's less. I can admit that. It is a bit less. I still cry myself to sleep nearly every night but...it's different than out there. I just don't want to get it into my head that the things I'm trying to do in here will translate out there. Do you know what I mean?"

"They'll translate if you work them. And you're right, there is a bit of the artificial to this place. This level of help and support and the fact that you can't just pop out to a store for a drink, that matters. But I also don't think you're giving yourself enough credit. Did it ever occur to you that you're thinking more clearly now than you have in over a year? That some of the effects of all that alcohol have receded? That's not artificial, that's hard and true science. That matters. And that's what you did for you. That's sobriety and you can take that with you. I swear to you, even if nothing else here is portable, that is. When you first got here you were posed with a question about whether or not you'd attempt suicide again if given a chance and you said yes. Do you still feel that way?"

"I don't want to be trapped by my answer." he said practically gritting his teeth to avoid sobbing again.

"Your answer is not legally or morally binding. But it is important especially for a man like you who does tend to shift towards the negative. It is important to acknowledge the successes just as much as you acknowledge your past failures."

"I don't see what you see or feel what you feel. If I think about the future, a future it's too much. I feel like the breadth of it all will swallow me whole."

Hanah passed him the box of tissues, a sympathetic look on her face. He knew if he accepted the box he wouldn't be able to stop the tears, all bets would be off.

He took the box from her hand with a quiet, "Thank you."

"All the literature says 'One day at a time'. And it has become such a cliche but it's still true. You're not who you were yesterday and you can't make any promises for who you'll be tomorrow. I'm only speaking to the John Watson that exists today, the one sitting in front of me. He's the only one you have to answer for. Do you want to live?"

He inhaled deeply and brought the balled up tissue to his eyes."I don't know that I definitely want to
live...I just...I don't think I want to die." He paused and covered his face for a moment before speaking from behind his hands "Yes, yes, today, this day, right now, I want to live. ...I don't know about tomorrow"

"John, no one does."
Dear John,

It likely doesn't mean very much coming from me but, I'm proud of you. 20+ days in rehab is no small feat and I'm just glad that you decided to do this.

You've always been kind of cheap with you. Do you know what I mean? There's a lot of things you don't seem to think you're worth, you never have. Of course, that's just my opinion, what do I know.

I sat down to write this and I realized I don't know what to say about our recent past or our present or even our future. So, maybe I'll go back to our very distant past. I just wanted to say I keep thinking back to this one memory. This time when we were both pretty small. We were supposed to go to the carnival in town but it was raining something terrible so we were forced to stay home. I didn't even know what a carnival was but from the other kids at school it sounded incredible and I was heartbroken we were going to miss it.

Dad wasn't home, it was just you and me and while I whined and looked out of the window and tried to wish the rain away you vanished for a bit. After awhile you called me into the bedroom. You had one of our big white sheets stretched over two chairs and you told me to sit down because the show was about to start. You turned off the lights and got behind the sheet and switched on a lamp. And then you put on a show for just me, a little shadow play. You'd cut out some animal shapes with scraps of paper and the cardboard from Dad's cases of beer and you used some of my paper dolls too. You made a little circus for me, for us. You sang songs and you made the elephants jump and the lions and tigers roll and roar, you made my dolls walk a shoestring tightrope.

When the show was over I clapped and you came out from behind the sheet and said we weren't finished yet. The clowns hadn't arrived. I asked you who were the clowns and you said we were. You pulled out a little bag of flour you'd nicked from the kitchen and a tube of lipstick that I assume you'd gotten from Mum's old jewelry box. You used water to turn the flour into a paste and you "painted" your face and mine and then gave us both big red smiles and cheeks. We walked about the house making faces and, well, clowning around.

Then you said it was time for a ride but I needed a ticket. I said I didn't have one but you told me to check in my pocket. You'd slipped in a ticket that you'd made out of construction paper. "Admit One For Unlimited Rides".

You had all these pillows lining the wall at the bottom of the stairs and the laundry basket at the top. It's funny how neither of us thought this was a bad idea at the time! We both piled in and you sent it careening down the stairs and we crashed into the pillows laughing and then we reset the soft barrier so we could do it again. I lost track of how many times that happened but by the end of it all after we'd cleaned up and you helped me wash the flour off my face I knew that what we'd had was better than any carnival on earth. If I didn't tell you so then I'm telling you now.

See, it wasn't all bad, you and me.

I miss what we might have been, Johnny.

I love you and I'm cheering you on.

I remember when I was in treatment how sometimes people meant well, sending stuff from home, but it often had the opposite effect of making things worse, adding undue pressure. So, all I'll say is
that Rosie is doing remarkably well. She's happy, she's saying her first words and she actually took
two steps on her own the other day before crashing down onto her bottom. I've enclosed some
pictures of her for you but they're in a separate envelope. You don't have to open them right now.
They'll keep. But they're there for you.

I'm not supposed to say anything but you've got really good friends.

Take care of yourself, John and job well done.

You can write back if you like. That would be nice.

Love,

Harry
Dear John,

Hello, love! Oh, I miss you, but I’m pleased as punch you’re safe and sound. I’ve sent along a few more comforts from home and if you have any requests for treats of toiletries or sundries you just let me know.

I don’t want to overwhelm you so I won’t keep you long. Just know that we all miss you and send our best and look forward to you coming home.

I’m sure Sherlock does too.

Hugs and kisses, dear!

Mrs. Hudson
Chapter 27

Every day he went to the head office and got his mobile.

Every day he took it with him to dinner, or back to his room and kept it until he turned it in before going to bed.

He never called anyone or texted.

There was no one to call. Or rather no one he dared call. He wanted to phone or text Sherlock but had no idea what his friend...ex-friend would say. Rather, he had an idea what he’d say and the last thing he wanted to do was hear it.

John had no one but himself to blame.

That didn’t stop him from stalking him online and this particular evening he sat on the edge of his bed scrolling the internet.

His website hadn’t been updated in ages except for one small thing.

In the bottom right-hand corner was the message “If you want my help, write to me at 221B Baker Street, London - SH”

The six words he added not long after they met, “or contact me through John's blog.” were gone.

It hurt more than he thought possible. But the truth was, he didn’t even know when he’d removed it.

John went to his own site to find the blog was no longer available. That wasn’t exactly a surprise as he’d let the domain fees lapse. But still...

He then went to Sherlock’s twitter account. He'd avoided his Twitter specifically, fearing what he might find there. But tonight curiosity got the better of him.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** I would like to stress that this account and DM's are to be used to contact me only when you have a potential case.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** In no way, shape or form is this meant to be a personal account.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** When you clutter my private messages and inbox with inane babble you prevent those who need help from getting through.

*Replying to @ConsultingDetective221B*

**Maisy Daisy @DeerStalker101** You used to tweet personal things
Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B I used to do a lot of things.

Those tweets were from the 20th of December.

Mar @MissyMissyMystery @ConsultingDetective221B Are you at hospital right now?

Replying to @MissyMissyMystery

Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B Why would you ask this?

Replying to @ConsultingDetective221B

Mar @MissyMissyMystery I know someone who knows someone. They said they could have sworn they brought John in in an ambulance & you were there.

Replying to @ConsultingDetective221B

Mar @MissyMissyMystery Are you not going to answer?

Replying to @ConsultingDetective221B

Mar @MissyMissyMystery It’s all over Reddit now. TMZ is next. They say he tried to off himself.

Those from early in the morning on the 25th. The next was from the 27th.

Kel @ShadyGatorade @ConsultingDetective221B Sherlock, we can’t imagine what you’re going through. But please, can you tell us, is John alright? Will he live?

Replying to @ShadyGatorade

Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B No. Yes.

Replying to @ConsultingDetective221B

Kel @ShadyGatorade Jesus, Sherlock what does that mean????????
He hadn’t responded to the last reply and in fact, his response to the first had been deleted. But someone has screen capped it and included it in the thread.

Some hours later a single tweet.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** Am I to find your crying/sad face emoji’s accompanied by reaction gifs from your favorite TV shows comforting? I don't. Please refrain.

Finally, a group of tweets sent on the same day John’s press release became public.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** This will be the one and only statement I make regarding the incident that occurred over Christmas holiday.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** As someone who has struggled privately and quite publically with addiction, I understand how it can wreak havoc on a life.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** I am also aware that the act of seeking help is a monumental decision and one of the bravest choices an individual can make.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** John Watson, my friend, remains the bravest man I have ever met.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** If you think well of me, think well of him. If you think well of him and couldn’t give a toss about me, so much the better.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** No matter what you may believe about him or his actions which have been salaciously reported in the press-

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** -I ask you to wish him well. As I do and always shall.

**Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B** He has had far too many dark days. I hope that all
those that lie before him are bright and brighter still.

That was all.

After a 2015 filled with sporadic tweeting, the account had effectively gone silent. There was nothing for the new year.

John got up from bed, left his room and dropped the phone off at the desk.

He returned to his room, turned off the light and laid awake until morning, unable to sleep, to dream or to cry.
Staring in the mirror, the incongruity of what he saw distressed him. Because of the weight loss, his
clothes fit him oddly, hanging limply off his body. His mustache and beard were scraggly and
unkempt, he was pale, or at least paler than normal. He had circles and bags and circles beneath his
eyes to spare. On top of that, his hair was too long. Well, at least the hair issues were the one thing he
could fix. He hated his reflection. Hated staring at himself for long at all so he didn't.

He'd made plans to meet James for dinner on the steps of the facility. It was one of the few things
he'd grown to consistently enjoy about this place. The peace and quiet and the company.

Therapy today had been unnerving. They'd moved on to talk about the war and thoughts he'd
wanted to put behind him. But then, what else was new? What didn't he want to put behind him?

"You think you're ready for combat. They train you and they tell you you're ready because they have
to, that's part of the job.

But nothing readies you for the sights or the sounds or the smells. The artillery fire is loud but it's not
loud enough to drown out the screams of the guy next to you who was hit. Or your own screams.
And the smoke is thick but it's not thick enough to block out seeing men and women reduced to
hamburger meat because of one misstep on a roadside bomb.

Mycroft said to me once...when I first met him, that I miss it. You're not haunted by the war, Dr.
Watson. You miss it. To some extent he was right. I missed the adrenaline, the surety of what I was
doing in the moment because in the moment there were only two options; survive or don't. I like that.
But I don't miss the carnage.

When I was discharged I was referred specifically to a bedsit that housed mostly other post-war
headcases like me. Thick walls. That was a selling point and do you know why? So the screams of
the other residents wouldn't bother you and so your screams wouldn't bother them. It was like a
mental hospital where we were all allowed to come and go as we pleased.

I would wake up and I swear I could smell that stink of burning flesh. I could hear my men shouting.
Duck shouting.

I could feel the bullet rip through me, again and again, and again."

"What did you experience when you were shot. What feelings did you...do you relive?"

"Not the fear. Not so much anymore. Just the same emotion I felt at the time. Ah...here it is. That's
what it feels like."

"What do you mean?"

"A part of me feels like I've been dodging a bullet, that bullet that finally got me my entire life."

They'd talked a bit more after that, about that bullet before circling round again.

"What did you have with you in the bedsit?"

"My laptop, some clothes, my service pistol."
"You were supposed to surrender that upon discharge." She said gesturing at him with her pen.

"Going to report me?" He said trying for a light reply and missing.

"Why did you have the gun, John?"

"A reminder of my time in-"

"John?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you have the gun?"

"Because I was terrified. And I can't even tell you why. I can't even give it a name. I just know I would wake up frightened out of my mind and I'd go to the drawer where I kept it and I'd sit up and hold it sometimes until the sun came up. I wanted the sun to come up but I hated seeing it rise. I hated being awake to see it rise because it was just another failure."

Hanah nodded.

"Is there anything else? What were you going to do with the gun?"

He closed his eyes and saw the circled date on the calendar in his mind. Circled in blue.

"I'd picked a date. An arbitrary date, it didn't mean anything. 8th of August 2010."

"For what purpose?"

"I think...had I not met Mike and subsequently Sherlock when I did..." He'd stopped and restarted. "I had decided that that was enough time for things to either get better or not. Enough therapy, enough civilian life-"

John had stopped again.

"Not long after I got to the bedsit There'd been a commotion, maybe about three or four nights in. The walls were thick but not bloody impenetrable. I opened my door and rushed out into the hall and I saw these people trying to break down a door. Or debating on whether to break down a door. They thought there was a resident inside who needed help. Someone had heard something heavy fall over. When they'd called for him, knocked for him there'd been no response. That was all I needed to know, I shouldered my way in and there he was. I only found out his name later. Nick." He cleared his throat. "Nick decided he'd had enough and hanged himself with a bedsheet. I ordered someone to call 999 and confirmed that they were in fact calling. I know they tell you to do that in an emergency because if you don't designate someone everybody will assume everyone else is doing it. I had another bloke come over and lift Nick up to give me some slack while I climbed on a chair, the chair the neighbor had heard fall over...that was the heavy thing... and got him down. I started CPR but...well, as I'm sure you know sometimes that's just something you do for show. For the people watching so it looks like you're doing something. And also so maybe some day in a crisis they'll actually do something that may save someone's life because they recall seeing you doing it. But I knew this kid was...gone. Long gone. He was dead when I brought him down.

That was basically that. I spoke to the EMT's when they arrived, I spoke to the police and maybe two weeks later someone else was living in what used to be Nick's flat with brand new hinges on their door. But I kept thinking about Nick and seeing his face. The longer I thought about it the more I envied him.
8th of August, 2010 I was going to put my pistol in my mouth and kill myself. I met Sherlock on the 5th.

I've never told anyone that in my life. Not anyone."

That afternoon Reggie began the meeting as he always did.

"I'd like to welcome Amy to our little group. Amy just passed the milestone of 24 hours sober. I'm going to give her her 24-hour coin and you all should give her a big hand."

Amy offered the group a tired, grateful and shy smile as she accepted the coin. She was about to return to her seat when Reggie stopped her.

"Just one second, we also have for you the Surrender coin. This is something everybody gets once they make a commitment to surrender their lives to working through their addiction and toward their sobriety. We've all been where you are now, Amy, and we're happy you're here. Again, let's give her a hand."

John hadn't given much credence to the "Surrender" chip. In fact, he'd hated it. Hated the name. The implication. In one of the first handful of meetings he'd actually said; "Trust me, mate, I was trying to surrender to it all but the seizure got in the way." That had gone over as well as one might imagine.

Once he'd gotten back to his room that night he'd set the coin on his bureau, untouched and ignored.

But that didn't mean he didn't clap for Amy. That didn't mean he didn't clap for all of them. When he'd first arrived he, admittedly, tuned out. He didn't want to be there, couldn't relate to some of their stories of getting munted at Coachella. But...when he peeled away their tales, when he allowed himself to look deeper at their pain, finally looking past his own, he saw they weren't as different as he had thought. To long-story-short it, he realized he'd been being an arse and upon realizing it he changed his behavior. He still hadn't shared, didn't quite know how to do so. It was difficult enough with Hanah in the beginning. Now he felt semi-at ease with her. And though he knew the people here fairly well now, he still mostly kept his mouth shut.

Amy sat and Reggie continued.

"Anyone with 30 days?" He asked.

John scratched at his beard and looked about the room.

"John? That's you." Reggie said and John snapped his head towards him in surprise. "30 days, mate. Come on up get your chip."

For a minute he just sat there even as the applause started. 30 days. Had it been 30 days? How had he lost track? How was he not keeping track? Was that a bad thing?

Finally, he got to his feet and made his way to the front of the room. Reggie shook his hand and then placed a small coin in his open palm. It was red and about the size of a poker chip. Emblazoned on it were the words "Unity. Service. Recovery. To Thine Ownself Be True". He smiled at it, it felt like nothing in his hand, practically weightless. He hadn't thought this would matter much to him, couldn't see how. It was just a trinket. But that didn't stop the surprising surge of tentative pride he felt.
"Would you like to say something?" Reggie asked.

It was on the tip of his tongue to say, No. But then he looked at Amy. He had no idea who she was or what her story might be. She wasn't a tv or movie star as best he could tell. Maybe she was somebody's adult kid, some wealthy heiress or maybe she was Secret Service. He had no idea. But in that moment it didn't matter because she was looking at him with wonder. There were plenty of people in the room who had far more days than he did but she hadn't heard that and didn't even know their names. But the way she was looking at him told John that this, seeing somebody who'd kicked it for even a month was a big deal. Right now she likely couldn't imagine another 24 hours much less a month.

For some strange reason, he felt he owed it to this stranger, Amy, to speak.

"Um, yeah, sure." He cleared his throat and gazed at them all. "30 days...well shit." He began and it immediately garnered a laugh. "I didn't expect this. It's been hard to keep my head above water so I admit I hadn't even been attempting to count days. When I came here I didn't have much interest in getting better...in going on. But lately, with the help of my therapy, I've decided that living might not be such a raw deal after all. And if I'm going to live, then I'm going to live sober. I want to live sober. I...umm, also realize I may not have been the most receptive person in group." There were a few more scattered chuckles of agreement. "I apologize for that and from here on out I will try to do better." He looked at the coin in his hand before clenching a fist around it. "Much to my surprise, this matters to me. Ok, that's all. Thanks for listening."

He hurried to his seat amid the applause and was greeted with a few slaps on the back and murmurs of 'Congratulations, John.'.

He was glad the flush that had risen to his cheeks was mostly camouflaged by his facial hair.

John kept the chip securely in his hand, running his fingers over the raised print for the duration of the meeting.

Reggie dismissed but not before making an announcement.

"For those of you who may not know Family Day is two weeks from Saturday. It lasts from Friday evening until Sunday evening. We encourage you to let your friends and family know they're welcome here to see how you're doing, to visit, to catch up and to just tell you they love you and for you to do the same. We'll have activities, special group meetings, sessions, one-on-ones. We can obviously accommodate them here at The Location, we have plenty of rooms but if they'd prefer to stay at a hotel they'll need to make their own arrangements. Ok, have a good night everyone."

"Is your wife coming for family day?" John asked later that night, sprawled on the steps tray resting mostly untouched on his lap.

"Funny you should ask that, we just spoke before I came out here. Yeah, she agreed to come." James replied.

He seemed happy and John smiled.

"That's great."

"What about you?"

"Don't really have any family."
"Not your sister and your kid?"

"I...I can't deal with Harry right now and I don't want Rosie to see me. I mean certainly not like this. I might just lie low that weekend. Keep to myself."

"Well, forgive me if this is intrusive. But what about Sherlock? He's your friend."

"I'm not really sure if he is anymore. We kind of had a falling out. What I did, what I was about to do really hurt him. He found me. He got me to the hospital. And then I think he uh...ended things between us. Ended the friendship."

"But you don't know for sure?" James said before taking a bite out of a cinnamon roll.

"No, but he hasn't contacted me and apparently I've been here 30 days." He said holding up the chip.

"Oh, mate! You got 30 days, well done!" James said enthusiastically.

"Yeah, thanks. But, my point still stands. He hasn't written or called or texted or anything. It doesn't take a genius..." He trailed off and laughed mirthlessly. "It doesn't take a Sherlock Holmes to get that message."

"Look, I don't go in for everything they spew at us in here. I'm no holy roller. That said there's a lot of common sense advice about honesty and shit that does make sense. So I figure if you don't know you should fucking ask."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah, just like that. Ask him. Oi, Sherlock, are we mates or not? Like that."

John laughed, genuinely this time. It was a simple enough plan, but perhaps deceptively simple. Maybe he could just ask. Maybe he should. Maybe he should finally be brave enough to just get a final answer even if it was one he didn't want to hear. Then again, maybe not.

All that was what he was thinking but not what he said.

"Mate, you know anyone with clippers?"

"We've really switched gears, haven't we. Like beard clippers? I was wondering when you were going to take care of that baobab tree on your face. I've got one in my room. You can borrow it."

"Thanks, James."

20 minutes after they finished dinner John walked James to his room and his friend handed him the tool. 10 minutes after that he was standing in his own bathroom in front of the mirror gingerly trimming his beard.

It didn't look too bad once he was done and he turned the clippers off and gazed at his reflection.

For a while, he just stared, dwelling on everything in front of him that he didn't like. Everything he wanted to erase.

With a flick of his thumb, he turned the clippers back on, adjusted the guard setting and brought it to his head.

The first pass was the hardest and for a second as the clump of hair fell soundlessly into the sink he panicked.
But there was no going back now and after two or three more passes he realized he didn't want to.

When it was over he ran his hand over his freshly buzzed scalp. The hair that remained, as he hadn't wanted to go completely bald, felt fuzzy, soft. He could feel the surrounding air hitting his scalp. This was going to take getting used to but as he smiled at his reflection he realized he didn't regret it.

John cleaned the clippers of stray hairs and disposed of the tufts and strands and clumps of hair that had collected in the sink.

5 minutes after that he was back outside James door, knocking to return the borrowed item.

"Thanks, mate." He said handing it back and grinning at his friends shocked expression.

"Jesus, John what did you do!?

"I just thought it was time for a change. You know how people shave their heads when they cross the equator? It's like a fresh start, a new beginning. I guess I just wanted something like that. 30 days and I wanted to start again. Thanks for the clippers, James. I'll see you tomorrow."

John walked away leaving the other man slightly agog.

Somehow that only solidified to him that he'd done the right thing.

Author's Note: Edit July/2017 ** I am aware that Sherlock and John apparently met around January 2010. However, when I wrote this a few months back I was going by air dates. I may change it in the future but I haven't decided if it's terribly relevant yet.
Chapter 29

Day 31

Hanah shutter blinked when she saw him as she took in the rather drastic haircut. He didn't mind, he'd been getting that response all day. It still didn't make him regret the decision.

"You think it was a bad idea." He said and it wasn't a question or a challenge, just a statement.

"I think it was impulsive. But I don't want you to think I think impulsive is a bad word. It isn't. Impulsivity can be wonderful. Do you think it was a bad idea?"

He thought for a second.

"No."

"What was behind it?"

"My lumpy skull." He joked. "No, I know what you mean. Um, what was behind it was the fact that I wanted a change. That I didn't like what I was seeing in the mirror and I thought taking a stab at making my reflection look different was worth a shot. It's only hair, I mean, it'll grow back."

"Fair enough. First off, congratulations on your 30 days. That's quite a milestone, John. I want to tell you this isn't just a triumph of not drinking. I have seen you grow over the past month as an individual and I hope you have as well."

"I'm trying to." He said.

"Good. Well, I think 30 days is a great point at which to do a rundown. We're a third of the way there and I'd like to hear your thoughts about what you've learned so far."

He cleared his throat and shifted in an effort to get comfortable in his chair.

"I..guess I've learned that things I thought were dead and buried with my father, especially my feelings about him aren't. I learned that I'm predictable. Maybe not just in my patterns but in the people I choose as well. Huh..." He paused. "That one is just occurring to me now. Um...what else, I suppose I'd say my ideas of depression missed the mark. I think I've been trying to deal with it or not dealing with it since I was a teenager. Maybe it's colored a lot of my life."

"That's great, it really is and I agree with you on all those points. I'd just like to set some goals for the next 30 days. As we get close to the events that caused your most recent depressive episode you may feel a great deal of that anger return, you might even feel as though you're losing ground, but that's natural. We're going to work through that together. Now what we're going to focus on is a method called active coping. We're going to directly confront certain things specifically your PTSD, from your time in Afghanistan and Kandahar, Sherlock's suicide and return as well as the death of your wife. As we confront them I'm going to give you coping mechanisms to work through the negative emotions that arise. This isn't going to be easy but I'm very pleased with your progress. Now, how do you feel about what's ahead?"

"I feel dread." He said honestly.

"That's a normal, level headed response. I'd be suspicious if you said anything otherwise. Now, I'm assuming you know about Family Day."
"Yeah, Reggie mentioned it in group. If this place is so secluded how exactly are people supposed to arrive?"

"The same way you did. A car will take them to the airport and they'll board a specially chartered flight and once they land be taken the rest of the way by driver. Who were you thinking of asking?"

He looked at her and gave a shake of his head.

"No one."

"Not Harry? Children are allowed, and of course spouses. She could bring Rosie and Clara."

"I really don't...I just don't." He concluded and she nodded.

"What about Sherlock, then?"

He made a vague almost helpless gesture with his hand before speaking.

"We didn't end things on very good terms. I doubt he'd want to see me."

"But you don't know for sure. It's my understanding that it was his persuasion of Mycroft that got you in here."

"Yeah, that's true. But he made it pretty clear..."

"John you spent two days essentially in a coma and he spent months agonizing over you. I don't think anything is exactly clear. In fact, I imagine things are quite nebulous. It's important for people in treatment to have these grounding experiences with the people in their lives. When this is over do you want Sherlock in your life?"

His throat felt dry and hot and painful, his skin felt somehow too tight and distractingly itchy.

"Yes, I do but-"

"Then invite him. This isn't just about seeing your best friend this is about moving forward and embracing what's true and what isn't, no matter how painful. I can't guarantee he'll accept and I can't force you, but I can strongly advise that you invite him, all right?"

"I'll think it over." He was absolutely unwilling to commit to this, not with James and not with Hanah. Right now it was far too big a promise to make.

"Ok, good enough for the moment. Now, day 31, let's get started."
Chapter 30

Fuck.

Fucking shit.

Goddamn it.

You selfish, stupid prick, goddamn you.

He berated himself for taking so long to have even thought this.

Self-obsessed arsehole.

One of the first times he'd been able to sleep in weeks had resulted in nightmares of a very specific sort.

Sherlock's tweets had come back to him.

And then the absence of his tweets had come back to him.

He had all but vanished from online. The last time John had casually combed the papers there had been no hint of a crime foiled by the great detective. Not a word, not a peep.

In his dream, his mate...former mate, wasn't calling for help because Sherlock wouldn't call for help. He wasn't even there, technically.

John was back in the forest, searing red hot but for once he felt he had a purpose. Instead of wandering aimlessly he was looking for something, for someone. It had to be Sherlock. He shouted out his name. It echoed all around him, bouncing off the thick dead trees which were thicker than normal. Not just their trunks but their numbers as well. There were so many he could barely move. But he tried and he kept trying and he kept calling out his name over and over and over again but he never got a reply.

One second he was asleep and the next he was bolt upright in bed. Then his feet were on the ground and he was out the door walking, running down the hall towards the nurse's station and the main office.

He knocked on the thin glass window separating him from whoever was on duty.

The nurse opened the door with a frown and looked him up and down.

"Is there something wrong, John?" She asked.

"No, yes, yes! Actually, yes there is something wrong. May I please have my phone? I need to place a call."

She smiled obligingly but he could tell immediately she had no intent of relenting.

"You know the rules. Phones are to be returned at eight every evening and cannot be checked out again until the next day."

"Yeah, I know that but this is an emergency. I just have to make a very short call. Just a minute please."
"I'm afraid the answer is no, John." She said adding an edge to her voice. "Now, please return to your room."

"You're not listening to me." He said raising his voice. "This is urgent, this could be a matter of life and death. I need to make a call."

"John, if you don't return to your room on your own, this moment, I'm going to have to have Frank take you there."

She gestured to her right and Frank, the mountain of a bloke who'd been there when he'd checked in appeared with a less than cheerful look on his face.

John felt his frustration, his rage flare and threaten to lash out at both of them. Just like when he first arrived he felt caged, trapped.

"Fine." He said shortly. "Ok, fine. No need for Frank or anyone else. I'll go back to my room."

He turned on his heel, and furious and defeated he returned to his room. Childishly, and he knew it was childish, he slammed the door and sat on the edge of his bed.

He knew it was ridiculous. What was he even on about? He needed to call Sherlock because he'd had a bad dream? Because he had a hunch, like a psychic that something was wrong.

This isn't a hunch, John. This is your guilt coming to bear. Are you really surprised? After what you did to him? The only person left who cared about you?

It all sounded so stupid now, rolling about in his head.

Still...still he couldn't shake the need to talk to him, message him, just make sure he was ok.

Just to make sure.

The next day crawled by at slower than a snail's pace. He was distracted, short-tempered and unable to focus throughout all the days various activities.

"I heard there was an incident yesterday evening," Hanah said.

He knew it would come up and in the light of day the action, though not the urgency behind it, embarrassed him.

"It was daft, alright, I admit that. I was stupid but I...it sounds so idiotic...I had a bad dream."

"What sort of dream?"

"I'm not ready to...talk about it now. But um...I decided I needed to reach Sherlock."

"Alright."

"But I was likely out of line. I'll apologize this evening. It was impulsive, I know. I couldn't help myself."

"It's still upsetting you, you're full of anxious energy right now."

"I'm not going to feel better about it until I know he's alright."
"Why wouldn't he be, John?"

The funny thing was once he got the phone in his hands it paralyzed him. For a good ten minutes, he'd just sat on his bed staring at the device like he didn't trust it.

He went to Sherlock's Twitter first. Nothing. His blog. Nothing there as well. As best as he could tell he had no new online activity. He scanned newspapers, searched for Lestrade's name and words like "murder" and "unsolved" and phrases like "no leads" and "seek the public's help". But there was nothing. Nothing at all.

He was avoiding actually doing it which was stupid considering the state he'd been in last night.

John went to his contacts and then clicked on Sherlock's messages to view their thread. It was enormous. He wasn't even sure if he'd ever deleted anything.

Most of it, in the beginning, had been business-related of course. Short, staccato messages which always ended in SH.

SH. As if he wouldn't know who they were from. It was so delightfully pretentious. So very public school. So Sherlock.

John felt a warmth bloom in his chest as he thought about him.

One of their last exchanges had been so average. Sherlock was both trying to pick his brain as well as spark some interest. He'd taken a picture with his phone and sent it. It was of a letter opened found at a crime scene.

But John hadn't been interested in the letter opened instead he'd focused on what he could see behind the object Sherlock held in his hand.

**Is that my chair?**

*Of course, it's your chair.*

**Why is my chair still there?**

**You'd have a lot more space if you binned it.**

**Space for stalking about and playing you violin**

*It awaits your return.*

**Sherlock, I'm not coming back.**

*Then it's no concern of yours how I decorate, is it?*

That was all. That was the last message between them. Quite honestly John didn't even recall the conversation. It must have happened when he was drunk.

Screwing up his courage he started to type.

He started with a simple "Hi, Sherlock." But immediately erased it. It was well known to him that Sherlock ignored and deleted any messages that began with "Hi".

"Sherlock, it's me."
No, that wouldn't do either. There was something about it that sounded too...presumptuous. Far too much assuming that his ex-friend had nothing better to do that hang around his phone and wait for a message that might never come.

"Sherlock, are you free?"

No, that sounded like he was in Tesco wondering if he needed anything. Too casual.

"Are you there, Sherlock? I was hoping we could talk. If you have the time. I hope you're ok."

Alright. Good enough. Send.

There it was. He'd sent it off for better or worse...and of course instantly regretted it.

Less than a minute later he added.

"It's John, by the way. In case you don't have my number anymore."

It was hard to write that sentence but it was better than receiving the spirit-crushing reply of "Who is this?"

So, with those two texts sent he sat and he waited and he waited and he waited.

He tried to distract himself, he tried to read, he tried to write a bit in his journal. But every few minutes he found himself looking at his phone, checking to make sure the ringer was turned on as well as the buzzing alert. He checked it and double checked and checked it again.

It was all in working order.

He tried to tell himself this didn't mean anything, after all, he could be busy or on a case.

But did he even take cases anymore? Maybe he was trying to figure out what to say. Maybe he was ignoring the message altogether.

Maybe this wouldn't have a cinematic ending.

Time passed as it always did and this time the hours went by far faster than they had earlier.

Soon it was time to return his device and dejectedly he made his way back to the front office and dully handed the mobile over.

"I want to apologize for last night. I was out of line. I'm sorry if I was threatening or in any way made you feel unsafe."

The nurse smiled at him genuinely.

"I understand. Apology accepted. Have a pleasant night, John."

"And you." He said before listlessly returning back to his room.

Some things, he figured, you have to realize and re-realize, accept and re-accept. Letting go of his best friend was going to prove difficult, he imagined. There might be a great deal more banging his head against the wall before he got the message that this was really over.

Tonight had brought him one step closer.
But John quickly followed the morose notion up with, bugger that. Fuck his whinging.

The urgency had not been so he mend fences with Sherlock it had been to see if he was alright. And he still didn't have an answer to that.

And with no answer, his mind and his heart were too unsettled to let him sleep.
Chapter 31

Day 38

He'd stalled out.

And he imagined to anyone on the outside it looked like a Goddamned cliche. Hit's 30 days, gets his chip - which he still treasured, by the way - and immediately decides to rest on his laurels.

Anyone looking in would probably think if given half the chance he'd have vanished to a pub by now only repeating three words "Keep 'em coming."

Ok, so they were right about the last part but not the rest.

He would be drinking if he could, in fact, the need for it was like pain now. He hadn't expected it to come back so strong and that was probably naive, but still. His body ached and his brain felt near on fire for it and just a few mouthfuls of something, anything searing, and bracing, anything that hurt going down before coiling tight then radiating from his stomach outward would be blissful. Oh God, just a taste to make all this go away if only for a minute. Then maybe he could sleep, maybe he could eat, maybe he could look at the world through anything but tired, bleary, red, angry anxious eyes.

But despite all that, that wasn't why he stalled.

It was partially because of Sherlock, though he didn't blame him. Sherlock was a very large cog in an only slightly larger machine. A machine that was breaking down as he broke down.

He was sitting in Hanah's office with a death grip on the arms of the chair, precisely the kind of grip she was trying to get him to loosen. He stopped and wiped sweat from his brow he didn't even know was there.

"Why are we doing this?" He asked.

They were in the middle of exposure therapy, something that had left him more anxious and upset than he'd been in a good long time.

She would ask him to talk about a particularly traumatizing event in Afghanistan. He would have to put himself there, all over again. Feel it, hear it, smell it. She talked him through it, confronting his thoughts, his fears, helping him rearrange his ideas and always, always reminding him that where he was right now was safe. No matter how real things seemed when he closed his eyes, no matter how fast his pulse, it was over and it was time to put these awful memories to bed once and for all.

He was struggling with the whole scenario and had been since they'd begun a few days prior. It felt combative, it felt like poking the hornet's nest and his mind and body rebelled against summoning these spirits so vividly.

"It's part of cognitive behavioral therapy," She said replying to his question. "We need to, emotionally speaking, return you to the moments of trauma to, in effect, let you know you're beyond them."

"That's not what I mean. I mean why are we doing this, any of this? The therapy, the rehab, any of it. What am I getting clean for?"

"You're angry."
"Yes, I'm fucking angry!" He shouted. He hadn't expected it to come out as a shout but Hanah looked unphased.

"Good, it's some of the first real emotion I've seen from you in days. And I've been waiting for this question."

"Well, I hope you can answer it because I am just about ready to walk out of this place."

"I can, but you may not like it."

"Go ahead."

"First, let me tell you something which is the exact opposite of what they'll tell on the outside. I'm going run down a list of who you are not getting clean for. You are not getting clean for your daughter, you are not getting clean for your sober sister, you are not getting clean to keep some sort of promise to your dead wife, you are not getting clean because you have disgraced Duck or the army, you are not getting clean for your father who didn't and you are not getting clean for Sherlock Holmes." Hanah had put down her notebook and was looking at him critically. "You have to understand this, John and you have to understand it now because otherwise, we're going forward under a false belief. A lot of marriages don't survive rehab and do you know why? Because the process of recovering from addiction is just as selfish as being addicted. Because after months or years of the addict focusing on what they want, they now have to address and focus on what they need. That leaves very little space for anyone or anything else. People come here and they speak about saving a relationship or their family. John, right now you are not capable of saving anyone or anything, not even yourself."

"Well, that's pretty fucking hopeless." He said his voice catching.

"No, it's not. It just seems that way on the surface. I think sometimes rehab is presented as 'Get your life back.' For some people, that's comforting and desirable. For others, it's a nightmare. Let me make something clear, John. If you want to live but were unhappy with the life you were living you don't have to take that one back."

He pulled back to gaze at her in confusion. "I...I don't know what you mean."

Hanah sighed.

"I don't like to get ahead of myself but I think this needs to be said. If you're serious about giving up custody of your daughter which is a hasty decision initiated at the height of your addiction that I strongly advise against but if you're serious, you can. If you want to sell your home, you can. If you want to leave London, leave everything you know and start again somewhere else, healthy and clean and sober and hopeful, you can do that. It is absolutely in your power to make that happen once you leave here."

"It's not that simple."

"Why not? What's keeping you in London."

He faltered and scoffed, albeit nervously. He hated, hated being pressed.

"Alright, let me phrase it a different way. A way that you're not going to like. Why do you feel responsible for taking care of Sherlock Holmes?"

"What?" He asked and was immediately uncomfortable by the way his voice raised up at the end. "What on earth are you on about?"
"I need to make sure he's alright. Those were your words to me a few days back. Why do you have to do this? He has a very attentive brother. He has parents who are still vital and living."

"Mycroft can't...he's not the one for the job. And his parents..."

"But you are?" She countered quickly.

"Yes." he replied just as quickly.

"Why?"

"Because ...because he's emotional and erratic! Because he needs someone to look after him! Because I owe him! Because I broke his HEART!"

"Is that all it is? Obligation?"

"No there's..." He stopped, his mouth clamping tightly shut.

"There's what? You need to stop stifling yourself, John."

"Because I disappear down a bottle and he vanishes down a syringe and if I drove him to that...if I hurt my best friend, I will never forgive myself. I will...be crushed under the weight of that."

He leaned forward in his chair covering his face with his hand's visions of the worst of it all flashing through his head. Sherlock high. Sherlock lying on the floor in a filthy crack house. Sherlock coming down. Sherlock in pain. Sherlock pleading for a fix. Sherlock throwing himself into his work because it was the only thing that could make him ok. Sherlock throwing himself into their friendship because it was the only thing that could make him smile.

"He's a war zone," John said quietly, most of it muffled behind his hands.

"I'm sorry?"

"He's a war zone. He's constantly being torn apart, from inside and out. He just looks calm but he's not...he's not ok. He was getting there, getting better and then I had to go..."

"Do you think he might say the same thing about you?"

John pulled his hands away, shocked at the notion of comparing the two of them.

"He doesn't think that about me. He doesn't know any of the things I've told you. He's brilliant but he's a terrible liar, a ridiculous snoop and he can't keep quiet about something that's stoked his curiosity to save his life. If he had any inkling of this he would have said something."

"Have you been able to reach him?"

"I texted him a week ago...never got a reply."

"What does that mean to you?"

"On good days it means maybe his mobile is out of service. Maybe he's genuinely too busy,"

"And on bad days?"

"On bad days I assumed he looked at it and scoffed. I figure maybe he's glad to have extricated himself from this mess. On really bad days I imagine he's lying somewhere dead after one last binge,
one last speedball."

"Do you think that would be your fault?"

"I know it would."

Hanah sighed and leaned back.

"I don't know if you're able to hear this just yet, John, but you are not responsible for the choices and decisions of Sherlock. I would tell him the same thing about you if he were sitting there."

"I will never agree with you on that. Love is responsibility. If it's not, then what are we even doing this for?"

"That seems to be the refrain of this session. What are we doing this for?"

"And I still don't think I have a satisfactory answer."

"Alright, I'm not sure you're in the right mindset for us to continue today so I'm going to let you go, but give you an assignment. I want you to write a letter that you're going to post to Sherlock."

"Saying what?" The idea was both daunting and terrifying.

"Everything. Everything you want to say. Everything you wanted to text him and ask him. If he's a reasonable man who cares or cared as deeply for you as I can see you do for him then he'll respond. He wanted you here and convinced his brother to make it happen. That speaks to me of a man who will answer what you ask and, if your relationship is over, be willing to give you closure so you can move on."

John had to keep his lips pressed tightly together to keep the wobble to his chin at a minimum. He had cried more in this past year than he thought possible. He wondered sometimes if it would ever stop.

Quickly he stood up from his chair and gave a quick nod to her; "I'll see you tomorrow."

He skipped group.

He skipped dinner.

He only emerged from his room to grab and then return his mobile. His message-less mobile.

For the rest of the night, all he did was write.
Dear Sherlock,

I don't know exactly how to start a letter like this. Not exactly my area. I much prefer blogging about things from a distance, after the fact. This is an entirely different kind of post-mortem.

My therapist has encouraged me to be honest. I never thought honesty was all that difficult until people started pressing me on the subject. I believe it is. I believe I lie by omission and silence.

In the spirit of honesty that I am trying to really hold onto I guess I should get started.

I don't know which you is going to receive this letter.

My best mate of over 5 years, yes, I count the two you were missing. Your "death" didn't end our friendship.

Or, will it be the angry, hurt man who left my hospital room and instead sent his brother to tend to me?

I don't know who's reading this or if you're reading this at all. Perhaps it'll just end up in the bin as that's exactly what I deserve. I hope not, though. And I hope it's my best mate who's reading these words right now.

First things first I have to apologize to you for what I put you through after Mary died. From the moment she drew her last breath I lashed out, emotionally, physically. I wanted to hurt you and I did. I've been learning in here why I do those things but that's not the point of this letter. I have no right to ask you for absolution, none at all.

And even when we mended our friendship I kept on hurting you. I abandoned our work and I abandoned you.

I abandoned you because someone caring for me so, so much hurt. It physically hurt. I was so tired of hurting. I thought if I gradually pulled far enough away from you that maybe you'd forget me. Or that when I was gone, really gone, it wouldn't hurt so much.

It must have felt like an extended sort of torture for you. You a man of action, a man of results.

I don't know how many I need to say I'm sorry but I don't think I've said it enough. You must have been so frightened to find me the way you did. I imagine it's hard to get that image out of your head.

I really hope this letter doesn't bring it all back.

I texted you but didn't get a reply so my therapist suggests I reach out to you this way instead. Either it will open the lines of communication or perhaps be the start of closure. Both possibilities scare me but obviously one more than the other.

Since I'm the one who so violently pushed you away I'm the one who should beg you to come back. And I am, I'm pleading with you to come back. To be my friend again. Though I admit I don't deserve it.

I'd like to be able to talk to you, to say these things on the phone if not in person but I think that's far too much to ask.
Family day is coming up here in a week. It's actually more a weekend than a day it's the entire weekend. It doesn't sound like your kind of thing exactly but I promised Hanah, my shrink, that I would at least extend the invitation. I'd like you here. Even if you just wanted to show up to punch me in the mouth, at this point I'd welcome that.

If I have to, I'll take your silence as a goodbye, a final goodbye. I won't pester or haunt you.

I've got a little less than 60 days left here and Hanah has put some interesting ideas in my head, about not going back to a life that made me so unhappy. I may be leaving London for good. Going somewhere else, try and start again.

But the point is, whatever you answer, I won't forget what you've done for me. Up to and including getting me in here. It's a good place and they're taking good care of me as they teach me to care for myself.

I think I was more fucked up than either of us imagined I was. I'm sorry I lied to you about that.

Ok, mate, that's all. I hope to hear back from you.

I know you're going to laugh but I kept...I keep having this feeling that things aren't right with you. That something has gone wrong, that you need help. I had a ridiculous dream and...just knowing you're ok, if you're ok, would go such a long way.

I hope you're ok. Please let me know. Four words would do it; "I'm ok. Fuck off."

I'd take that, I'd take it gladly.

I miss you. I miss my best friend.

Take care of yourself.

Love,

John
Chapter 33

Day 39

He went through multiple drafts and even as he sealed the envelope he was unhappy with what he wrote.

It wasn't enough.

It was too much.

They didn't communicate like this, not ever. They had only ever done face to face or the occasional text which was three sentences at the most.

One thing was for certain; he'd taken Hanah's idea of leaving the country and run with it. It was down on paper now which made it rather real and something that needed to be considered.

The sheer simplicity of the idea shocked him. He'd never thought of it before. "Mary" was right. He did lead a life like he was bivouacking. Maybe...just maybe he could leave. His daughter would be better off without him. Maybe adoption could be arranged with his sister outright.

If Sherlock wasn't going to speak to him again then really, what was left for him here? He had no great affinity for London, not anymore. It had seemed rather magic when he was running with his mate, romancing his wife, planning a future that would never happen now. But as it stood, he didn't romanticize it the way other people did anymore. One city was as good as another, one country was as good as another.

Maybe, as much as it hurt him, his time with Sherlock and with London was over.

Maybe this part of his life was done and had been for awhile. Maybe he was just only now realizing that.

And maybe, just maybe that could be ok?
Chapter 34

Day 43

There was something about this new limbo that allowed him to refocus.

It was the same logic you used when a mysterious letter arrived in the post, or there was a voicemail from an unknown number.

It could be from anyone, it could be anything and it didn't necessarily have to be bad. He was existing now in that space between what is and what could be and he was breathing deeply as possible lest the hammer drop any day now.

Until he knew Sherlock's answer, his answer could be anything.

It was childish really but it was working so why argue?

As the Family weekend drew near the mood of the entire places changed. Everyone seemed more antsy, more upset, touchier, nervous.

James wasn't immune.

"I mean, she's been through this before, you know? This isn't the first time I've been in a place like this. I want her to know I'm serious this time. God, I just want my family back. I grouse and I run my life down to shit but I just want them back."

His friend was on the verge of tears and John put an arm around him. They were sitting outside as had become their habit nowadays, breathing in the night air. The dinner tray on James' lap was wobbling so John grabbed it and set it to the side.

"If you mean it this time, and I believe you do, then she'll see that. She'll feel it. That can't be faked, you know?"

"You think so?" He sniffled.

"Yeah, yeah I do. Just be honest. Drop any bullshit you've got scripted and be honest. That's what matters to her."

James nodded and righted himself before looking at John with pink eyes.

"You're right. You're even right about the scripted shit, I did have something sort of prepared."

"Drop it. Bin it. Just speak from your heart, as corny as that may sound."

"You know, you're pretty good at this."

"Maybe I'll take it up as a second career." He said with a smile. "Eat your dinner before it gets cold."

"You too."

"I'm not really hungry."
"Jesus fucking Christ..." He said leaning forward trying to catch his breath.

"John. John! Open your eyes. Open your eyes right now. Look at where you are. You're in my office, you're safe."

"I was right there. Right back there. I felt the bullet. I felt it."

"Your mind was there, your memories were there but you were here the whole time. You still are. You need to understand that and accept that and realize these memories cannot hurt you."

"I feel like I'm going to puke." He said swallowing hard.

She casually slid a garbage can between his feet.

"Do what you have to do. But I still need you to feel the wood of the arm rests beneath your hands. Feel the floor beneath your feet. Look at the focal point we choose, the clock on my desk. And hear my words."

He did as she asked, trying to ground himself in the present and escape the grip of the past.

He was here, at The Location, in Switzerland. He was nowhere near Afghanistan, he was not on the battlefield and his shoulder had, for the most part, healed.

He nudged the garbage can away after a few moments.

"I'm ok." He said before exhaling harshly through his nose.

"Yes, you are. Very good, John. Very, very well done. It's going to get easier, I promise. It already has."

John reached for his water bottle.

"If you say so." He replied with a shake of his head as he took a swig. He was doubtful. But then again it was a doubtful sort of day. It was the kind of day where all he felt he could do was disbelieve. The limbo he had been enjoying earlier in the week had faded almost tonight and he was on wretched ground again. Sherlock's silence was deafening. He would have gotten the letter by now. He certainly would have gotten the text. This was the message. This was the message. This was it and it was "No. Not interested. Please continue on with your life, Doctor Watson and I shall endeavor to do the same." What else could it be? The reality of this had thrust him back into a rather deep depression that made him crave the simple truth of the bottle and the comfort of his bed. Dragging himself up and out today had been a chore. And then this, piled on top of it. Being catapulted back into some of the most terrifying and jarring memories of his life was the antithesis of what he wanted or needed. But his wants didn't matter much in here and while he wanted to rage at her, at this at himself, he didn't have the energy. His heart rate was returning to normal, almost there, the outbreak of sweat had slowed and stopped but his clothes still felt sticky. It had been a week of this and he was exhausted. A week of reliving battles and ambushes, terror, lost limbs, the stink of hospital bleach used to cover up blood and seared flesh and the faces of so many dead friends.

Hanah was speaking and he tried to focus on her words.
"I do. I do say so. Now, I want to talk about what might trigger these particular memories in everyday life."

"I don't know...um...metallic noises...like silverware in a restaurant. Anything that sort of whizzes by my ear too fast. Sometimes, running too hard, getting winded, I think because it reminds me of the bullet just seeming to suck the air out of my body. A car backfiring...we talked about that one before."

"How many of your meals do you eat in the common area?"

"None, if I can help it."

"Because of the silverware?"

"No, it's not just that it's the low hum of conversation. I don't know it just sets my teeth on edge."

"I want you to start eating there at least once a day. And I don't want you to zone out either. I want you focused and aware and when it sets your teeth on edge, when those memories start to arise I want you to recognize where you are, when you are and breathe your way through it."

He finished the rest of his water and nodded.

"Yeah, yeah, ok."

"Not just ok, tell me how that makes you feel."

"Wary. Unhappy. I'm not stupid I know that's the point of all of this. Getting me acclimated to the fact that these sensations are going to happen. I just...I don't think I have to look forward to it."

"No one says you have to, you just have to do it." Hanah replied with her no-nonsense smile. "I want to switch gears a bit because there's something that's been concerning me."

"I haven't heard from Sherlock." He said quickly. "He hasn't texted. I have to imagine given that it's been nearly a week he's received it by now."

"That wasn't what I was going to ask but we can discuss that if you like." She said patiently.

"No, I'd rather not. Please go on."

"You're not sleeping-"

"I sleep a bit." He protested.

"You're not eating."

"I'm just not in a feasting mood."

"I want to try medication."

"No." He shook his head fervently. "I thought we agreed that wasn't the best course of treatment for me."

"We never actually came to an agreement, John. And that was several weeks ago and while you've improved by leaps and bounds in certain areas there are others where you're flagging. You're exhausted and it shows and you've also lost weight. I understand you want to steer clear of medication but if we're unable to get your sleeping patterns and diet under control, antidepressants
and anti-anxiety meds may have to come into play."

Hanah was everything he liked and trusted in a doctor...so long as she wasn't doctoring him. He listened to her words and knew she meant it. He knew he was being given a window to somehow get this shit together. He'd heard and seen what antidepressants did to people. Not everyone, just some. The sluggishness, the lethargy, the disorientation, the irritability, the flatline of it all. He wanted no part of it, at least, not if he could help it.

"Ok, I...I let it slide. I did. Neither of those things has been at the forefront of my mind, but consider them a priority. You'll see an improvement, ok?"

"Alright. We'll give it a bit. In the meantime, I have a book on recovery after rehab that I'd like you to look through. Nothing in particular that I want you to read, just, whatever sparks your interest and if you like we can discuss it."

She reached across and handed him the book with he took with much of a reaction.

"Thank you."

"Before we end for today, how do you feel about Family Weekend? People should start arriving tomorrow around mid-morning."

John shrugged.

"I...don't feel anything in particular. It won't really disrupt my routine. I'll do as I always do, maybe spend a bit more time in my room, so as not to get in the way."

"I don't believe you'll be in anyone's way, John. You'll have your regular meetings, we'll have our sessions and if you need me off hours, you know I'm available."

"You think I'm going to have some sort of breakdown?" He asked with a grin that was more hostile than sincere. "I'm not. Really, not having anyone here was my idea. I didn't ask anyone, no one turned me down you know? I'm fine."

"Sherlock-" She began but he cut her off.

"I didn't ask Sherlock. All I did was send a letter in the mail. I hoped for an answer and in a way, I suppose I got one. It's that simple. I'm fine."

"When you feel the need not to lie to me, John, I'll be here." She said not unkindly. "See you tomorrow."

That night when he was able to sleep for just a bit he dreamed of Mary. The dream was remarkably peaceful, strangely free of the turmoil he'd felt before going to bed.

"Hey...I'm so sorry I ran you off like I did." He said to her.

"You scared me. You shut me out like you always do and always did" She paused before adding. "Like I always did to you."

He closed his eyes for a moment before blindly reaching for her hand. It was small and warm and felt like it belonged there. After a minute more he looked at her.

"I think we were going to get better at that, as time went on. I've been reading a bit, you know. We weren't young per se but our relationship...our marriage was so new, so tested...so odd. I think we
would have gotten better, Mary. I don't think we failed, you know? We just needed time, time that we didn't get. We didn't fail."

"That is one of the nicest things you have ever said to me, John Watson, alive or dead." She smiled and he smiled in return.

"I just feel so guilty." He said.

She looked at him curiously.

"About what?"

"Can't..."

"Ok." She said. "Ok, maybe later. John..." She started then sighed and glanced away from him. He was in bed and she was sitting on the edge of the mattress by his feet.

"What's wrong?"

"Things are going to get harder now."

"What do you mean? I mean...I got my 30 days, you know? That's good."

"I know and I'm proud of you. But you're not even close to done. You have a lot of fences to mend, our daughter to reclaim...things to admit. There's more but..."

"But what? Mary, I know this is a dream, I know it's not real. While it's really comforting I know you're not here, love, not really. Even before all this, you were just a benevolent hallucination, my last scrap of sanity taking a form that I trusted trying to pull me back from the edge. You're not a ghost, you don't have precognition. And if I'm just here interrogating myself then I'd like an answer from me."

She turned a bit on the bed to look at him, bringing her legs up to fold them beneath her.

She stayed silent, neither agree to or refuting anything he said.

He found it unnerving so he kept talking.

"You can't tell me anything I don't already know. You're not Jacob Marley and you're not going to tell me about three spirits come to visit me."

"Look, John, you're a fighter but you've spent a long time fighting against and for the wrong things. You're going to have to fight now, clear-headed. You're going to have to be brave."

He tried to laugh but her words were making him too nervous. He imagined he was probably tossing restlessly in his sleep, a frown on his face.

"Do you always have to be such a harbinger of doom and gloom?"

"Dead. Ghost. Unsettled spirt. Kinda comes with the job."

"Stay with me, under the covers?" He asked as he lifted the sheets and extended his other hand.

She smiled and immediately joined him and the dream was real enough that he felt her weight in his arms and the warmth of her skin.
"I miss you so much, Mary."

"I know. I miss you too."

Author's Note - So many of you have written so many kind things about this story and I just wanted to thank you for taking the time to leave comments and kudos. I'm going to try and stop being a lazy arse and respond to as many as I can in the next few days. But I wanted this too, to serve as sort of a group thanks.

I'm flying by the seat of my pants here, I don't plan much out and I don't have much more than a general framework of where I'm going. But I'll get there. We'll get there together. Thanks for coming along for the ride.
When he woke up the next morning it was snowing. Lightly, just a dusting and by noon it had stopped. He'd choked down both a late breakfast and a lunch he'd been less than enthusiastic about but he considered it a victory. Another victory was the fact that he'd overslept, which of course meant he'd actually slept at all.

Could he really will himself better in these areas? Only time would tell, he supposed.

He wasn't going to think of Sherlock. Not at all. He wasn't going to think about happy families reuniting. Wives coming to see their husbands. Husbands coming to see their wives. Boyfriends. Girlfriends. Brothers. Sisters. Children, running up to their fathers and mothers. Best friends.

He just wasn't.

A bit after the noon hour he'd started to notice unfamiliar faces. There was the sound of new voices, more voices, more footsteps, exclamations of surprise and welcome and tears...quite a lot of tears.

He moved largely unseen. He wasn't the only one who didn't have visitors today, not by a long shot and his 12 Step meeting had actually been filled with faces he barely recognized, piecemealed together from the fragments of other groups.

He didn't get much out of it. He was far too lost in his own thoughts.

"How hard did you fight to stay in the army?" Hanah asked in their session.

He looked at her surprised.

"No one's ever asked me that before."

"It's not a question most civilians would think about. But a wound to the shoulder is not something that would normally result in a medical discharge. What else happened?"

"My leg. It was like, right as the shoulder was starting to heal and I was getting my mobility back, everything was working, everything felt fine I got the news. They wanted me to be assessed before the medical board. I'd been permanently downgraded and they were recommending discharge."

"What did you think about that?"

"I thought it was shit. I was fine. The bullet went right through. But they said it wasn't just the injury, it was other things. I wasn't sleeping, I was volunteering for extra shifts at the hospital, extra patrols. I thought I was doing everything a good soldier would do and they found it suspect."

"You're quite angry, talking about it even now."

"Yes, I'm angry, it was a goddamn betrayal. I gave everything I had to the service and they didn't enjoy my enthusiasm for it. That was a reason to discard me? I petitioned, I stated my case, I filled out all the paperwork, I came very close to begging, I even got Duck involved...but hell, for all I know it was on his recommendation. Maybe he called himself looking out for me or some other such nonsense."

"Your efforts didn't matter?"

"No, no they didn't. I got graded P8 and that was it. Here's your hat, what's your hurry. Another part
of my life just over. They shipped me home."

"Home being London."

"It was as good a place as any. Home, as a concept or location didn't mean much to me. I just wanted a place to regroup and think. I wanted a loud place where I could be quiet and get lost. That is, by definition, London."

"And then you met Mike and then you met Sherlock. Do you want to tell me about that? First meeting. First impression?"

Just that question alone brought more thoughts rushing back to him than he thought he could handle. The wave of nausea rose, crested and then, thankfully, calmed.

"Not today. It's already been far too much today."

"It's my job to push you, you know? And I've been giving you a pass recently."

"This has been you giving me a pass?" He asked incredulously.

"Indeed it has. So, Sherlock. Just tell me. First meeting."

John sighed and scratched at his beard. It had become a comforting habit, something to occupy his time.

"He did what he always does with people. He figured me out on sight. It was incredibly unnerving. I mean, by this point you know me, I like to play things close to the vest. I don't like to reveal too much. But he just saw right through me, he saw everything."

"Now, to me, that sounds like exactly the kind of thing that might make you run. You were feeling vulnerable after your discharge, you still had extreme trust issues and yet you decided to live with this man."

"Yeah...yeah, there was just something about him. Something...magnetic, intriguing. It reminded me of the way I felt when I met Duck and later, Mary. Some people, you're...you're just immediately thrust into their lives. That first night we were at a crime scene, running through the streets, I was vaguely threatened by his brother, we tracked down a serial killer." He paused, ultimately deciding to leave out the fact that he'd killed a man. "I'm pretty sure I saved his life and then we went to dinner." John laughed and shook his head in disbelief after all these years. "We went to dinner."

"It sounds like it was a strange but good experience."

"It was. And it started something incredible."

"You're smiling." She said quietly.

"That bastard always made me smile. When he wasn't making me furious...Shit. I'm going to miss him."

He blinked away tears before they fully formed and turned his gaze towards her window.

"It's snowing again." He replied softly though she hadn't asked.

John retreated to the relative safety of his room. The common area was over crowded, the hallways were thick with people, everything felt cramped and overwhelming. It wasn't until he was in his
room with his dinner that he felt able to breathe. James had spotted him in the dining hall and motioned him over but he'd begged off as politely as he could with a brief wave. He couldn't do it now. The smile on his face was already tight and alien and he wanted nothing more than to drop it, curled up on his bed, music playing softly, nose in a book.

For awhile, a few hours, in fact, he was able to lose himself in it all. When one book was no longer cutting it he closed it and switched to another and another, finally settling on the post-rehab text Hanah had loaned him. Grabbing his pad of paper he began to make half-hearted notes, hoping against hope he'd feel the tug of sleep on his eyelids. But it wasn't working. If anything he found himself getting more tuned up, more agitated. He felt itchy, his muscles were twitching and he speculated that maybe his body had gotten used to his early morning exercise. He's missed out on the treadmill today due to having overslept and he figured he was paying for it now.

Glancing at his clock he saw it was nearing 2 am.

Maybe a shower would help. Something warm and soothing. That sounded grown and reasonable and like a suggestion, he might have given to someone when he was a respected physician.

Something warm and soothing. That sounded grown-up and reasonable and like a suggestion, he might have given to someone when he was a respected physician. Whenever that had last been.

It didn't help.

Quite the opposite as he emerged from the bathroom clean but with more pent up energy than ever. His mind was going a million miles a second, jumping from topic to topic, worry to worry yet refusing to settle.

He dressed quickly and headed out into the hall, iPod, and earbuds in hand. He had no idea if he was allowed to use the gym facilities in the middle of the night but it was worth a try.

The Location was as silent as one might expect this time of night and he padded softly toward the front desk. He was almost there when something caught his eye. He gazed past the desk towards the main door and the absolute blanket of white.

It seemed as though the snow that had started while he was with Hanah had only increased in the ensuing hours. That had to be 30 centimeters now, at least.

He got another idea, one that excited him but one they probably wouldn't agree to. Still, it was worth a try.

"Hi," He began flashing his best smile. "I was wondering something."

The nurse, the same as before glanced at him.

"I'm sorry, I can't give you your phone, you know the rules."

"No, of course, I understand. That wasn't what I was going to ask, actually. I see it's been snowing, quite a lot. You can barely see the walkway."

"Yeah, it's coming down pretty heavy, isn't it?" She replied politely. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, um, I overslept this morning, so not only did I miss out on exercise I also missed my daily chores." He didn't feel as though he was actually able to charm women anymore so he abruptly dropped the act. "Look, I'm feeling really antsy. I can't sleep and I was wondering...if you'd let me shovel?"
"She blinked and he could tell this was the first time she'd ever gotten that request before."

"I'm not on any sort of physical restrictions." He pressed. "I'll always be in your sight line, not that someone wouldn't have to be daft to run off in this. I'll even sign a waiver if that what you need but please...I just want to maybe get a few hours of sleep. And tackling that mess out there might be the only thing that could help."

"We're not supposed to put the patients to work. Not like that, not alone."

"I know and it's not as if I think I can manage it all. I'm not going to be able to clear a path down the mountain or anything." He smiled. "Just maybe make it so you can open the front doors come morning if need be."

She looked at him curiously before picking up the phone.

"I'll need to make a call first, to make sure it's ok."

"Yeah, yeah, ok, I understand."

Ten minutes later he was standing in calf deep snow wearing a borrowed coat, gloves, boots and using a borrowed shovel. It was cold and quiet and dark...and he loved it. Putting an earbud in each ear he turned on his music and got to work.

Oh God, but this was just what he wanted and needed. He wasn't keeping track of time exactly but he knew how long an album was and then another. The gloves were thick and at this point, his hands were about the only things on his body that remained warm. The legs of his sweatpants had darkened due to the wetness of the snow. His hair had still been damp when he'd come outside and now, despite a hood, he could feel that it was stiff and frozen. His arms were starting to burn from the effort, every few shovel fulls the winds would kick up and rip the air out of his lungs. He didn't know how much longer he could go on but he was making headway and didn't want to stop. Everything was numb and painful and alive and he wanted to scream and beat his chest and work and work and work until he had dug his way all down the side of the mountain, preferably all the way to a pub. His face felt numb and inflamed but still, he kept on.

He wanted to exhaust himself. He wanted to flare and flicker and burn out.

"Suicide by shoveling." He muttered to himself and then laughed in the darkness.

The lights in the distance surprised him but he didn't stop. The snow made everything so echoey and he heard what was clearly the sound of a car approaching, far off now, but getting closer.

A late arrival, no doubt, a straggler.

As it had to be nearing 4 am a real late arrival.

With a bit of effort as it battled against the packed snow, the SUV pulled up to the building, idling in front. His iPod had abruptly died, due to the temperature or a faulty battery he wasn't sure but as he shoveled John heard the driver get out and circle round to open the door for the passenger in the back.

The storm was starting to intensify something fierce and he only just heard the passengers quiet; "Thank you." as it was carried to him by a gust.

Something about that voice made him cock his head and look at them more pointedly. Or at least he tried to look through the wet sheets of snow.
The driver went to the back and removed two suitcases and hurried ahead of the passenger. He gave John a nod of acknowledgment as walked past him up to and through the doors.

The passenger turned their collar up against the wind and lowered their head.

No hat, no gloves, ill prepared for this weather.

But...

Snow quickly covered the dark head of hair which he only just caught a glimpse of in the headlights of the vehicle.

But...

The figure was approaching, erect posture, long coat, confident steps...

But... it couldn't be...

The figure walked past him, not even glancing in his direction.

John opened his mouth to speak but the wind whipped away his first attempt.

“Sherlock!?” He tried again having to shout over the storm.

The figure stopped and turned towards him. He raised a hand against the onslaught of snow, squinting against both it and the headlights.

“It..It’s John.” He said to him.

If a walk and carriage could portray disbelief, Sherlock’s did right now as he headed toward him.

“No, no go on inside. It's madness out here. I'll be there in a second. Go inside.” He said waving him away.

He thought he heard "John?" In reply but it was hard to tell.

John cupped his hand round his mouth and shouted again. "Go inside! I'll be right there!"

Sherlock paused, turned and headed for the door, but he glanced back several times.

He was alone now and John needed a moment or ten to get his bearings. He’d heard people hallucinated in freezing weather before they died. Was he perhaps in actuality, curled in a snowdrift somewhere? Was his final vision before he died Sherlock coming to see him one last time?

That sounded about right.

But there was only one way to find out.

Shovel in hand, heart pounding he started to head inside.
Sherlock Holmes was waiting for him by the front door as he entered.

He could see him now, quite clearly and to prolong both his anticipation and fear, John took a little more time than necessary stomping the snow off his boots in the vestibule.

Sherlock's eyes never left him as he came through the door. Finally, John swallowed hard, dropped his hood and met his gaze properly.

"John..." He said quietly and John felt those eyes roaming over him. They lingered on his face, no doubt making complicated calculations and estimations unimaginable.

Now that he was faced with him he didn't know what to do. It felt as though it had been so long since they'd stood like this, together like this. Certainly, it had been ages since John had looked at him clear-eyed. What to do? He wanted to embrace him but feared what might come of it. What if Sherlock took a step back? What if he stiffened with discomfort in his arms. Worse still, he could easily have come more out of pity than affection. Or obligation. After all who would want another one of John Watson's dreary suicide attempts on their conscience? Not that John was thinking along those lines right now. And not that he would ever blame Sherlock even if he was.

"You came." Was all he could respond as he was still having a difficult time believing this was real.

"I got your letter. You invited me."

"Yeah..yeah, so I did." John said. He wanted to smile but he was having difficulty reading his mate's face.

"I can't read your face." Sherlock said eerily as though he were, in fact, reading his mind.

"I'm sorry, what?" John asked but the nurse at the front desk interrupted.

"Mr. Holmes, I'm very sorry but we didn't know you were coming. We can have a room prepared in 30 or so minutes if you'll just come back up to the desk then. In the meantime, perhaps John, can show you where he's staying?"

"That would be fine. Thank you." He replied at normal volume where before he'd been talking quietly and John shivered at that resonant voice that he'd missed. The baritone just as warm and rich as he remembered.

John removed the coat and hung it back on the wall peg and carefully leaned the shovel against the wall before removing his boots and replacing them with his shoes. Throughout he felt Sherlock's eyes on him, puzzled, troubled.

John hurried to pick up the bags the driver had set down and turned to his friend.

"Ok, well, just follow me, then."

Back down the long silent hall, they went before arriving at his room. He opened it and motioned Sherlock enter. Stepping in after him he swiftly shut the door and locked it.

"Let me take your coat." He said at the same time Sherlock said "John?"
"Yeah?"

"You've lost a considerable amount of weight. I would estimate at least 10 pounds, possibly upwards of 15. Aren't they helping you?"

John stood behind his friend and helped him off with his coat, hanging it in the closet.

Normally...perhaps in the past, he might have been offended. But not now, not at all.

"Yeah, they're helping me, quite a lot actually." He came to stand before his friend trying not to telegraph his...what should he call it? Shyness? "Thank you for getting me in here." He concluded.

Sherlock dismissed this statement by ignoring it.

"You've grown a full beard and cut your hair." He said with undisguised disapproval or was it...distress? Or both?

Had he been so long out of Sherlock's presence that his ability to pinpoint his moods? He didn't like that idea at all.

"Yeah, I just...needed a change."

Sherlock nodded and looked about the room.

"Mycroft had every intention of putting me in here, several times. I see he didn't exaggerate its comforts. This is a fine room, John."

"It's far more than I deserve." He replied quickly.

"No." He said quickly. "On the contrary... in fact, you've always been a poor judge of what you deserve."

John gazed at him, unable to parse just what he meant by that statement but it did give him a real opportunity to look at his friend.

He had hoped to see him healthy, robust, rested. He'd hoped that time away from the turmoil that John brought, Sherlock would have settled, stabilized.

Unfortunately, it seemed the opposite.

"Sherlock...Christ..." He said and hurried to the other end of the room to switch on a second light. His friend blinked and squinted against the sudden change. "You look like shit."

"Then what a pair we make." He said wearily. "Would you mind if I changed clothes?"

"Of course not." He said motioning toward the loo. Sherlock headed to his suitcase and took out his sleepwear.

"Thank you."

"But you need to tell me why you look like that." John paused as he didn't want to have to ask the next question. "Are you using again?"

"No." Sherlock said shortly before passing him, entering the bathroom. He shut the door leaving it open a crack as he changed. "I've been working for the past two months, first in Austria, the Hungary, then Croatia." He continued.
"At Mycroft's behest?"

"No, I sought these assignments out. I only got back Thursday evening and Mrs. Hudson promptly gave me your letter as I entered the flat. I read it in the hall, packed a bag and then made arrangements to come here."

John didn't know what to say. He had never, not once, expected such effort or such an immediate response by his friend.

"When was the last time you slept?"

"I slept a little on the plane." He said coming out of the bathroom, his clothing neatly folded his arms. He was wearing a t-shirt, trousers and that well worn and consequently impossibly soft dressing gown. Placing his clothes atop the suitcase Sherlock then headed to the bed and sat down.

"You don't mind, do you?" He asked gesturing towards it. "Just until my room is prepared."

"No, of course not." John said and as he approached his mate he entered into doctor mode. Crouching down in front of him he took his wrist in hand to feel his pulse. It was the first time they'd actually touched. As his own foolhardy behavior had ramped up they become more demonstrative with one another, more physical. Hugging and that sort. And then, of course, there was the kiss...But the distance between them now made John wonder if that was over and done with. A phase now past.

"John-"

"Shhh." He said quickly as he felt the blood rushing through his friend's veins. "It's faster than I'd like." Cupping his face he gently tugged downward at the skin below his eyes. "Look up for me. Good, thank you. Dry with bloodshot sclera." He placed his fingertips lightly on each side of Sherlock's neck, just under his jaw. "Your glands are a little swollen. Is that tender?"

Sherlock nodded in reply and John sat back on his heels.

"While I appreciate you coming to see me...more than I can ever really say, you were in no condition to undertake this trip. You're exhausted and I mean that medically, you are suffering from exhaustion. You might also be coming down with something, only time will tell. Lie back, right now."

"That's hardly necessary." He protested with only a shadow of his normal indignation.

"Even in my admittedly shambolic state, I am still your doctor, hmm? So do as I say and lie back. Now."

With surprisingly little resistance Sherlock scooted further back on the bed and laid down. The relaxed sigh was audible though he likely hadn't intended it to be.

He thought his friend would protest but instead, he just gave a weary "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He said standing and gazing down at him. The relief he felt as the idea that Sherlock was here, actually here, crystallized from hope to fact almost made his knees weak. He walked over to the small refrigerator and removed a bottle of water and some string cheese and a few savory biscuits.

"Just have a little for me, ok? Just get something in your stomach."
Sherlock raised his head and started eating silently.

"I won't get crumbs on your bed." He promised and John smiled.

"I know."

"Why were you shoveling snow?" He asked.

"I couldn't sleep. I've been having trouble with that lately and I thought maybe I could tire myself out."

"Did it work?"

"As it happens I'm flush with adrenaline right now." He replied.

"Why is that?" Sherlock asked with a curious frown but John only smiled in return.

"Drink some water. I know you're dehydrated. I'm going to go change as well."

John left his friend where he lay on the bed and went into the bathroom. He changed quickly, barely sparing a passing glance to the face that grinned back at him in the mirror. He came out and closed the door softly behind him. Sherlock had neatly placed the food on John's bedside table. He'd eaten a little and that was honestly more than John had expected. But then again his friend seemed both tired and spent and that historically meant pliable.

"John...?"

"Hmm?"

"Would you be terribly offended if I didn't move?" Most of his words were muffled by the pillow beneath his head.

"Of course not. Don't be silly. The bed is yours, stretch out."

"Lie down. It's your bed."

"I don't sleep much. Not really tired. Let me just steal a pillow and I'll camp out on the floor. If I read a bit will the light disturb you?"

Sherlock propped up on an elbow suddenly and John saw the move took far more effort than it should have.

"Are you still so angry with me that you won't share this bed?"

John was flabbergasted. Angry? At him? What on earth was he... He pushed those thoughts away. Now wasn't the time to start this conversation.

"Of course not." He said quietly.

Sherlock flopped back down and closed his eyes before edging his body over to allow John more space.

"Then come to bed." Sherlock replied and his tone left little room for argument.

Switching off the lights John did just that. He raised the blankets and slid beneath them. The bed was already warm from Sherlock's body. It was usually chilly when John got in, empty and cold.
Sherlock's head was pressed into the pillows, his curls, still damp from the snow, fanning out. John typically pushed that pillow to the side, as he didn't ever need it. Or some night, when he was exceptionally lonely he pretends it's Mary.

Sherlock's let out a soft little "Hmm" noise and then a warm sigh. He was more than half asleep by then and John took the moment to just stare at the face he'd missed so much. He was the same. Still the same. Always the same. And that was a relief when everything around John was in ruins.

Actually, that was more than a relief. That was home.

Sherlock's face was home.

He wasn't sure how to do this. Face him? He did usually sleep on his right side. Or face away, with his back to him?

In the end, he decided to face away but even like this, he didn't feel as though he were missing anything. When he was last in this bed he was all nervous, unhappy energy. Now, he felt completely different, relaxed, decompressed.

The shoveling. It was the shoveling that had done it. That's what he tried to tell himself but it wasn't true and he knew that.

It shouldn't have mattered, but it did. He had gone for more than a year without the feeling of a body next to his in bed. The counterpressure on the mattress, the warmth, the company. The metronome of someone breathing next to him. Someone he cared about and loved. Someone he had deeply, deeply missed.

It shouldn't have mattered but it did.

He laid there for a good ten minutes, listening to Sherlock breathe in and out. Thinking, trying not to think but thinking just the same. Counting and recounting what he had and what he'd lost and what's he'd almost lost.

Suddenly he felt the weariness, that exhaustion dragging him down towards sleep but as it did, it weakened his defenses.

Just one crack in the dam that kept everything at bay eventually lead to another and another until he was surging away on a wave.

The tears threatened with a burn but the sob that wracked his body was already fully formed when it escaped from his lips.

He'd tried to keep it in but it was no good.

Fuck.

This was ridiculous. Crying when he was sad. Crying when he was happy. Crying when he was caught somewhere in-between. When didn't he cry? He hated it, hated what his life had done to him. Hated what the alcohol had done to him. Hated what he'd done to himself. Amid all the hate was the fact that he loved that this man was here safe and sound at his side.

Silently, so as not to wake Sherlock he swept the covers back, preparing to get out of bed. He could at leasts have the decency to do his weeping in private and return once he'd settled himself. But a hand on his wrist stopped him. It traveled up his arm until it landed heavy on his shoulder coaxing him back down onto the bed. He let it happen. The next thing he knew Sherlock was inching closer,
spooning behind him, raising the blankets back in place before an arm circled his chest drawing him near, long fingers of a broad hand splayed out protectively, possessively.

Every alarm in his body went off.

**Remember. Remember how devastated you were at the idea of losing him?**

**Do you want this? To be so close? To be drawn in again? You know what happens when you tangle yourself up with people...they leave...they die.**

**Red forest. Burning and burning and burning and danger and don't get so close. You'll set the both of you ablaze.**

"I'm sorry for-" He began but Sherlock cut him off.

"Hush. Stop running. Sleep."

Sherlock's grip was tight, secure and allowed no room for movement making it a most pleasant prison.

His friend left no space between them.

It was the most intimate, personal, contact he'd had in over a year and it rattled him to his core.

Things had felt off since Sherlock arrived. Off beat. Off rhythm. They hadn't shaken hands or hugged. Rather they'd kept an orbital distance around each other. It was painful and fast and confusing. And now all that was over. They'd never shared a bed before. Never embraced like this before and certainly never for this long.

This was entirely new.

Somehow in the rhythm of something they'd never done before they found their rhythm again.

John put his hand atop Sherlock's which rested on his chest, his heart beating evenly beneath.

And all was right.

"I didn't think you'd come," John admitted so softly he wasn't sure he'd even be heard.

"Of course I came." Sherlock mumbled already asleep but just conscious enough to respond, though with a slight delay. He then exhaled heavily, softly, contentedly and the sensation burst across the back of John's neck causing goose pimples to prickle and rise. "I'll always come for you, John Watson."
He woke the next morning with two distinct and new sensations.

The first was that he was hungry, almost ravenously so. For John eating hadn't been much more than a mechanical annoyance for months. But now, suddenly as he thought of the ridiculous spread that awaited them both for breakfast he nearly started to salivate.

The second sensation...was the feeling of Sherlock's erection pressing hard against him as he slept. Their positions during the night hadn't changed and in fact, his friend was still there heavily at his back.

John almost...almost chuckled. There was something delightful about confirming the great detective was just as human as any other man. After all, it was a natural occurrence, it didn't mean anything. It was normal morning wood. He closed his eyes and sighed. Again, it wasn't like it meant anything. It was just part of the experience. It wasn't as if he was turned on. He was warm and happy and untroubled for once and he didn't want to analyze why.

If there was one thing, one small positive thing that had come out of the turmoil of this past year it was that when it came to how his relationship with Sherlock was perceived, he just didn't care anymore.

He didn't care what people thought or whispered about or believed. He had never really cared all that much, to begin with. Alright, that wasn't entirely true. He had cared, once upon a time. Sometimes the questions and assumption from people, especially just after he and Sherlock had first met did raise his heterosexual hackles. But as the years had passed it mostly just vexed him when it came from friends and family. It played on issues he struggled with of believability and lies. He didn't want people to think he was a liar. That included Hanah and what he felt were her suppositions about he and Duck.

Now, largely, he was untroubled.

Not to jump too far ahead of himself, but if he and Sherlock happened to return to Baker Street together and people assumed they were a couple, so be it.

He was tired and wounded and hurt. He'd just had the best nights sleep since 2014 and it happened to be in the arms of a man. And he didn't intend on wasting one more breath shooting down rumors about whether or not he and his best mate were sleeping together.

Who the fuck cared? They were two straight men in bed together. What of it? Hang-ups were boring and for some reason, right now as Sherlock's hand rested warmly on his stomach the red forest was far, far away.

"What was your nightmare?" his Sherlock asked suddenly. The sleepy voice just in his ear made John start slightly out of surprise.

"You were calling for me. Like you were lost. I'm not big on premonitions or anything but I couldn't shake it. And after you didn't reply to my text-"

"You texted me?"
"Yeah, a while ago."

"I didn't have my phone. It would have been a liability so I left it at Baker Street and got a burner."

He hadn't been ignoring him. Not at all. All that worry for nothing.

"So...are you alright?" John asked tentatively.

Seeming to notice the placement of his hand and perhaps the placement of other things Sherlock moved just slightly away from him in bed.

John wished he could have found the words to tell him to stay.

"I couldn't remain at Baker Street. I couldn't focus or concentrate. You became...indispensable to me somewhere along the way. I already knew that to be the case in my personal life. But I didn't realize it extended to my professional life as well. I cannot seem to do this without you."

Sherlock had rolled over onto his back and John turned over too so as to face him.

"I'm sorry." John replied and it sounded as woefully inadequate as it felt.

"I know." He said simply. "So, after accepting that as a reality I asked Mycroft if there was anything a little dangerous, all-inclusive, time consuming, what have you that I could do. He gave me an assignment, or a half dozen actually."

"That's all very interesting and I mean it sincerely but you still didn't answer my question. Are you alright?"

Sherlock turned to look at him, eyes bright with their ever changing blue to green and green to blue.

"I'm fine." He said softly.

John nodded. He was fine. Sure. Of course, he was.

Perhaps how he really felt would come out later.

"Are you hungry?"

"I'm still rather tired, actually."

"I can bring you something. I'm famished. Anything, in particular, you'd like?"

"I trust your decision making."

John knew him well enough to know while it wasn't an emphatic yes, that wasn't a no either.

He made to get out of bed then stopped himself and put a hand to Sherlock's forehead.

"What are you doing?"

"Confirming whether or not you have a fever...which you don't. Ok, I'll be back soon. Just sleep."

With an undeniable spring in his step, he headed to the commissary and began filling a tray with all the things he knew Sherlock enjoyed.

This time when he spotted James he did join him briefly. He smiled and met his wife, shook his hand, talked him up a bit and then hurried back to Sherlock.
His friend was still asleep when he arrived and try as he might, he couldn't tempt him to eat.

John still maintained that he wasn't sick, just exhausted and God only knew what he'd been through lately. He ate his breakfast quietly and after tucking Sherlock in more securely and telling him he'd be back soon he headed off to morning group. When he got back he was still sleeping and after a quick change John headed off to the gym for a jog before chores.

When he arrived back a third time Sherlock was awake, dressed, looking refreshed and nibbling on a waffle.

"Hey, you're up. How do you feel?"

"Tolerable. I think I just needed some uninterrupted sleep. I appreciate the use of your bed, John. Thank you."

"Of course. So, um, would you like a tour of the place? I know it's not exactly your thing but-"

"I'd very much like a tour." He said sincerely.

"Oh...oh great, ok. Um, well let me grab a shower really quickly and we can get started."

Not long after they were walking down the hallway with John directing his attention to a few points of interest. Sherlock was watching everyone who passed by but if he was deducing them he was doing so silently. In fact, he was largely silent. Not cold just...quiet.

"Hang on a moment, I just want to speak to Hanah."

"Of course."

John knocked on her office door and from inside she said: "Come in."

He stepped inside but just barely.

"Hey, Hanah, um first, I wanted to return your book. And second, Sherlock, arrived late last night so I was wondering if maybe we could take a break from the session today."

"Is he with you now?" She asked with a raise of her brows.

John paused and glanced over his shoulder him.

"Um...yes."

"Bring him in. Sherlock?"

John felt Sherlock move close behind him forcing the door open a little more.

"Yes?"

"I'm Hanah, I'm John's therapist. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Sherlock eased past John and walked over to her desk, extending his hand.

"A pleasure."

"So, we're just going to head on out..." John said trying to keep things moving. "I'm going to give him a tour of the grounds."
"John, is this when your normal therapy session would be?" Sherlock asked turning to him with a slight frown.

John opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again.

"Yes, yes it is." He finally replied.

"I didn't come here to disrupt your schedule or your treatment. I think you should continue as normal."

"Well, I don't think-" John began but Hanah cut him off.

"That was exactly my line of thinking as well. Sherlock, would you be opposed to joining us? This is typically the time where we encourage family and friends to become more involved in their loved one's mental health struggles and their sobriety."

"If John has no objection I don't."

This was all moving too fast for John, way too fast and he had a ridiculous impulse to run out of the room. He didn't want this, didn't want to be so exposed. He had no idea what sort of question she might ask him in front of Sherlock or worse what she might ask Sherlock directly.

"John, you're hesitant, I understand." Hanah began soothingly. "But this is a safe environment. I think I'm right when I say that you trust me."

He cleared his throat.

"Yes, yes I do."

"And you trust Sherlock."

"Absolutely."

"You believe that we both want the best for you as you want for yourself?"

"Yes, I believe that."

"Good, because that foundation is what Family Weekend is based on. It's meant to occur when you've built enough trust in your therapist, the program and yourself. It's also meant for you to face head-on the effects of your addiction and behavior on the people you love most. It's going to be hard but I think you're ready for this and I think it's a good thing."

Damn her for being calming and logical but most of all damn her for being right.

"Ok, alright, you're right."

"Good, alright, have a seat gentlemen."

John sat down in his usual seat keeping his eyes on his friend who seemed quite unperturbed by the change of plans.

"So, " She began as she set cold bottles of water before them. "How are you today, Sherlock."

"I'm well. John was kind enough to offer me the use of his room to get some rest as mine hadn't yet been prepared."
"Good, I'm glad you got some rest. And emotionally, how are you feeling right now?"

Well, if nothing else, this would be both uncomfortable and entertaining as Hanah tried to break through.

He narrowed his eyes briefly.

"I don't follow."

"How did it feel to see John again today, it's the first time in several months."

"He's my best friend. We were separated by necessity so he could get better. He appears to be on the correct path."

"Interesting but still not an answer. How did it feel?"

It was good to see Hanah was just as hard on everyone else as she was on him.

"Upsetting." He said finally and John frowned as he looked at him.

"Why upsetting?" Hanah asked before he could.

"Because it was rife with uncertainty. I didn't know what I might find, what state he might be in. I didn't know how he would receive me or how I'd receive him."

"That's all very normal," Hanah replied but Sherlock made a small disbelieving grumble in his throat.

"How did you feel seeing Sherlock, John?"

He wanted to match his friend's reserved tone, maybe even echo some of the fear in it but he couldn't lie, or rather he didn't want to.

"Elated." He said and felt his cheeks burn with the admission especially when Sherlock glanced at him. "Nervous, hesitant but more than anything just elated that he'd come."

"Ok, ok good. Now, tell me how would you describe your relationship with Sherlock?"

"Uh, good...really good, until I mucked things up."

"I think you know I'm looking for more than just good." She replied with a smile.

"Intense. Complicated. Loving." He faltered finding it harder than he ever expected to sum the two of them up that way. "Probably quite peculiar looking from the outside in."

"Sherlock, how would you describe it?"

John expected his friend would have equal difficulty with such a question and while avoiding looking at him directly he reached for the water bottle set out for him.

"The single most important relationship I have ever had in my life."

The bottle didn't make it to John's lips, instead, it just hovered in mid-air, untasted. He looked at Sherlock dumbly, surprised by the straightforward reply.

"Tell me more about that." Hanah responded.

"When I first met him I lived a very solitary life. Little contact with the outside world save for my
brother or the people I met briefly who came to me for help. I had acquaintances but no real friends. Friends were something other people had and I had certainly made no attempt to make myself friendly or like other people. He changed that."

"Would you say John was friendly? Open?"

"No, not at all." He responded and John let out a short bark of laughter. He wasn't wrong.

"Sorry, please go on."

"I mean, he was not friendly or open in the conventional sense. He doesn't go around grinning like an idiot and shaking everyone's hand. But there was something about his demeanor that seemed welcoming. He wasn't initially put off by me as so many people are. It confused me. We took a cab and his reaction to some of my deductions was just...respect...admiration. I supposed it softened me, Made me pay more attention to him beyond what I could determine from his clothing. The way he dealt with me changed the way I dealt with him. Our friendship grew rapidly and naturally from that."

"What effect did he have on your life?"

"He...improved my work. He centered my thoughts, he sent me down paths I wouldn't have considered. I never thought of myself as needing a partner of any sort and now I find myself quite lost...without my blogger."

John watched as his friend's eyes clouded over sadly. This was both a lovely admission and a weakness Sherlock was bearing badly. He had never wanted to be dependent on anyone. In fact had structured his life so it would never be an issue. And then along came John, disrupting a lifetime of plans...and then not bothering to stay. The guilt of it made him shift uncomfortably in his seat. It was only alleviated slightly when he realized Sherlock had done the same to him. Gotten him accustomed to them, just the two of them together and then he'd taken a dive off a building.

"Would you describe the relationship as intense?" Hanah asked.

"Yes. But not unpleasantly so."

"That intensity did it have an effect on your other relationships once they came into being. Your relationship with your brother, for instance? Other new friendships? Romantic relationships with men and women?"

Sherlock sighed thoughtfully and crossed his legs and in hindsight, John would realize he was deciding something.

"It chafed at Mycroft as he loves nothing better than being the primary influence and antagonist in my life. He's never been one to play second chair, he'd sooner gas the entire orchestra. I believe it improved my relationship with Lestrade, my contact on the police force. It may have altered things will Molly as well, maybe even Anderson once it was all said and done. As for dating, I never had an instinct or interest. So, nothing to report with men. But, were I to be interested in a romantic relationship, women wouldn't be part of the scenario as I'm gay."

John bobbed his water and subsequently spilled it over his lap.

"Shit!" He swore before turning fully to Sherlock. "Wait...what? Why would you say that?"

Sherlock turned to look at him.
"Because it's the truth. I'm homosexual."

"You're gay?" John asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

"You are? And you're just now telling me?"

"You never asked. Though I think I've been fairly clear. Women are not my area, didn't I say that multiple times?"

"And from that, I'm meant to glean that men are?"

"John," Hanah began. "Why does this upset you?"

"It upsets me because he's my best friend and he never bothered to tell me. Had I know I would have."

"You would have what?" Sherlock pressed quickly.

"Well, I wouldn't have been pestering you to call Irene Adler... Jesus Christ, nights of passion in High Wycombe. You must have thought I was such an arse. Does Mycroft know?"

"Wouldn't is a negative contraction denoting what you would not do or have done. Would is a verb expressing a positive inclination so technically you didn't answer my question instead you changed it midstream. But to answer your question, to hear Mycroft tell it he deduced it whilst I was still in my cot. In any case, he knows."

"Sherlock, are you ok?" Hanah asked with concern. "Coming out is an important step."

He waved his hand dismissively.

"I'm not emotional about this. I realized my same-sex attraction decades ago. It is a point of interest neither propelling nor guiding my life. It is a fact, that is all. Facts are not emotional."

"Facts aren't emotional? That's nonsense. You know, you could have talked to me." John said leaning toward his friend, holding his eye contact.

"Could I have done, John?" He replied and there was just the hint of bitterness to his words.

"Yeah. Of course, you could."

"I had no desire to be your project, not then and not now. Despite how much you think it would complete me as a human being."

"You're angry." John said incredulously. "Why did you never tell me you were angry about this?"

"I'm not angry." He snapped.

"No, but you are. I didn't mean it that way Sherlock, I didn't mean to imply you were broken. I thought..."

"You thought what?" He asked flatly.

"I thought you were lonely. And while I couldn't see my way clear to ever placing myself in that position again I didn't want my bitterness to rub off on you. Sour you on a possible relationship when
maybe, just maybe you were close. I just wanted you to be happy and if that nutty beauty would have done it then I wanted you to go after her. I've always, always only wanted you to be happy. I see now I was wrong."

"Yes, you were very wrong."

"I'm sorry."

Sherlock nodded shortly and looked to Hanah clearly expecting her to somehow take the reigns.

"John, I want to ask you the same questions. What effect did Sherlock have on your life and relationships?"

John was still reeling from the last five minutes but did his best to regroup.

"He...um...changed it for the better. I was very confused and angry and lost when we met. Purposeless, I think would be the right word. I hadn't had any real connection with anyone since Duck-"

"Who's Duck?" Sherlock asked.

"Uh, Sholto, that was the nickname we all had for him."

"Duck." Sherlock repeated just a touch derisively under his breath.

"Do you want to tell him what you told me?" Hanah asked gently.

John glanced at his friend.

"Maybe this isn't the best time."

"It's a fine time. Tell me." Sherlock said.

"Alright, well, I met you on August 5th and just before that I had decided that on August 8th I was going to kill myself."

Sherlock's eyelids fluttered, his mouth dropping open.

"So...this wasn't the first time you'd..."

"No, it wasn't. What I think I'm learning in here is that I have...issues handling certain situations. I get depressed and sometimes I can shake it off, sometimes, I can just live with it. But a lot of times it...it gets bad. That was one of the worst times, actually. But I met you and suddenly things didn't seem so bleak, I had a purpose again. And, um, August 8th came and went."

"John, I'm..." Sherlock trailed off searching in vain for the right words.

"Hey, it's alright. You saved my life and you didn't even know it. That's nothing to feel bad about or apologize for."

His friend nodded but clearly, the information had shaken him.

"Say what you're thinking, Sherlock," Hanah said quietly.

"I'm thinking that I had no idea what you were struggling with. I was clumsy and inattentive." He shook his head with frustration.
"Hey, so was I, hmm? I think I just demonstrated that. You want to forgive each other, if you're ready that is? I've learned not to push. Forgiveness comes in its own time."

"Of course I forgive you."

"Thank you and of course I forgive you." John said with a smile that Sherlock returned. Some of the uneasiness and tension seemed to leave the room and John took a deep breath to steady himself.

"You two make my job easy," Hanah said. "Ready to go on?"

"Not much time to savor a breakthrough." John joked.

"Miles to go before we sleep." She replied. "Tell me about how this affected your relationships with women, John."

"Well, uh, they didn't like him very much." He said with a laugh. "They thought I was only focused on him, devoted to him, willing to drop anything for him. They thought there was no way I could ever put them first."

"Was that true?" She asked.

"Yes." He stated with more emphasis than he intended. That being said he didn't want to take it back. "The only one that understood, the only one that encouraged it, the only one that liked him and that he liked, was Mary. They got on before he and I ever mended fences. Peas in a pod, they were." 

"Did Mary's acceptance of Sherlock increase your affection for her?"

"I don't know, I'd already made up my mind to propose before he came back. But, did it help, yeah. I don't need his permission to do anything. But I often feel just a bit happier when I have his blessing."

Sherlock ducked his head suppressing a small smile.

"Get him and that self-satisfied look." John teased hooking a thumb in Sherlock's direction.

Hanah smiled and asked. "Sherlock, how heavily does John's good opinion weight on your actions?"

"Well, I wouldn't say-" Sherlock began but John interrupted him.

"He took down ash."

"Beg pardon?" Sherlock asked but John saw the blush creep to his cheek.

"You took down "Analysis of Tobacco Ash". After I teased you about it, you deleted the entire blog post.

"That was a bandwidth decision."

"Oh, I'm sure it was."

"I think highly of John." His friend replied, ignoring him. "To have his good opinion and to maintain it is no small feat."

"Alright, let's get down to it," Hanah said leaning forward. "Do you both want to maintain this friendship? To be honest and forthright and to work through things that may have been holding you both back?"
"Yes, I do." Sherlock said without hesitation.

"Absolutely." John replied.

"Good, now no one has to wonder where the other stands and we can really get down to work. I want to take advantage of the fact that we have you here for the weekend, Sherlock. Would you be willing to come back tomorrow?"

"Yes, of course."

"Fantastic. But don't get me wrong. We're not even close to being done for today."

He'd left therapy sessions feeling exhausted, even weak before but this took the cake.

Sherlock too seemed more rattled and less poised than normal.

"Is it always like that?" He asked.

"Um, yeah, yeah it can be. Not for the weak of heart. And Hanah's a real ball buster."

"You like her." Sherlock said and it wasn't a question.

"I do. I liked Ella as well but there wasn't much she could do for me because I lied to her at every turn."

Sherlock turned to him as they walked and John could read his gaze without seeing it. It was the honesty that was taking the detective off guard. It gave John both a surge of pride and shame, pride that his friend had noticed and shame that it was rare enough to be worthy of note.

"Are you hungry? One dry waffle can't have been enough to satisfy you." John glanced down a his pants and decided the water stain had faded enough to look respectable. "Shall we grab some dinner in the lunchroom?"

"Wouldn't you rather eat in the privacy of your own room or mine?"

"I would, but I promised Hanah I'd have at least one meal a day in the public area. It's part of my therapy."

"How so?"

"The um...I..." Why was this all suddenly so embarrassing. Maybe because every suggestion, every conversation somehow lead back to recover or recovery issues. He hoped this wouldn't be what life was like from now on. "She diagnosed me with PTSD and part of exposure therapy is to...well, expose myself to situations and sounds that cause me stress." Before he could ask more John connected the dots. "The open floor plan of it all, the way the voices all merge together, the clanging of the silverware...that kind of thing."

Sherlock was silent as they entered the common area, silent as the got their trays and silent as they moved from station to station to station to plate their food. John didn't say much either except to make the occasional recommendation as to what was good and what could be avoided.

They chose a table somewhat off to the side and sat down.

"You're getting a few stares, I hope that doesn't bother you too much. The people who know you, know you. The ones who don't, well I think they're just surprised to see me sitting here with anyone
other than James."

Sherlock had both hands on the table, palms face down. He inhaled, exhaled and spoke acknowledging none of what John had just said.

"There's a great deal we've never told one another isn't there? I didn't imagine until now."

John stopped chewing and looked at him.

"You mean like, you had a mad murderous sister and I had a father who used to beat me? Yeah, I guess so." Sherlock blinked in shock at that but John pressed on. "To be fair, you suppressed the sister and I would do just about anything to not mention my dad. On top of that, we got busy. We got complicated. We got afraid. We got protective. It happens, you know?"

"I don't want us to drift apart. Certainly not due to misunderstandings and half truths. You can tell me the truth, John."

"Sherlock, I know that, I do. There will likely be more things to come up in the future but I can't just...I can't just dump them on the table like that. They're old and complicated and half-buried just the way I wanted them. But I'm trying to face them and not to run away or run to the bottle. That's pretty easy in here. Not sure what it'll be like out there though."

"I'll help you as best I can."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I was too dull to miss the clues you dropped that you're gay. I feel like a shit."

"Does it change anything for you?" He said tracing a pattern in the wood grain with his finger on the table top.

"No, no of course not."

John saw something pass over his friend's face that he couldn't categorize. He expected to see maybe relief or confirmation of a suspected belief that it, of course, wouldn't matter. But no, there was something else...what was it?

"I thought perhaps you might feel odd or misled especially as we just slept together...shared a bed together!" The last bit was tacked on hastily but it didn't stop the blush from rising on his friend's neck.

"I knew what you meant." John grinned. "And it's all ok, all of it. And I know you know it's ok but I need you to know that I know it's ok. Ok?"

"Ok and I'm glad." He said softly before picking up a fork.

"Yeah, me too...Thanks for coming."

"You're welcome, John."

That peaceful feeling had returned and John poked happily, distractedly at his food before glancing at the large windows off to his left. It was still snowing steadily. He wondered if it had stopped all day?

"They won't have you shoveling again, will they?"

John laughed.
"No, not tonight. So, um, we could move your stuff to your room after dinner, if you like. Or, if you wanted you could stay with me again."

"I...fear I already imposed on you too much. I'll sleep in my own room tonight. Don't you agree?"

John as a point of fact didn't agree at all but he nodded his head anyway.

"Yeah, of course, whatever makes you comfortable."

They spent the next few hours together, taking a dessert of biscuits and tea to John's room and just talking. Sherlock caught him up on all the goings on with Lestrade and Janine and Mrs. Hudson, et. al. They stayed away from anything personal, anything about the two of them. They were rung out from the session earlier and decided to tread lightly without Hanah being around. That was fine by John, he was just happy to be here with him. Happy to laugh with him and to make him laugh. Happy with the warmth he brought to the room. He tried to hide his disappointment when Sherlock rose to go. He wasn't sure if they would hug before he left.

They didn't. But that was ok.

After reading a few chapters of the novel nearest to him John turned off his light and settled down to sleep.

Hours later, how many hours he was unsure, he heard a knock on his door. It took awhile for the reality of it to penetrate through to his dreams but eventually, he croaked out a "Come in?"

The door creaked open and Sherlock's unmistakable frame was backlit from the hallway just beyond him.

"John?" he whispered softly.

"Yeah?" John sat up and pawed at his eyes. "You alright then?"

Sherlock hesitated in the doorway and for a moment looked as though he was going to change his mind and shut the door.

Wordlessly John raised the covers in welcome.

The figure of his friend visibly relaxed and entered the room heading towards the bed. John inched back a bit to let Sherlock join him. This time he was the one behind, with Sherlock in front, their bodies pressed against one another. Once his friend was comfortably settled John pulled the covers back over them both.

Sherlock sighed so softly it could have gone unnoticed. But it didn't.

Whatever had driven his friend from the comforts of his own room and bed, he didn't know and he wouldn't press him for answers.

Instead, he mimicked the position Sherlock had taken the night before, resting a hand on his chest just above his heart, just above his scar. Sherlock put his own larger hand atop John's, securing it there.

A deeper, lovelier, heavier sleep was pulling him down and he gladly let it happen.

Sherlock was still, peaceful and whatever troubles had arisen to drive him here were now forgotten.

John fell asleep to the comforting feeling of his friend's heart beating evenly beneath the palm of his
hand.
"Who's James?" Sherlock said apropos of nothing as they lay in bed the next morning. His face was smashed in the pillow, words nearly swallowed up by it in fact. Sherlock had the rather silly habit of looking as though he were dropped from a plane directly onto his bed. He slept compactly, he wasn't a sprawler but he slept hard, body solidly pressed against the mattress.

"Hmm? Oh, James. He's a friend I met here. MI5, we apparently worked with him indirectly at some point."

John still had his eyes closed, in no hurry to move. They were both in that delightful point of existence between sleep and wakefulness, hovering at the boundary just as likely to go in one direction as another. This night of sleep had been even better than the previous one and neither he nor Sherlock had moved for the duration.

"Mmm." Sherlock said in reply.

"Want to join me today or wander a bit for yourself and cause trouble?"

"I don't cause trouble, John."

"Whatever you say." He smiled drowsily.

"I'd like to investigate a little I suppose. This place is intriguing."

"As you like, but you're welcome to spend it with me if you want. It is your last full day here."

The truth of that make John's stomach sink and he frowned and opened his eyes. Why was it only just occurring to him now?

"I wouldn't count on it." Sherlock said.

"What do you mean?"

"The snow hasn't stopped since before I arrived. I anticipate an announcement, later on, today stating we are in fact snowed in."

"Do you really think so?" John asked trying to keep the excitement out of his voice and failing.

"I do, indeed."

Perhaps he sounded pleased about it too.

John's hand still rested on Sherlock's chest and he gave it a slight pat.

"Want some breakfast, a cuppa? Anything?"

"No thank you, I think I'll sleep a bit longer. I'll thank you not to let me adopt this lazy habit when we return home." He stopped perhaps hearing what he had said. "When I return..." Realizing that didn't make things much better Sherlock shut his mouth entirely.

John let it pass. He wasn't sure of what to say anyway. They hadn't discussed it. They hadn't...
discussed a lot of things. Perhaps a snow-in would allow them more time. Much needed time.

"Ok, enjoy. I'll be in and out and if we don't meet sooner, see you at Hanah's." He whispered close to his ear.

In a moment he was out of bed, not long after he'd dressed and started his day.

Breakfast. Gym. Chores. Group. When he'd become such a creature of habit or better put a creature who enjoyed this type of habit he didn't know.

"Today's topic is trust." Reggie began once they'd settled in their seats with their coffee, tea, and workbooks. "Now, that's trust we've lost, trust we gained and trust we hope to get back. Does anybody want to start us off?"

The group meeting today, was, by John's estimate, twice as full as normal. There were, of course, the regulars but they were now accompanied by their parents spouses, family, friends, and significant others. He didn't realize how much he'd grown to depend on these people, these faces until he was thrust into the reject meeting the other day. He'd been uncomfortable and a little lost. And now, though he was without Sherlock, he still felt better to be among those he knew. When had that happened? Then again, why question it?

His mood was so good in fact he decided to speak first.

"I'll go, if that's ok?"

"Yes, of course, John, please." Reggie beamed. He'd been trying to get him more involved since day one and always liked when John volunteered.

"Ok, hi, my is John and I'm an alcoholic." he said, the words coming out easier now.

"Hello, John." They intoned.

"So trust...yeah, I guess what I realized just yesterday, in fact, is that I trust you all." He paused for the small wave of laughter.

"I skipped our regular group and wound up with a lot of people I didn't know, in one of the other wings of the building, actually. They were nice and attentive and welcoming but, um, we were all hesitant to speak openly and honestly and just a little wary in general. So it didn't go anywhere. Plus I was, um, rather down and didn't feel much like participating in any case. I guess it made me realize that I actually do trust you all. I know we don't really know each other, I know we might never see or speak to each other again when we leave here. But right now, in this space, seeing your faces feels good. Not all the time, mind you." he added with a smile. "But every now and then. Ok, that's all."

The group laughed and Reggie gave him a round of applause which he found incredibly embarrassing.

"Thank you, John, John brings up a good point. When you all leave here our group will be broken apart. This is something we've all had to face in bits and bobs as people join us and others leave. But one of the things we must acknowledge even if some of you have hated every moment of this is that AA provides at least two important things; stability and trust. Now, you all had to gain trust in here from one another. You had to listen to each other, understand one another's stories, find commonality and build a relationship. You may find that surprising, you may not think you've built anything with anyone here. After all, you're not obligated to spend time with your fellow residents, you don't have
to eat together but you may feel the loss when you leave here for good. That's not a reason to become disheartened but it is a warning sign that you need to find a new meeting and a new group that you connect with. AA isn't perfect but it is the best thing we've got and if you work it, it works.

So group. That's your first safety net. AA and NA meetings are like buses there is always another one you can catch. You can always another one going on somewhere if you miss your first choice. But I urge you to find a first choice and then stick with it. Don't let missing out on one be an excuse to flake on the rest.

We'll talk about sponsorship more in depth later. While it is not essential it is highly recommended and again this is about trust. Finding someone you trust who can keep you on the straight and narrow, someone you can talk to when you're considering getting that drink, getting that high. Now, I'm sure some of you may be thinking, but isn't that what my family is for, my friends, my partner? They are there to support and love you but, if you'll allow me to bastardize a quote from Philippians 2:12 you are to work out your own recovery with fear and trembling. Because if I know you, and I do know you because I know me, you have put them through an awful lot."

John looked around the room, he'd been riveted to Reggie which honestly didn't happen very often. He realized now that was because Reggie wanted them to have the floor, to speak when and however long they needed to about whatever was on their minds. But when it came time to command a room, to take center stage, he could.

Every face mirrored what John felt; hopeful, afraid and chastened. This was all so much, too much. He wanted to get out of here, every moment of every day he dreamed of hitting day 90 and heading home. But...but another part of him was terrified of that outside world, with its temptations and consequences and structureless days. The outside world with all the people he'd hurt and abused and generally fucked over. He shivered at the thought but when he looked around he didn't feel so alone.

"Addiction at its heart is betrayal; betrayal of self and betrayal of loved ones. It may be difficult for them to trust you again. You should be prepared for that. You should be prepared for flare up's, angry conversations that may seem to materialize out of nowhere. But they're not out of nowhere, are they? You know that. We all know that.

Conversely, you may have a hard time trusting them. There may have been ideas or buried facts or truths that have come up for you in your time here and you may be angry with them. You may not trust them or their motives. This can bring things to a standstill but it doesn't have to. Time for some hard truths. Not all relationships are meant to work, not all marriages are meant to stick, not all friendships are meant to last. But I encourage you to prioritize a return to trust, a new relationship, a new pact built on an old one. Even if it doesn't work, if you want it to work you still have to try."

"What about sex?" Carl asked and the assembled giggled like schoolchildren. John cracked a smile. It was a fair question.

"Sex, excellent question. So trust is something you'll likely have to get back in all forms of your life, especially for some of you who are in romantic relationships and possibly, especially in the bedroom. Now, we'll talk more about this later but re-starting an intimate relationship with your partner won't just happen. It might take time to rebuild that bridge. You can't and shouldn't just hop back into bed. For those of you not currently in a relationship the recommendation is a year of celibacy-

This was met with a chorus of shocked gasps and even a few playful boos.

"That's right a year of celibacy while you get yourself sorted out. This is a little flexible and largely depends on how your relationship with your addiction and sex has intertwined. For those of you
currently involved, well, it's just going to take time. Vexing, yes but also perhaps the best thing for the two of you. You'll have to work up to it, with dating, conversation, gestures, touch, attention. It can be as simple as a good night kiss, a stroke of a cheek, a head on a shoulder. Remember the simple things, remember every time you hold a hand, embrace, feel a heartbeat you're rebuilding your life together. That's worth the effort and it's worth the wait.

Re-establish the bare bones of intimacy and build from there. You'd be surprised at what can be achieved from just lying in bed and holding one another."

**Author's Note:** Not too much tonight after yesterday's rather large chapter. Just a snack of sorts to tide you over, but still, something that I believe moves the story along. I'm hoping to get more done over the weekend but those are famous last words aren't they?

Your reviews have all been so lovely and detailed and wonderful. I am truly overwhelmed to be fortunate enough to wake up nearly every day to such kind words. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.
Chapter 40

"We've got a unique opportunity here." Hanah began. "Sherlock, I had intended on discussing these things with John anyway but to have you here and receptive I think will make the process that much more useful. First, we're going to talk about your "death".

Sherlock inhaled through his nose and then nodded resolutely. He'd arrived before John had and was seated comfortably when he'd entered. For a moment, just a flash he'd felt nervous, wondering if they'd been talking about him before he'd gotten there.

"John, this isn't going to be easy but it is the next step in your exposure therapy. I want you to start at the beginning, January 15th, 2012."

"I'm just...I'm uncomfortable doing this in front of him, you know?" He said gesturing to his friend while looking at Hanah. "It's all kind of raw."

"I realize that. And I think that's just the reason we should tackle it right now."

"OK.." he sighed heavily. He was holding a tall disposable cup, filled with tea between his hands. It was warm, hot if he held it too long in one place. He concentrated on that and not the road that lay ahead. "Just, Sherlock, don't interrupt me, ok? Just, let me get through it all in one go."

"I won't say a word." He promised.

Clearing his throat, he began."When I saw you last, before the rooftop of Bart's we were in the lab and I got the message that Mrs. Hudson had been shot. Now, clearly, in hindsight, this didn't make any sense, this was all orchestrated by you to get me out of the way." He jutted a finger at Sherlock surprised at how things anger rose so easily to the surface, surprised and a little frightened.

"John," Hanah said quietly. "To me, direct this to me, not to him. Not just yet. This is you and me, like always."

But he already felt too far gone to abide by her directions now. Honestly, he wasn't even willing to try.

"I got to Baker Street, she was, of course, ok, thank God and then I realized you'd played me for a fool again."

John saw Sherlock open his mouth to speak but he cast him a warning glance to stop any and all words.

"So I got to Barts, got out of the cab and you called me. You direct me to look up and you start spouting off these lies. Awful, awful lies really, one after another. You were a fake, you looked me up, it was all a trick, etc. etc. And you were crying. See, I'd heard you upset before, frantic, lost, scared but I never heard you cry. Not ever...and I wanted...I felt so helpless. I avoided getting close to people because that helplessness is always, always part and parcel. And here it was again. I couldn't believe what you were planning.

Keep your eyes fixed on me. That's what you said. I hear that, in dreams, I hear your voice.

And might I just add, if that was your note, it was the most impersonal piece of shit I have ever heard. So thank you for leaving me with that."
"John, take a breath for me. Take a sip of your tea and take a deep breath."

"No, you see that's a pause button and he doesn't get a pause button. No, he doesn't, I didn't get a pause. From the second he called me from Barts I didn't get a pause. That reel just kept playing and playing, it never stopped. I didn't get to take a break when I lived it for two years and he doesn't get one hearing it now."

He set his tea down and steepled his hands in front of his face before speaking again.

"Do you know what happens when a body hits the ground? It bounces. It bounces, because you know, at the end of the day we're just meat. Meat that in this case just threw itself off a building. When it hits, after that initial bounce, of course, it can just fall apart, I mean it just falls open and you see how raw inside we all are. Just raw fucking meat that used to be someone you loved but has now, just like that, ceased to be anything at all.

The skull of an average adult human male is 6.5 millimeters thick. It can withstand 520 pounds of force, that what's needed to crush a skull. Now, that's a lot of force but from where you jumped, the height, the rate of acceleration...well that was easily achieved. So when I got there your skull had fractured like an eggshell. Bit's of you just floating in this ever growing puddle of blood. Skull...brain matter."

John made a gagging noise as the sounds and the terror and the pain and the sight and the smell came back to him all at once. Hanah nudged a bin towards him but he waved her away.

"I'm fine. Copper...pennies...I could smell your blood and it smelled of copper pennies. You know I don't even keep them? When I get them back as change from a store I put them in the Take-A-Penny-Leave-A-Penny thing or I just drop them on the ground outside. I can't bear that smell on my fingers. I can't stand it. In an emergency, if someone needs help, I'm fine. But I can't just casually smell that anymore, hmm? Your hair was just soaked with it. Soaked with your blood and when they moved you it just left this streak on the pavement, like an artist's brush soaked in oil paint.

They rolled you over and your eyes were open, just frozen, just staring, there was blood spattered over your face. They put you on a stretcher and took you away. They checked me out, Lestrade questioned me then got me out of there before I had to face the press. And that was it. You were dead. No suspense to that you were just...dead. I went back home to Baker Street but I didn't make it there before Mrs. Hudson found out. Because you see the paparazzi were camped out at her door. Someone snapped a photo on their phone of you on the concrete and uploaded it to Twitter, the photog got it from the internet and showed it to her just to capture her reaction when she saw it. I had to give her a tranquilizer that night just so she could calm down and get some sleep. As for me, I sat in my chair and stared at your empty one until the sun came up. I don't know if I had ever felt so thick, so stupid because I was just going round and round trying to figure out what had happened, what had you done, what could I have done to stop this? Why you would tell me what you did? I still don't know what that was...I don't...I don't understand that part. After all this time why try and make me believe something you know, you know I wouldn't. Paper after paper, bullshit column after column in the Sun and the Mail and the Telegraph and I never doubted that everything we'd seen and done was true. Why that part? They weren’t listening to the phone they were only watching. So why that? Hmm? Why that extra nail in the coffin? Why that purposeful attempt to hurt me? To devalue everything we'd done together?"

"I thought...I would help you to let me go." Sherlock replied as it turned out, unwisely.

"I told you, not a word!" John roared. "Now, I have been stifled in this long enough, by you and by Mary, not anymore. I have been told that my feelings on this don't matter. Well right now, today, for
once, they do. For once, finally, I will have this out with you.

You were shit at human emotion, Sherlock. You were shit at supposing what I'm going to do when it really counts. And you were shit at trying to make me believe something awful about you that isn't true. Mary always said you were a terrible liar, like a fucking child. Like a 4-year-old covered with paint still professing innocence as to how the wall got to look that way. And she was right, that's what you are, a fucking lying child." John spat.

"Did you think it was ok, to do that? To piss all over my memory of you?. I didn't care about the papers, or the reporters or the knobheads taunting me in the street. Your suicide would have caused that anyway, that was completing the narrative. I get that. What I care about is that you tried to put it in my head. How dare you. How dare you do that us and do that to me."

"John-" Hanah began but he ignored her.

"You wanted me to grieve you as a liar and I hated you for that. I hated you for trying to take away someone that I loved twice over. Once by plunging onto the pavement and once again in my memory. You had no right to do that to me! No! Fucking! Right!"

John wasn't sure when he had started shouting again but rage was burning hot in his chest. He stood up suddenly.

"I need some air. I can't just sit here. I need a break. And I'm-I'm not asking. I'll be back in 5 or 10."

Without giving either of them time to agree or protest he left the room the door shutting behind him.
God but he wished he smoked. All the commercials and magazine ads from when he was a child said it was just the thing to even out moods and soothe jangled nerves and anger and anxiety and every other frustrating, annoying to-be-avoided emotion.

But he didn't smoke. Honestly, couldn't stand the taste of it so instead, he found the nearest exit, walked out and crouched by a wall. He felt both ashamed and justified for everything he'd just shouted at his friend. It was all true, all of it, and he had kept it inside just letting it fester. But wasn't it better in there? What good exactly was going to come from Sherlock's shell-shocked face. Because though he'd tried to ignore it that's what he'd seen. Sherlock; pale, speechless, terribly apologetic and hurt. How was this supposed to solve things?

This had been the wrong day for this sort of session. Maybe he should have put a stop to it. Ever since leaving group he'd been in a less than good mood and he couldn't put his finger on why. The conversation had devolved from the overarching topic of trust to questions about sex. It was as though once the floodgates had been opened people couldn't stop themselves. Query after query about 'What if this happens...', 'What do I do when..' 'What do I do if she...' 'What do I do if it won't'...

It just made him uncomfortable. He didn't know why. He certainly wasn't squeamish about sex but after Mary died he'd conveniently put it away. It wasn't like they'd been having sex before she died anyway. The six-week moratorium had just passed but they hadn't exactly been eager to jump back into bed together. They hadn't been that active before Rosie was born either. Though he'd been more than willing because truth be told he found it kind of sexy, she wasn't really enjoying her body all that much. And on top of that she'd often get fed up with all the maneuvering required around her belly. He'd offered oral as a compromise and wanked enthusiastically as he enjoyed the taste of her. Not the most romantic outing but it had been nice. It had been something that they'd both needed.

God, was that the last time? Was that really the last time they'd been together? If he'd known, if he'd only known. But he hadn't known and instead his most recent sexual memories involved sexting with Sherlock's mad-as-a-hatter sister. Jesus...

So, by and large, he'd packed sexuality and desire and everything that came with it away. Packed it up like a box to be shoved into an attic. The truth was he didn't quite feel the urge anymore. Memories of Mary still made him happy but that visceral pleasure was for the most part gone. In the early days, back home, in the suffocating quiet of his room he'd tried to have a wank to no avail. Whiskey dick was a stone cold fact whether he drank whiskey or not.

Initially, it sort of panicked him. This part of him should work. It needed to work. It always worked, come hell or high water. He didn't have the nickname Three Continents Watson for nothing. Whether partnered, solo, or that one ill-conceived threesome it always worked. But not then.

And not now either.

He'd given it a go more than a few times here at The Location but had always wound up stopping when his cock had no interest in being anything other than limp. It was maybe too early to panic. Erections didn't just come back once you got off the booze. It took time. As a doctor, he knew there could be temporary nerve damage and serious changes in his hormones to repair and it wasn't as if the depression had just gone away or the anxiety with it. The penis is such a simple, stupid thing...except when it's not.
But, not only was it perhaps too early to panic...but he also didn't feel like panicking. He didn't know what life was going to be like once he left here. But he was having a difficult time imagining dates and trips to the cinema, first kisses and snogging and hopping into bed. It all seem so trivial and so distant. It seemed like something that was part of a past life.

But he'd had to sit there in group and feign interest and listen to all their nervous, hopeful questions and Reggie's reassuring answers and wish to God he was somewhere else.

He was tired of talking about it, tired of thinking about it.

It was funny too, but all the things Reggie mentioned, the last time he'd been in bed with someone he cared about, the last time he'd held someone or had been held...

The last time he'd kissed someone where it had mattered...

It had all been with Sherlock.

Except it wasn't funny and he didn't laugh. Instead it made his head hurt.

"You need to go back in there and finish this." "Mary" said.

"Why are you here right now?" He said glancing up to see her standing against the wall by his side.

"Because you called for me." She said simply. "Whether you know it or not. When you call for me I come."

"I didn't call for you." He said feebly.

"You did, John, and we're running out of time. You're right, you know. It will take time because you are still stressed and you're still anxious and you're still grieving and lost and lonely but those are not the only reasons why you can't get it up. There's one more big one. And if you don't face up to it-

"Mary" paused and looked at him critically.

"Get up. Go back in there and say everything you need to say to him. Say it right now, because if you don't it's the equivalent of only removing half of an infection. And these feelings of rage have been infecting you since before we ever met. It's killing you, John. And it's efficient and multi-pronged because it's using the alcohol and the depression and the panic and the denial. Go in there and finish. Get it all up, like a child who's sick. Get it all up. Then you sit there and you listen while he has his say because if for one moment you think he can't give as good as you just did and with just as much ammunition you are sorely mistaken."

"When is this going to stop being so hard?" He asked.

"John..." She said as she mimicked his posture, sliding down the wall to be at his side. She raised a hand to place it on his cheek.

For a moment he almost felt it. The much-missed caress.

"John, do you have any idea how lucky you are? Do something while there's still a chance because that chance doesn't last forever. It's gone before you know it. Before you know it."

"Me quoting me back to me. New depths." He said with a sniffle and she wrapped an arm around his shoulders and lay her head against his.

"Please, John, please." She begged him and after pretending to draw strength from the pretended
pressure of her small frame against his, he rose.

"Ok, I'll go back."

"Alright, love. I'll take what I can get...for now."

He smiled down at her, at his Mary before heading back inside.

He knocked on the door to Hanah's office and waited to be invited in. As he entered he noticed Hanah's eyes were on him while Sherlock's most definitely were not.

"I am sorry." He began before she could speak. "I know better than to behave like that. My emotions got the better of me."

"I don't think you should apologize," Sherlock said, his baritone having a bit more of a waver to it than normal. "Those are your feelings and you're entitled to them."

As Sherlock continued to speak John stepped further into the room and reclaimed his seat, turning it just slightly so he could better face his friend who continued speaking.

"I admit...I counted myself lucky that I had avoided your rightful anger. I thought, 'How convenient. Everything has been compressed and accelerated because of the terrorist attack and the bomb on the train. We've fast forwarded and all is well.' But it wasn't well." Sherlock looked up at him. "You weren't well. I suspected it and it was solidly confirmed in the morgue. That wasn't about me pulling a knife on Culverton. It wasn't about the drugs. I don't even know if that was about Mary, not only, not just. It was about this."

But John shook his head emphatically.

"No, no, mate. I make no excuse for that. None. I let you get that way. I let you sink so far and that's what allowed that creature to prey on you like he did. I did that. Me. I did that. I can't excuse hurting you like that, I won't."

"If I may step in," Hannah said. "I don't think he's asking you to excuse it, John. I do think he's asking you to acknowledge where it came from. You can do one without the other. Try it, try it now."

John had no desire to go back to that moment, in fact, he'd been actively avoiding it but against his wishes, it came rushing back anyway.

The anger, the disgust he felt looking at his former friend, out of his mind, high, mad, hysterical, perhaps on the point of violence. The one thought he'd had back then so clear and loud was...

"This is what it's always like. Pulling him back from the edge. Keeping him calm, keeping him in line. Keeping the mad genius with his feet on the ground and I'm sick of it. I am sick to death of babysitting this child who never ever has to face the consequences of his actions. Who is always bailed out by me or his brother or sheer fucking luck. I am sick to death of it and I am sick to death of him. And I want to hurt him until he wakes up. Until he wakes both of us up. How much more do I have to suffer for him? How much more do I have to lose on the altar of Sherlock Holmes?"

John didn't realize he'd been saying all this aloud until the echo of his voice caught his ear and immediately rushed to take it all back.

"No," Hanah said firmly. "Leave it there. That is the point of this. Not to make admissions and then retract them. You can tell what you believed was the truth and still regret it but it doesn't make it any
less true for you. You are an angry person, John. That is something I have been trying to get you to face since day one. Now, whether you are disgusted or content with your past actions you have to face them and acknowledge why they happened. Do you understand that?"

"How can I say such terrible things to him and not apologize?" He asked incredulously.

"Have you apologized to him about these incidents in the past?"

"Yes. I mean, all but what I said just now about his suicide because I'd never spoken of it before."

"And for the things you had told him and apologized for, did he accept?"

"Yes, he said he did."

"Did you believe him?"

"Yes, I believed him." John replied not entirely sure where she was going with this.

"Sherlock, did you mean what you said when you forgave him? Do you harbor any negative feelings toward John about what happened in the mortuary other than the simple fact that it happened at all?"

"I forgave him long ago." He intoned.

"As I suspected, which means your constant apologizing and your unwillingness to let it go, is vanity, John."

He scoffed in reply but she continued unfazed.

"No, I know you don't like that because you don't consider yourself to be a vain man. But languishing in apology after apology while never A) clearing the air about what you were actually angry about and B) not accepting forgiveness when it had been given is vain and self-serving. It avoids doing the work in favor of lamenting past work undone. We're here for truth, John, you and Sherlock and me. Truth about why you really assaulted him, truth about why you drink, truth about why you felt unable to vent your anger about your best friend to your best friend. We've done a bit of that today and it's to be celebrated and not swept under the rug with more apologies whose time has long passed. Don't you think he deserves to hear it? What the consequences of his actions were? Don't you think he deserves an explanation for your actions?"

"Yes..." he said with exasperation. "It's just hard. I want to let all of this go."

"No, you want to pretend as though you let all of this go. That's not healing, that's malignancy. Malignancy only feels better in the short term. This hurts, yes, because resurrection, I imagine would hurt. You want to resurrect, you want to come back to life. There is a difference in acknowledging your anger and justifying the actions that sprung from it. You can do one and not the other. And you can be angry John but you can't make your home there."

He'd never heard it put so succinctly and still, it made him bristle. It also made him sound like a drama queen something he'd accused Sherlock of on more than one occasion. He wanted to take umbrage at the idea that he enjoyed being trapped in an endless cycle of guilt and forgiveness but he wasn't sure it could stand up to the harsh light of reality.

"Alright, you sit with that for awhile," Hanah said. "We'll come back to it. For now, let's move on to the two years before Sherlock returned. I want you to tell me how you coped."

"Work, alcohol and then more work and more alcohol. All coupled with cutting people out of my life
that reminded me of what was now over. Greg, Molly, Mrs. Hudson."

"Bivouacking," Hanah said.

"Bivouacking." He agreed. "I thought it was best to just leave everything behind and I was almost successful but one person kept popping up."

"And who was that?" She asked.

"Him." He said hooking a thumb in his friend's direction. "Always there, always adding in his two cents whether I wanted to or not. I thought I had let him go but he was still there. I mean, I know it wasn't him..."

"You saw me like you saw Mary?" Sherlock asked quietly.

John winced fearing he'd revealed too much and suddenly worried his therapist might think he just casually hallucinated and had never bothered to mention it.

"You speak to Mary?" Hanah asked.

"Not exactly, I realize...I understand she's not there, she's not a ghost, she's a creation of my subconscious. But in the past, it has helped me. I mean everyone talks to themselves now and again, don't they?"

"John, you look as though you're frightened I'm going to have you sectioned. I'm not." She smiled. "Yes, we all talk to ourselves and yes, it is a valid coping method. If I thought I was seeing or hearing something that hinted at instability I would let you know and we'd persue it. I don't so we won't. Now, what did you say to Sherlock?"

"I told him that I missed him, terribly. I told him he left too soon, we had so much more to experience together. So many more adventures. I told him there were so many things I wanted to say to him that I couldn't now."

"Have you told him any of those things?"

"Some of them. Not all." He said honestly.

"What's preventing you now that you've been given a second chance?"

"I...I don't know."

"Would you like to tell him now?"

"No." He said quickly.

"Alright. I want you to tell me about when these flashbacks occur. What brings you back to the point of Sherlock's fall?"

"They don't so much happen anymore. It's pretty rare nowadays. They flared up recently when I was worried about him. The last few months before Christmas were...awful. But, umm...hearing about a suicide on the news. Seeing something topple from high above out of the corner of my eye. Construction sites with people on beams, those can set me off. I told you earlier, Hanah, about that sound that the wet cement bags make when they hit the pavement."

"What happens when an incident like that occurs?" Sherlock asked and John felt a pang at the concern with which his voice was laced.
"I sometimes start to sweat, get short of breath...just your run-of-the-mill panic attack, I suppose."

"Don't minimise. Say what you mean." Hanah replied.

"Alright, it's bad. It feels bad, it gets bad. I feel like I'm back there again, my heart starts racing, I can't breathe...it's visceral."

"Does it also interrupt your sleep?"

"Yes, quite a bit."

"How have you been sleeping lately? I feel as though the last few days you've seemed better rested."

John glanced at Sherlock and then away again.

"Yes, it's been better, better since seeing Sherlock."

"So both times that he's come back and you've let him in the episodes have lessened?"

"Yeah, quite a lot actually. They became essentially non-existent. But that makes sense, doesn't it? It's not so much him anymore, it's the ones from the war and Mary. Relieving what happened to Mary."

"Ok." She said scribbling something down in her notebook. "Sherlock, is there anything you'd like to say to what you've heard."

"Yes," He said before clearing his throat and sitting up straighter. He what been slouching. Something John had never known him to do. "I know that you know I had my reasons for leaving you out of the loop before I went to the roof. My pride, my hubris made me believe that I had beaten Moriarty at his own game. I didn't send you on the chase after Mrs. Hudson to keep you completely away. It was only to delay your arrival if I needed backup. I trust you, John." And at those words he made eye contact, steady and sure. "I trust you but Moriarty...he threw me and I didn't want you there. I didn't want to run the risk he would use you as a pawn. As it dawned on me that I had been out played I knew what I had to do to keep you safe. Obviously, I'd anticipated this possibility. If I hadn't I wouldn't be here today. I didn't mean for you to see it. I didn't mean to leave so quickly, so callously." He took a sharp deep breath and John watched as he blinked away tears. "There was a part of me that thought and hoped you might be ok...better off. Better off without my madness..."

"You stupid git." John said affectionately. "So bloody stupid."

Sherlock gave a weak smile before continuing.

"I thought about you every day. I thought about the time when I could come back to you, come back home. But I didn't allow myself to think about how what you'd seen might affect you. I purposefully didn't allow that. To hear what...what you go through...what I did...I'm so...sorry. I am so, so sorry, John Watson. I am sorry."

Before the first tear could fall John was on and covering the distance between the two of them. Crouching down he pulled Sherlock into his arms, cradling the back of his head. He kept his words soft, far too soft for Hannah to hear.

"It's ok. It's all ok, I promise. I forgive you. I forgive you, love." Sherlock nodded against his shoulder as John held him closer. "It's done, you hear me, hmm? It's over, all that, all of it is over. I forgive you and I don't blame you."
Sherlock mumbled something into his shoulder that he couldn't understand.

"What was that?" He asked quietly.

"You mean it this time." He said as he pulled his head back and it wasn't a question but a statement. John wasn't sure exactly what he was referring to but he just nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, yes, I mean it." Turning behind him briefly he grabbed the box of tissues off Hanah's desk and taking a few began to dab at Sherlock's face.

The detective laughed, a watery chuckle still thick with tears.

"The only other person who's ever done that is my mum."

"Well, then I'm in good company," he said drying his friend's cheeks. Once done he followed an instinct he couldn't trace and bringing his mate's face close to his, he planted a kiss on his forehead.

Rising from his position on the floor he noticed Sherlock looking at him curiously but he offered no explanation for the kiss as he didn't have one. Instead, he balled the tissues up and tossed them in the bin and took his seat.

"Is that all for today, Hanah?" He asked.

She was about to answer but as her mouth opened she was interrupted by an alert on her phone.

"Excuse me one moment." She said picking it up. "It's on silent except for emergency announcements."

She read quickly and then nodded.

"Well, it looks as though family weekend has been extended. The roads are impassable and the flights are grounded. We're snowed in."

John glanced at Sherlock who having regained his composure was wearing a small smug smile.

"What did I tell you?" he said.

"So," Hanah began. "To answer your question, John, I'm going to leave it to you. We can stop here and come back tomorrow or we can push on. I have some questions I'd like to ask Sherlock."

"I'd just as soon continue if it's all the same to you both," Sherlock said quickly.

John was a curious combination of exhausted but exhilarated. There was a momentum in the room and feared it's dissipation if they broke for the day.

"I'm with him." John replied.

"Good, then we're all in agreement. Sherlock, your turn."

"Ominous." He replied.

"Perhaps. I want to know what you consider to be the last truthful conversation you had with John?"

John could tell Sherlock who prided himself on being several steps ahead hadn't been expecting that question and neither, frankly, had he.
"I.." he sniffed before continuing. "I believe that would be at Baker Street, when I was home from hospital, recovering. He was...babysitting me as I couldn't be trusted alone. We were talking about the future and the past, about a woman, about Mary and as he started to cry. I stood and embraced him. Rather like he just did to me. He apologized and I forgave him. He asked me if I would be alright and I told him I would be if he was. He reiterated that he needed me to be alright. And then--" He stopped short.

"Yes?" Hanah prompted.

John had been sitting there frozen. He hadn't know Sherlock would choose this moment. He hadn't known he had believed this was the last time he'd been forthcoming. He also didn't know what was worse, the fact that Sherlock was going to reveal what happened after that or he fact that he was going to tell it wrong.

"And then I kissed him."

He told it wrong.

"No." John said. "That's not what happened."

"John..." Sherlock began and there was no mistaking that tone. Sherlock thought he was going to deny it, deny it ever happened. It was just this side of heartbroken. He didn't think for a moment it had been something romantic to his friend, that would be silly. Sherlock didn't do romance. But it had been a moment, an important and private moment between them and it meant something, even if John still didn't understand his impetus.

"I kissed him. He didn't kiss me." John stressed.

Hanah turned to him and where he thought he might see surprise on her features there was none.

"On the forehead, like now?"

"No, on the lips. I don't know why, exactly. I'm not sure but...he's been blaming himself for it since it happened. Thinking maybe he tricked me or took advantage of me or some other such nonsense. He didn't, I kissed him and then he kissed me back."

Sherlock looked positively shocked but not angry or hurt and John would take the former look over either of the latter two.

"Alright," Hanah said before turning back to Sherlock. "Please go on."

"Um, yes, that was, I believe our last truly honest time with each other. There were moments of honesty over the months that followed but as time went on he closed more and more of himself off. After that it was just deception after deception."

"Be specific, what was he lying about?"

"Everything, how much he drank, how much he slept and ate. He lied about the work, about how he got a confession from a witness."

"Do you believe he's telling the truth now?"

"Yes, for the most part."

"When was the last time you believe he lied to you?"
"In the letter he wrote."

John had withered under Sherlock's assessment but kept his mouth shut. But at this he had to say something.

"What are you talking about?" He asked.

"That wasn't you." Sherlock said plainly. "I said I came because of the letter and that was true. I came here to see what exactly was happening to you."

"What does that mean?"

"It was full of platitudes, greeting card sayings. There was very little of you in that note to me, John. You should have gone with your first copy."

"My first."

"The impression you made from your first drafts bled through and could still be deciphered on the one you sent me." Sherlock said before he started to recite what John had clear memories of setting down and then binning, from memory.

_Dear Sherlock,_

_I don't know what to say in this bloody thing. I fucked up. I fucked your life up and mine in the process. Jesus Christ, if I hurt you, if I've sent you off the rails I am so so sorry. I wish to hell you'd answer your fucking phone, write me, call me, tell me to piss off, tell me you miss me, tell me you'll come see me. This limbo is killing me. You're killing me which I suppose is fair since I may have nearly killed you._

_I'm sorry. I love you. Please get in touch with me._

_Love,_

_John_

"I came because of that letter, not the drivel you wound up posting. I came for that John and to see if he was alright."

John lowered his head. Sherlock was right, of course. That was the truth, short and bittersweet. Why hadn't he sent that one? It seemed so long ago he couldn't recall.

"You're right and I'm sorry. It was...it wasn't all that I wanted to say."

Sherlock nodded shortly and returned his attention to Hanah.

"When you first suspected that John was drinking too much what went through your mind?"

"He'd never had a problem with alcohol before, to the best of my knowledge. I thought if he wanted or needed to indulge he was entitled. I believed it would pass. I didn't think life would be fine but I did believe it was a phase of sorts."

"And when you found out it wasn't?"

"I was frightened. I am a recovering user, I don't subscribe to the word addict, though my recovery had had quite a few false starts. But I know how quickly things can spiral out of control. It became apparent fairly soon that that was precisely what he wanted."
"When did you feel you knew that for sure?"

"When he gave away Rosie." Sherlock replied and John could see the muscles clench in his jaw. Had he been that angry at the time? John couldn't recall, so much of it was lost in a fog. "I knew when he gave away his daughter he was cleaning house. Slowly, taking his time, mind you but ready to ratchet it up at any second. I sought help, I told our friends to be wary and be on watch. I made sure to stay in contact with him, visit him, care for him as best I could. But he was bloody determined."

"You sound angry."

"I was angry. I am angry."

"Tell me." Hanah prompted.

"I am angry that he never turned to me for help or accepted my offer to move back to Baker Street so I could care for he and Rosie. I'm angry that he could be so blind so un-self-aware as to see what's right in front of his eyes. I'm angry that he stopped fighting and that he shut me out. I am angry that he lied about forgiving me."

Sherlock turned to look at him.

"When you just said it now, you meant it. I believe you. I believe it was different from all the other times. But before, when I would ask you, it always came after you referenced my fall."

John, of course, knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Come on, Sherlock...watching someone die is easy. You just look up and you watch them fall to the ground. Then you rush up and you get to see all the bits of brain and blood on the pavement."

But that wasn't even the worst one. He knew the worst one but only in retrospect. He would swear on a stack of bibles he hadn't meant it at the time, that it had been a slip. But even now he wasn't quite so sure.

"Are you my Mycroft? Should I leave you a note?"

"What did you say?"

"I said, are you my Mycroft, should I leave you a list?"

"You said note. John? John!"

All the little awful callbacks, meant to needle and hurt.

John opened his mouth to apologize but only got so far as "I-"

"Let him finish, John. This is his time. Go on, Sherlock."

"I am angry that he would ever think I would stop being his friend. That he holds me so cheaply as to believe I would walk away after all this. That anything on this earth could compel me to walk away from him."

"How did watching his change effect your life?"

"I was suddenly unable to concentrate. I still kept on with the work but I found that my mind was sluggish, for me, at least. There were constant intruding thoughts I couldn't control. Which is to say
nothing of Mycroft, the most intruding thought of all."

"What happened with Mycroft?"

"He became increasingly worried and agitated by my behavior. He never has or will consider me to be the reasonable, stable one out of we two but he does have a chart, a level of his own creation that he uses to determine if I am what he considers to be ok. I had fallen far below his markers on that chart. This made him hover almost incessantly, it made him hostile to even the idea of John, unshakeably and revoluotingly paternal towards me. And worst of all, it made him offer his assistance on my cases. I could not shake him or his neverending calls and texts."

"Was he worried you might start using again? To cope?"

"Yes, as he never failed to remind me."

"Did you start using again?"

Sherlock paused and in that moment John's heart simply stopped beating.

"No...I thought about it but ultimately made the decision it would be unwise. I was of course using prior and during everything that went on with Culverton but I stopped once that busines was concluded."

"Thank God, for that." John said under his breath.

His friend continued on either not having heard or choosing to ignore him.

"I thought about it, as he pulled further and further away but decided against it. Not for me, but in case John decided to come round it wouldn't do him any good to find me wrecked with a needle shoved up my arm."

"Are you sober now? Attending NA meetings?" Hanah asked.

"I am clean and sober. I have not nor do I have any intention of attending meetings. I'm pleased if they help people. Doubly so if they help John. I, however, have no place there."

"So how are you taking care of yourself?"

"Work. I've been out of the country recently working and it helps to keep me right." He sighed as if debating on whether or not to add something else and John looked at him with interest. "Occasionally I have dropped by to see Ella. Usually when I've been having nightmares."

"Ella, my old therapist?" John asked with surprise.

"Yes. It initially began early last year, after Mary's death. I was asking for help with regard to... how to...what to do about you. But I still visit...occasionally. When I need to. I don't know that I would be able to do this," He gestured vaguely with his hand at their surroundings. "If I wasn't already somewhat used to it."

"Ok, that's good, I think that's very good. It concerned me that you weren't looking out for your own mental health and well being and it seems as though you are. I'd be happier if you had regular appointments with Ella but for now, this is good." Hanah added with a smile. "Now, is there anything you need to say to John? If so, say it directly, say it now."

Sherlock angled his body toward him but began by looking down at his palms.
"Do you know what it's like to hear what you suspect are someone's last gasps for breath over the phone? All throughout asking Mrs. Hudson for the use of her car, driving to your home, running stop lights, bursting through your door I kept my mobile to my ear talking to you, trying to comfort you, trying to keep you here with me. Thinking the entire time that I had heard you take your own life."

He was looking at him now, straight on. Though John wanted nothing more than to look away from his piercing gaze he owed him this moment. This was the least of what he owed him.

"I am truly sorry for what I did to you, John. I could not be more apologetic or regretful of the horror my actions caused you. That being said, after being confronted with what for all intents and purposes appeared to be your lifeless body, your head lying in a pool of your own vomit, your trousers soaked with urine, your racing pulse, your pale, sweaty skin, your intermittent full body tremors, after stepping through a floor strewn with broken glass and alcohol bottles and pill bottle and after rolling you over to thump on your back and then clearing the puke from your mouth and throat to perform CPR, after riding along in the ambulance, holding your hand while they tried to revive you and figure out what happened and of course after that FUCKING NOTE ON THE DOOR-" Sherlock stopped himself, breathing deeply, clearly trying to regroup before speaking again. "After all that, I believe, in terms of trauma inflicted, we are even."

John noticed the tremor in his own hand now as he raised it to his eyes. He had long imagined the scene Sherlock had walked in on but never with such clarity. He'd been glad to keep it vague in his mind but he no longer had, and had never deserved that luxury.

"Would it be alright if I said something?" He asked tentatively.

"Of course." Hanah replied.

"I've apologized for a lot of things, but never that, never fully that. I, um...put you through months of systematic torture, didn't I? Just forcing you to watch as I got closer and closer to the edge. I'm sorry, Sherlock. I am sorry. Looking back on my behavior, on what I did to everyone but especially to you, I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am. I was fucked, I was so fucked and I thought if I just left it would make things so much easier, for me and for you. But I didn't mean for you to hear that last bit that happened and I didn't want you to have to walk in on that scene. I am so sorry. You are more than a friend to me and beyond family and I...I am so sorry for all of this."

He crumpled in his seat, leaning forward and resting his face in his hands as he sobbed. So much crying it was a wonder he had tears left.

This time it was Sherlock who bridged the distance between them. He gently lifted John to his feet and the latter stood there limply.

"And I forgive you. I just needed to get that out as you likely needed to get your part out. It's gone now, alright. It's gone. If you want, we are as we always have been. Sherlock and John, no longer with the ugly unsaid and unforgiven between us. Alright?"

When someone breaks a bone sometime the pieces heal together quite nicely, no intervention needed. Sometimes the alignment is off and a doctor will have to reset the fragments to get them back where they belong so as to heal properly. Reset is a pleasant, sterile word when the truth is the bones often have to be rebroken. Pressure has to be applied, manipulation too and then snap! But it's a good break, a healthy and needed restructuring of something that had gone wrong. It was the only way to start to heal.

At Sherlock's words, something inside of John Watson broke.
But it was a good break.

He embraced his friend with a sob and a nod of agreement. It was a clumsy and heartfelt hug. The taller man drew his friend into his arms and John sagged against him. He could have sworn he felt the detective draw in a long, ragged breath.

After that, after a few more tissues and tears Hanah released them for the day with loads of praise about what they'd accomplished. It didn't feel false. John felt accomplished. He felt better, cleaner, lighter, free-er.

They were quiet for most of the rest of the evening. Not upset or unnerved but, as far as John felt, the sort of quiet that comes when you can be with someone and not feel forced to speak. When the silence is it's own comfort because it's something you share. Words are unnecessary, redundant. Because everything is alright.

After dinner, he convinced Sherlock to go outside with him and trudge through the thick heavy snow to a spot where it was cold and quiet and just them alone. The storm had broken, at least temporarily, and all above their heads were stars upon stars.

"You can't see this in the city," John said with an awed shake of his head.

"No, you can't." Sherlock agreed. John tore his gaze away from the sky and back to his friend who was gazing at him in a peculiar way.

"Don't look at me." He teased. "Look up there."

"I'll look where I choose," Sherlock said, making sure to add a fake amount of haughtiness to his tone at being told what to do. But it was all in good fun and at John's request, he did indeed look up.

They spent the night as they had the previous two, in John's bed, in each other's arms, except this time they fell asleep facing one another.

Sherlock's room didn't even get a look in.
Chapter 42

Day 49

John awakened...mostly awakened to Sherlock's head on his stomach, heavy and warm. His mate was curled around him in some nonsensical arrangement of limbs. Clingy and strong and silly. It was all very Sherlock.

He smiled at the sensation. A small voice, small in every sense of the word started to nag at him. What was he doing? What were they doing? What exactly was this? This was not the normal goings on at Baker Street. They kept separate bedrooms, separate beds, separate everything.

But all of that seemed so far away from here. From this chilly morning after a good night's sleep where his limbs felt heavy but rested and his best friends was sound asleep against him. What did it matter? What did definitions matter in the face of happy?

He could get used to this, groggy, sleepy, slow mornings together. Could this be their life?

"John...?" Sherlock asked interrupting his thoughts.

"Hmm?"

"Are you going to buzz your hair again? It's growing out."

"I don't know. Hadn't decided. Why?"

"No reason."

John paused and then grinned.

"You hate it, don't you?"

"Not as much as I hate the beard." He replied. "I really hate the beard." 

"I'll figure out what I'm going to do later." He said stroking his curls.

He was stroking Sherlock's curls.

Sherlock turned his head to better look at him, his chin poking pleasantly against John's belly.

"You look very good, very healthy, in case I hadn't said it before I'm saying it now."

"I think you said it before, and thank you." John reached behind him and bunched a pillow up under his neck and head to prop himself up. "Did you sleep well?"

"Better than I have in recent or distant memory." He said before he too rearranged his position. Pulling back a little he rested his head on his hand, his elbow on the bed.

"You?"

"The same. Blissful, as a matter of fact."

"Glad to hear it." Sherlock replied putting his hand on the hem of Johns t-shirt and tugging it up exposing his belly.
John was silent, his breath caught in his throat.

"W-what are you doing?"

Sherlock placed a kiss to the warm flesh and then another and another.

"What you want me to do."

John made as small noise in his throat but mostly remained silent.

Sherlock kissed upward as far as the limitations of the shirt would allow and John let his fingers get lost in his friend's hair. With ease, Sherlock pushed his body upwards so he was face to face with his mate. He studied him for a minute before kissing his lips softly.

"Have I misdiagnosed?" He asked the amusement apparent in his voice. "If so, then correct me, doctor."

He went in for another kiss which John returned hungrily.

"Sherlock..." He said softly.

"Hmmm..." He said pulling away from his lips and moving down his body again. "So much talk about what you aren't. But never a word about what you are."

He started to tug down John's joggers and a moment later his cock sprang free, hard and leaking.

"Don't you want to be happy, John?" He asked and John could feel the heat of his breath on the tip of his erection.

"Yes, yes, please."

"Let me make you happy."

"Ok, Sherlock, ok..." John shut his eyes, bracing himself for the feeling of Sherlock's mouth.

Instead, he heard his voice, farther away than it should be but rather insistent.

"John...? John, are you alright? John?"

John opened his eyes and woke up...for real this time. Sherlock wasn't in bed with him and he wasn't preparing to give him a blowjob. He was, however, peering out at him from the bathroom, toothbrush in hand.

"John, are you alright? You were calling my name." He asked his forehead wrinkled with concern.

_Holy. Fuck._

"Nightmare?" Seeing the look on the doctor's face.

"No, not a nightmare just a very vivid dream."

"You look a bit flushed."

"Yeah...it was...very realistic. Did I say anything else?" He asked trying not to sound panicked.

"No, not that I heard." Sherlock said as he disappeared into the bathroom again. "Was it a sex dream?" He asked bluntly.
John started. But so long as he kept the details to himself felt no reason to lie.

"Y-yes..."

"Perfectly normal. It's not like I haven't heard you have sex dreams before."

"I'm, sorry what?"

"We shared a flat, John. It's only natural." He finished brushing his teeth and after gargling with mouthwash he returned to bed. It was such an intimate gesture and thought. Returning to bed. Sherlock was returning to the bed they shared. The bed that in this strange place, this pocket of time, belonged to them both. John was loathe to have it end.

*Please. Somehow. Don't let his end.*

"I like this." He blurted out immediately regretting it.

"I like it too." Sherlock replied. "I've never shared a bed with someone before. I tend to require my own space but..."

"Have you ever dated? Had a boyfriend? Even a secret one?" There were so many times John had wanted to ask this but Sherlock hadn't been very receptive. Not angry or cold, just dismissive, closed off and most of all disinterested. But the Sherlock before him now was so bloody tender in the mornings, so soft spoken and relaxed, so teasing and unguarded and gentle. This Sherlock smiled easily and stretched his limbs and wiggled his toes and yawned! He wasn't sure he'd ever seen Sherlock just *yawn* before now. Was it just The Location or was this the way he was every morning? Is this how he could be every morning?

"There was a fellow I used to study with in my much younger days at school. We'd snog sometimes after classes in my room. Awkward thrashing about on my bed but never anything serious. Well, emotionally it was serious, for me at least. But we weren't exactly dating."

"So you liked him?"

"Yes, quite a bit. But it ended rather abruptly. And as for later on, well you met Sebastian Wilkes. He was a good sampling of the sum and total of my university experience so that ended any romantic prospects. But by that point, I felt I'd moved beyond the need. I preferred being alone. Which was good because people preferred leaving me alone."

"So...have you ever...made love?"

The question clearly unnerved his friend who took his usual defensive posture.

"Why must we cloud things with euphemism?"

John held firm.

"I wasn't. Sex is sex. Fucking is fucking. Making love is making love. I've done all three. But they *are* different things."

"Define your terms," Sherlock said with a hard swallow.

"Ok, well sex is...sex can be nice, it can be procedural, it can be clinical, it can be detached, it can be like a handshake...I suppose it's my least favorite out of the three. But again that's *my* definition and *my* opinion. Anyone else's results may vary. Fucking. Now, fucking can be great fun. Energetic,
spontaneous, quick and dirty, bed shaking, funny, meaningless, meaningful. It depends on the situation and on the people involved. Not something I want a steady diet of, though, I like variety. But what I asked you about was making love. Deep slow kisses, preferably face to face, eyes locked, caresses, foreplay, slow penetration, lazy strokes...you called me a romantic in your best man speech and I suppose I am. Though I consider myself quite skilled at fucking and scoring high marks in sex, I enjoy making love best of all."

Sherlock had gone red, flushed brightly from his shoulders up to his neck, cheeks and ears. John wondered if he'd be hot to the touch. They'd never spoken so frankly before. John had always spared him in a way, playing off his exploits with a cheeky joke but mostly leaving the man alone when it came to sex. Maybe that had been a mistake. After his initial dismissive statement, his friend had been rapt, clearly interested but too shy to initiate or speak. Maybe this was good for him.

"Um no, no to all three. Never."

"You ok?" John asked, unable to resist.

"Yes, I'm fine." He said trying to muster indignance but failing. "We're talking an awful lot about me, aren't we?"

"Are we?" John didn't think so but he was willing to play along for his shy friend. "Well, what would you like to know about me?"

"Umm...how many partners have you had?"

"We're just hopping right into, eh? Well, umm, total? Let me think. 2...5, 7, ummm...God, uhh 5...8 probably another 7...12, that was quite a year...I'm going year by year, what are we up to?"

"Adding those together?"

"Yeah."

46, John, we're up to 46." Sherlock said with disbelief.

"46?" John asked incredulously. "That can't be right!"

"I can add, I assure you it is. Are you...done?"

"Let's say that I am." John replied though truth be told he hadn't even made it out of his 20's.

"Are you a sex addict as well?" Sherlock asked half teasing half serious.

"I don't think so. When you think about it I averaged, what, 4 partners a year. That's one person every quarter. Does that sound so terrible?"

"I never said it sounded terrible at all."

"I like sex, I like feeling good and making other people feel good. I don't think I've ever made any bones about it."

"From that number count, I believe you've been making lots of bones about it."

John paused and then burst out laughing, his friend wasn't far behind with that adorable snigger of his.

"Posh boy with a double entendre. I'm impressed."
"Thank you." Sherlock replied with a grin.

"You think I'm slutty, don't you?"

"Perhaps." His friend teased.

"I never really thought about the number, you know?"

"Bit of a slag. But just a bit. I was privy to some of those times you mentioned. My ceiling was after all your floor."

"Oh God, you never told me that. You could hear?" John said laughing as he covered his face.

"I believe you know how to put a headboard through its paces. Some of the ladies were quite," he cleared his throat dramatically before continuing. "Vocal. But then as I recall so were you."

"Oh fuck, Sherlock. I'm sorry." He laughed with both silly, childish glee and embarrassment and so did his friend. "You should have taken a broom handle and thumped on the ceiling. Oi, quiet down up there!"

"It's alright, the mind palace isn't just about solving crimes. It can also just be a place to escape."

"Sorry for making you have to escape in your own home. But what about you...if work were to allow it, would you want to date? You did a pretty good job of fake-dating Janine."

"Thank you." He said before propping up on an elbow just as he did in his dream. He'd been lying on his back as they spoke and when John hadn't been looking at his face, watching his lips form words, he'd been watching the rise and fall of his chest. "I believe I may be far too spoiled for that. Dating is all getting to know you and whatnot. It's already so difficult to find a man you can tolerate in small doses, much less one you want to sit and have a meal and conversation with. If I wanted a relationship, which I do not, I should like to pop into it readymade, perfectly tailored to suit my needs. I realize I am a ridiculous man, impatient and rude, difficult to handle and generally more trouble than I'm worth. I doubt such a man exists who would want to bother."

"I think you're wrong." John said quickly, more quickly even than he imagined.

"Do you?" He said turning those cool and fiery eyes toward him.

"Yeah, I do. You're not a lost cause you're the polar opposite. You're the last person I would ever give up on Sherlock Holmes."

"You hold a rather fanciful view of me, John, you always have. I indulge it because it strokes my vanity but it isn't true."

"Maybe you don't know yourself as well as you think."

"Perhaps not." He conceded.

"So, you're not looking for anyone then?" John asked.

"Nope." He replied succinctly.

"Unattached like me." John said echoing a fond memory, an old conversation, a meeting that would change the trajectory of his life. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Yes, I believe I have."
"Your school boyfriend?"

"No, someone else. Quite unrequited, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"As was I." He said before shifting the subject. "So...I was wondering about...Duck."

"Sholto? We called him Duck-"

"Yes, I know, Sholto means teal duck in Gaelic, I got that. I didn't realize you went back farther than the army."

John raised an eyebrow. Was he hearing jealousy or just interest?

"Yeah he kinda came to my rescue. I wasn't very popular in school either. But for some reason, Duck took a liking to me. We ended up sharing a flat, working together. I spent nearly every waking moment with Duck. We even once had a threesome with this bird we picked up from a pub."

Sherlock's eyes widened and John grinned. Why did it thrill him so much to good-naturedly scandalize his friend? Sherlock who'd gone to the best schools and knew the best manners, whether he employed them or not, Sherlock who academically speaking knew a great deal about life but in turn hadn't experienced all its fineries.

"You had a menage-a-trois?" He whispered as though he were worried someone might hear.

"Yeah. It's not the kind of thing you plan it just sort of happened. As far as I knew he was the one who was going to get lucky and not me. We all three walked home, I was heading to my room to leave them alone, she grabbed my arm...and the rest is history."

"Three Continents and Multiple Pairings Watson." He said with a raise of his brows. "Your nickname should be updated."

"Is this making you feel weird?" John asked with concern.

"No, really, it isn't. As I told Mycroft, sex doesn't alarm me. I meant it. I may not speak much about it or have much real experience to contribute to the conversation but it doesn't distress me. I just tend to not want to engage in a discussion with many of the people who have brazenly brought it up."

"Ok, I get that. But...while we're on the topic..."

"Such a gossip, you are. Go on."

"Janine. I mean she seemed happy. And, well, I only really know her through Mary but I know she's a smart, capable, active young woman who could have her pick of guy. All the things she said in the papers about your sex life..."

"That was a bit of deserved revenge on her part. I certainly don't fault her. There were likely less efficient and kinder ways to get close to Magnussen than through her. I didn't seek them out because I didn't have the time. I also admit, I didn't care all that much about hurting her. But I'm not above regret. I'm not happy with what I did. I don't recall feeling bad about my actions prior to meeting you. But I do now. While I don't regret the ultimate result of my ruse, I feel very bad that I hurt her. I'm thankful she rebounded as she did and made a nice sum of money that should last her for a good long time. I like Janine quite a lot and I am grateful for her forgiveness." He concluded.
"I like her too, actually. Was it difficult to...kiss someone you weren't sexually attracted to?"

"The kissing wasn't nearly as difficult as the..." He paused as he tried to think. "What is the female equivalent of a handjob?"

At this, John flew into a coughing fit and Sherlock thumped him on the back with concern until he quieted.

"I think handjob...will do, as far as terminology. You did that?"

"Yes. That's what people who date do isn't it? Plus it was an excellent way to fend off actual intercourse. I don't believe I would have been able to do that. Nor would I want to. Manual stimulation lies somewhere between oral and a friendly pat on the shoulder, doesn't it? While it did nothing for me sexually it was very interesting to watch and a fascinating experiment. It was nothing I'd ever want to make a habit of but I was happy to please her and the situation was unique enough to serve as an intellectual exercise for me. That said, it's nothing I ever want to repeat."

John swallowed hard as now that Sherlock had put the imagery in his head he couldn't stop picturing it. Though he wasn't fighting very hard against it.

It wasn't making him hard but imagining Sherlock, sliding a hand slowly down Janine's body, her breasts, her stomach, finally slipping into her knickers, her moans, soft, her thighs spread, Sherlock, his lips pink and swollen from kissing her, his hair tousled, his breathing fast and heavy, whispering filthy things in her ear, his fingers wet...

And it didn't help that his friend wasn't done with his description, somehow picking up just where John left off.

"It actually wasn't all that difficult." He continued. "A slow, gentle hand, firm when necessary, light pressure, tight circles, a bit of penetration, occasional stimulation of the very real g-spot, the usual bluntness and innuendo in her ear and eureka. Not really sure why straight men find it so difficult. As the final part of my penance to her, I'm to serve as a "wingman", accompany her to a few events and point out viable romantic partners. John? You looked flushed again. Are you alright?"

John coughed again though he really didn't need to. It was just to bide time.

The images flashing through his mind were voyeuristic, filthy and about 12 different kinds of sexy. He needed them to stop if he was going to continue this conversation.

"Yeah, yes, I'm fine. You just described it in far more vivid terms than I could imagine."

Sherlock glanced at him with a look that John couldn't exactly read. Smug. Confident. And something else...something...

"I know how to please a woman, John, I simply have no interest in doing so. Well, perhaps I don't anymore, I think I deleted it. The point is, it's academic. it's textbook, like most things I assume. And each kiss and orgasm got me that much closer Magnussen and Appledore and putting a bullet in his head."

"What if it had gone farther? What if you'd had to actually sleep with her?"

Sherlock sighed.

"I'd really tried to avoid that as best I could and thankfully did. I had planned on professing to be fairly traditional, a sort of no sex before marriage type of fellow which I did hint at. If that didn't
work I would have feigned impotence which wouldn't have been difficult. If that still didn't work, well, I suppose I would have popped a Viagra, closed my eyes and thought of England."

"I'm glad it didn't have to go that far."

"Not half as glad as I am."

"I guess when I asked if you'd had sex and you said no I assumed that included no sexual contact."

"No, you asked if I had made love. I truthfully answered in the negative. Though I can clarify by saying I have not had penetrative sex with anyone."

"So, I'm lost. If Irene Adler is so perceptive and a lesbian and presumably with said perception, clever enough to know that you're gay. Why did she change the text alert on your phone to her moaning."

"To fluster me. To tease me. To have control over the fact that that noise can occur at any time. It's just a silly joke."

"Does she sext you?"

"She does indeed."

"Ok, lost again."

"They're not sexts about she and I..." He said scratching an itch that had suddenly appeared on his arm and was of apparent great interest.

"How can a sext not be about the two people on the phone?"

"She likes to tell stories she thinks I'd fancy." he says quietly.

None of that made much sense to John but he knew that Sherlock, unless it was for a case (...apparently up to and including making a woman orgasm for a case) wasn't going to do anything he didn't want to do. "You two have a very odd relationship. But good on you, I suppose. What harm does it do?"

"None so far as I can tell."

"The things she writes, do they turn you on?"

"That's a complicated question."

"It is?" John asked not unkindly.

"If sexuality, desire, need, want was a...a faucet, for lack of a better metaphor, I've turned it off...at some point. I don't remember when."

"Turned it off?"

"Yes, and I can't remember where the damn spigot is anymore."

John laughed and his friend, again, joined him. He considered making a lewd joke about the location of the spigot but decided against it.

"Maybe I deleted it." Sherlock added.
"I don't think so. To add a poorly chosen metaphor of my own, if you're wired for it, if you ever had it at all and drew pleasure from it, then it's part of your personal makeup. Kind of like restoring a computer to factory settings. I imagine it's still there. You just have to access it. Do you want to access it?"

"Well, I already said I wasn't looking for a romantic partner so..."

"Yes but you can still be sexual on your own." They'd never spoken this frankly before about sex and certainly never for this long. He wanted to take advantage of it all before the spell of this odd place and their odd placement was broken. "Do you, um, masturbate?"

"No...not for ages." Sherlock narrowed his eyes but John could tell it was more out of self-protection than anger. "You think I'm a freak."

"I don't think any such thing. I'll tell you..." He scrubbed at his face before continuing. "Since Mary died I haven't...had much desire either. Any desire I suppose. It's like it vanished. That sex dream I just had was the first in longer than I care to remember."

"Well, that's good then, right? A sign of better things? Healing?"

"Yes, yeah it's good." Hoping he kept the lack of surety from his voice. "Anyway, it sounds like yet again we're in the same boat."

"Yes, I suppose so." He said before a worried look crossed his features. Before he could question him Sherlock asked; "John..."

"Hmm?"

"When this is over, when you're released, have you thought about what you might do?"

"I don't know. I was toying with the idea of just packing up and leaving the country. I'm not sure."

"My offer still stands. Come back to our home." He said looking at him hopefully. Our home.

"After everything that's happened, you want me back at Baker Street?" He asked finding the offer hard to believe.

"I cannot imagine you anywhere else. I will remove all alcohol from the flat, I'll take my sobriety as seriously as you take yours. I will not knowingly jump off any buildings without your express consent. A poor joke, maybe, but the sentiment behind it is true. Come home to me, John, please."

"Even though I'm a mess?" He asked, his throat closing tightly.

"It's never been a consideration before," Sherlock smiled.

John missed him. He missed the clutter of home. The dishes in the sink, the mug rings on nearly every wood surface, Mrs. Hudson bustling in and out. His chair. Sherlock's chair. The creak of the stairs as a client approached. Looking up and seeing Sherlock, working, thinking, sleeping, playing the violin.

The house, the house he and Mary had bought together was from another time. A time he couldn't go back to and without her, he didn't want to. Maybe, best to let it go.

"Ok, I'll come home." He said with a broad smile his friend returned. "I don't really want to be
anywhere else."

"I'd braced myself for a fight." Sherlock said with an anxious exhale.

"No fighting." John said softly as he placed his hand on Sherlock's cheek. "No more fighting."
Leaning in closer, he pressed his lips to his friend's. It wasn't like the kiss in the dream, full of want and passion. It wasn't like their first kiss at Baker Street laden with angst and hurt and release.

This was softer, sweeter, kinder, something that could build like embers and kindling or could easily just stay as it was.

Why not this? Why not this right here? This peaceful, quiet kissing? Sherlock was the person in the world he loved the most and he was loved just as fiercely in return. Neither of them were interested in romance or even apparently sex. They just wanted to be what they were, best mates. John was of the opinion that that part of his life was over. No more women or girlfriends or wives. He was widowed and would stay widowed. Not to mention, the truth was he was always irritated with how the women in his life, all but Mary, wanted to make him choose between them or Sherlock. He wound up choosing Sherlock every damn time much to their surprise.

And as for Sherlock, well he had just said he'd essentially put the idea of a partner and romance to bed as well. So...why couldn't this be it? Yes, it was strange but what of it? Friends with benefits was such a crass term. He didn't want Sherlock as a fuck buddy. He didn't want to fuck him at all. He just wanted to sleep at his side, spend lazy mornings before the world was up and running talking quietly in bed. What was that? Did it have a name? Did it need a name?

The dream, well that was just an exaggeration, right?...His mind running riot. Mistakenly melding intimacy with sex. Like a bad translation of a foreign text, keeping the bare bones of the tale but missing the subtlety. But he didn't want sex, right? Of course not. He was straight. He liked women, loved women or at least he had in the past. He'd apparently had a minimum of 46 lovers for crying out loud.

He just wanted intimacy, like Reggie had been talking about in group. All the things that happen around sex that people ignore or skip or forget about. All the things that bring people closer together in ways that really matter.

Apart from Mary, Sherlock was the deepest most meaningful and true relationship he had ever experienced. Right now he just wanted to crawl into this feeling of safety and joy and never, ever emerge.

Was it so beyond the pale? If they weren't stepping on the toes of potential lovers, if they weren't even getting in their own way, if they weren't hurting anyone, why not? Why couldn't best mates include this? At least some of the time?

Labels...well, labels just seemed so unimportant here.

Sherlock made a small noise, a whimper that caused John to press a bit harder and in a teasing, testing way slip his tongue into his mouth. He felt his friend react with surprise but regroup quickly.

"Is this ok?" John whispered against his lips. "For us?"

"I think so." He said quietly in reply. His pupils were large and dark as they searched John's eyes.

"Can we maybe be...this. Mates, best friends and this? Can we?" He interspersed his questions with kisses, kisses which Sherlock returned.
"I don't know...I don't know what this is...I just know being in bed, touching you, holding you keeps the darkness, keeps everything away. But what are we doing?"

"I don't know either. I...I'm confused. I just know I want to go on kissing you."

"Me too."

This time it was Sherlock who reinitiated the kissing, placing a hand on John's cheek and drawing him in.

If John could have frozen a moment in time, a perfect, untainted moment where his mind was clear and blank except for the thought; "I love him." he would have. This would have been it.

Changing positions John rolled atop him, wanting, needing to have their bodies as close as possible. He thrust both hands into Sherlock's hair, sinking his fingers into the curls and scratching his scalp lightly. Sherlock swore softly though it was largely muffled against his mates lips. John felt Sherlock possessively, tightly sling an arm around his waist tugging with that same desperate need for closeness John felt. Eventually, it crawled up his back and into his hair, cradling his head and angling it the way he wanted.

"John?" Sherlock said breathlessly pulling back for just a second.

"Yeah?"

"If we're to continue doing this you're going to have to shave this fucking beard."

"You hate it, don't you?"

"I hate the hair, I am positively furious about the beard. And it's serrating my face."

"Want me to take care of it now?" John asked with a smile.

Sherlock grinned and pulled him in for another kiss. Unwilling to break away.

"Soon, yes, but not quite now."

Author's note: I'm trying to keep author's notes to a minimum but I'll break my rule here. This chapter went through several different versions. In one the dream wasn't a dream but something real. In another, there was no kiss at all and I decided to bump it to their parting once Sherlock had to leave. In another, the sex discussion was rather light and jokey with just hints of seriousness. But finally, I started breaking it down and realized I wanted them to have a deeper discussion. A real talk about how they felt about intimacy and sex and their past, what they'd done and hadn't done etc...

I first started off with only having John be the one with, for lack of a better phrase, performance issues. I also didn't hit the idea of Sherlock being so, (on the surface) against the idea of having a romantic partner so hard. But I was uncomfortable with the idea of them kissing without Sherlock, in his own way being equally closed off from a relationship and from expressing his own sexuality. I needed him just as clueless as John for this to fly.

This scene needed a balance. And I needed a reason for them to not push it farther. That's why they both have different root causes for erectile issues with the same result. The kissing couldn't and
shouldn't escalate.

**Simply put I needed to stop any erections before they started.**

And with both of them being so good at compartmentalizing things, I figured it played.

Of course, he's in love with John, but he's put the idea and possibility so far out of his head he doesn't even consider it. Of course, John is bisexual and in love with Sherlock but he can't understand or face that concept right now and this feels so comfortable and safe and lovely, so why muck it up with labels and sex, he figures? They're both lonely and hurt and damaged and self-protective and truly not willing to face certain ideas right now.

Two clueless people are fine. One clueless person kissing another who's in love with them comes a little too close to cruel, intentional or not. And I didn't want that for either of them.

I also wanted to stress the idea that for all their similarities, there are differences. John is bi, he likes women and finds the idea of Sherlock giving Janine a handjob intensely erotic because of both people involved. Sherlock is gay. When he speaks of a potential partner he refers to a man, when he speaks of his past it's always the boys and young men he's gone to school with. He has never questioned his sexuality, it has always been fact and while he did what he had to do with Janine he can't conceive of deriving pleasure from it the way John would.

But I digress. Back to my initial point. I made certain John confirmed several times in this chapter that Sherlock has put the idea of romance as far away and as high up on a shelf as John has. They enter this naively but equally and only when I decided to do that did the writing come together. They've both danced on this line of platonic romance or a romantic friendship for years and now they live in the deep valley between friendship and relationship and they're going to have to walk out of it together. I also think it's a perfect explanation of why you don't leap into a sexual relationship mid or post rehab or when you're still recovering from trauma as they both are. Neither of them are ready. But they are ready and hungry for intimacy which is something both of them have been very bad at giving and receiving in the past.

Ok, that's all I got. As always, thank you guys so much for reading and liking my story.

And if you see a spelling mistake, feel free to point it out as some of you have already been so gracious to do. They embarrass me to no end and being an insomniac I tend to post very late at night/early in the morning with little sleep so mistakes can be rampant. But, I'd rather be temporarily embarrassed and correct the mistake then have it just sit there like an eyesore. Also, if you see a sentence repeat, that's an A03 bug that happens sometimes. You delete a sentence, 30 seconds later it reappears and if you don't notice, you look like an idiot.

Alright, it's past midnight on Friday. I've got a 3 day weekend coming up so I hope to get more written for you...once I figure out what to write. :)

I'll try not to have such ponderous authors notes next time, but I didn't want any of this to be misinterpreted.

Best wishes,

-Maribor
They skipped breakfast and John let his morning exercise slide as he was far more partial to the workout he was currently receiving.

He couldn't let morning chores slide, however. He had to keep up on chores and meetings to retain phone privileges. And once Sherlock was gone that would be essential.

Regretfully he parted from his mate and slipped into the bathroom to shower and dress. As he was shaving Sherlock came in as well and John smiled as he saw his friend's reflection in the mirror.

"I like my doctors clean shaven as I have so often told you." Sherlock said, his voice a resonant rumble from behind John.

"Yes, I know." He said just before the razor froze mid-air when Sherlock placed a kiss to his shoulder. He let his eyes open lazily and the reflection again showed exactly everything he wanted to see. The crown of Sherlock's dark locks, pink lips pouted in a soft kiss. The two of them together. "And you always get your way."

"Would that that were true." He said.

John smiled and finished up the shaving, paying more attention to the figure behind him than his face. It would likely be a bit of a patchy job but he didn't care. He loved seeing the two of them together like this. It wasn't jarring. It was natural. Sherlock was all attentiveness and soft kisses behind him, planting them on his neck, just below his hairline and behind his ear.

The attention, this tenderness was almost too much to bear, too perfect, far more than he deserved.

Why hadn't they done this before...earlier...why-

But that thought was suddenly cut off. Like a wall came down before he could finish the thought.

He must have stiffened a bit because Sherlock paused behind him.

"You ok?"

"Mmmmmm, yeah, sorry, just a stray thought."

Not...regretting this, I hope." He replied and John could tell he was trying to make his voice sound steady.

"Not for a moment." Reaching a hand back he placed it in Sherlock's hair urging him closer. "Please don't stop."

That was all the invitation his friend needed to resume and John craned his neck exposing more of it for his mate's lips.

Closing his eyes, John enjoyed the sensation silently for moment upon moment until Sherlock's sudden cough jarred him.

"I think I inhaled a bit of your shaving cream." He said with another cough and laugh.

John laughed as well before offering an apology.
"I'm sorry! Let me take care of it." He turned on the water and bent forward to rinse off the remainder of the shaving cream. Sherlock's cough quieted as quickly as it started and after awhile, John felt, just for a second, hands, on his hips. They'd slid down from his shoulders, down his back and sides to land there, just for a moment. Large hands that gave him a squeeze, a possessive one, just the barest feeling of hips canting forward behind him. The movement surprised him but he didn't object.

He raised himself slowly and turned into Sherlock's arms.

"Better, love?" He asked quietly before rubbing his cheek against Sherlock's.

"So much better." They kissed briefly and after a moment John turned his attention to Sherlock's neck.

"Have I ever told you that you have Orion's Belt on your neck. Three freckles. Right here and here and here." He said punctuating each "here" with a kiss. Sherlock sighed pleasantly, his body growing a bit heavier against John. "I have always wanted to kiss you just here."

"Always?"

"Mmmhmm."

"John...?"

"Hmm?" He inquired as he continued his kisses.

"...John?"

"Yes, Sherlock?" He whispered against his skin.

"John, as much as I would...like for this to continue...you've got chores." His voice broke on the last word just about the time John licked a stripe up his neck. Chuckling at the cracking of his voice John conceded.

"Quite right. I need to get going. Will you be alright alone?"

"I'm not a child," he said smoothly and with no irritation. "I can occupy myself. See you at Hanah's?"

"See you there." A parting kiss and he left the bathroom as Sherlock entered the shower. Slipping on his shoes he hurried out of his room.

To say John was in high spirits for the rest of the day would be an understatement. He felt higher than high, elated, off the ground. It wasn't that he'd forgotten, where he was, why he was here and how he'd gotten here...but this was the first real, consistent joy he'd felt in as long as he could remember.

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Seeing Hanah put a damper on things.

"You both seem to be in a good mood today, care to talk about it?" Hanah began.

John looked at Sherlock and they wordlessly agreed to leave their new closeness as something between them.
"We talked last night." John offered in return. "I agreed to move back home to Baker Street when my 90 days are up."

Hanah smiled and nodded, as always looking unsurprised.

"Anything else?" She prompted.

"No, that's all." John said with a shake of his head.

"Alright. Well, it brings me to what I'd like to discuss today. I want to talk about what comes next. Now we're doing things a little out of order here because Sherlock is still present. Especially in light of what you just told me there are elements of John's post-rehab recovery that will involve both of you.

John, this is a very controlled environment, as you well know. There's nothing like this on the outside. You'll have to make your own structure, your own rules, your own fail safes and from here on out that's something you and I are going to work on."

"I realize, given my past I may not be the ideal person to offer my services. But I'll be there to help John every step of the way." Sherlock said.

"You chimed in with that at just the right time, Sherlock," Hanah said. "Because it's exactly what I was worried about."

Both men frowned surprised at her response.

"Friendships, relationships, marriages live or die on this point and the sooner it gets addressed the better. You are not his sponsor. You cannot police his behavior or his actions. You cannot be his accountability partner because mark my words, if you try, it will breeds resentment and anger and it will kill your friendship."

"That's...a pretty dire warning." John said with a doubtful look.

"And it needs to be." She countered. "Don't get me wrong, I hope and expect you will support him."

"Of course I will." Sherlock replied.

"But support does not mean monitoring his progress through the steps, it doesn't mean looking over his shoulder and it doesn't mean thinking you are the solution to his addiction. You aren't, just as he isn't the solution to yours. I need you both to understand that this is critical. There are no superheroes here, nor are any wanted." She was addressing only Sherlock now and all John could do was look on. "Be there for him, talk to him, go to open meetings with him, help him focus. Offer him all the help you can, always and with open arms but remember he has to do the heavy lifting. Don't think you can do this for him, no matter how badly you want to, because you can't."

"Hanah, you make it seem like I'm going to be back to step one when I get out of here." John interjected.

"In some ways, you will be. You will have 90 days of sobriety and that is no small feat, but you are starting at a brand new square one, John. You should start sitting with the reality of that now as we transition you towards the last leg of the program.

Now, Sherlock, you also need to set some boundaries. Things you will and won't accept. From what I've learned, from both of you, you're very tightly intertwined. If one of you starts to go down the other does as well, like sky divers whose parachutes get locked up.
I see a friendship here that has its share of dysfunction but doesn't appear to be codependent. I'd like to keep it that way. If he goes down, you cannot follow him down, Sherlock. You cannot take up his cross and you cannot torture yourself to save him. Life doesn't work that way.

And John I would be telling you the exact same thing if Sherlock had relapsed. Hard boundaries. Hard lines. Love, and trust and respect and help and sympathy, but not at the expense of your sanity or your soul."

Sherlock had been largely silent and John wondered how he was processing all of this. He didn't have to wonder long.

"Respectfully...no." he said.

"No to what specifically." She asked. "To all of it?"

"Not to all. I agree with regard to accountability. I have been through rehab before as well and managed to stay awake during group therapy sessions. While I never took advantage of any offered sponsorship I understand and agree that it has merit. As I previously said all alcohol and any other substances will be removed from the flat."

"What other substances?" John asked.

Sherlock looked down at his hands for a moment clearly embarrassed that he'd been inadvertently caught.

"There have been times in the past where I've stashed certain things away in various places around Baker Street should I need them."

"There's nothing in our flat." John said easily.

"John, while your faith in me is-"

"This isn't about faith, mate. There's nothing in our flat. I got rid of it all."

"Since when?" Sherlock said with a frown.

"Since always, since that first night. Lestrade was searching the flat for drugs you clearly indicated that while you were clean the residence wasn't. Didn't take a genius to figure out what that meant. I determined your approximate level of addiction and assumed you weren't in any withdrawal danger and I found what was hidden and flushed it."

Sherlock looked positively undone which only made John chuckle.

That is quite an invasion of my privacy."

"Yeah, I suppose it was." John said nonchalantly before continuing. "In all these years you never noticed. When you got a craving for something you always went out to get it because you don't like doing drugs alone. You want to be around people even if it's just to ridicule their syringe technique. The flat could be filled to the rafters with everything you could possibly want and you'd still only take enough to calm you down so you could hail a cab and go off to find more."

"You've been doing this since we met?"

"Once a month, every month. It first started because I didn't want to live in a place that might be tossed for smack every week and I didn't know who you might owe money to or who might be
busting in. But after I got to know you and care about you, well it took on a life of its own. You were not going to die on my watch. Not if I could help it. Not ever."

"You can't possibly know every place."

"Oh, I think you'll find I do." John said with confidence.

"In my sock-"

"Yep."

"Behind the-"

"Yes."

"Also in the-"

"There too. That one is especially roomy, you'd stuffed quite a treat basket in there hadn't you?"

"In my loo there's a loose-"

"Yeah on the floor under the towel rack. Got it."

"Do you really know or did you just get me to tell you?" He asked after a pause.

"It doesn't matter. I got it all, Sherlock. The very last time I saw you I did a sweep. Came up empty handed, thank God."

"The last time you were at Baker Street you were in terrible shape."

"Yeah and so were you. That's why I had to check."

It took a moment for Sherlock to collect himself at this news. he was always the one doing things behind the scenes for people. Indignance in these cases always masked the deep emotion he felt at being cared for and fussed over and loved.

"I had no idea you had such busy fingers." He said indignantly and John laughed.

"I'm not sorry for that but I am sorry for interrupting you. Please go on." John said.

"Yes, well..." Sherlock paused as he retraced his steps. "Yes, as I was saying, there must be a line...a blood brain barrier, if you will, between the addict's experience and what they, in essence, bring home. That barrier, that filter is the job of the sponsor or the therapist. I understand that. Where we part ways is on the nature of my responsibility to John. I could give a long-winded speech about the thin line between pulling someone out of addiction and being pulled down with them. Or speak about the concept of retreating to advance. But I will only say this, if he goes to hell, I go in after him."

John pressed his lips together tightly, swallowing hard. His emotions had been swirling darkly since this session had begun. But with Sherlock words, there was a burst of light.

"Ok, well better an honest answer than a false promise. Thank you for that." Hanah now turned to face John. "John, how do you feel right now, answer truthfully."

"I feel depressed as fuck...truthfully."
"This wasn't to depress you but to prepare you but it does bring me to my next point. Like addiction, depression is not just something you shake off. Being here is how we address and parse it but we don't fix it. Depression can be managed, it can be overcome but it can't be cured, per se. You will always have depressive tendencies. Now let me explain why it's a good thing that you know that. If you left here, thinking you were cured you would be incredibly upset and confused the next time feelings laid you low. You might feel increasingly negative, disappointed with yourself, doubtful of the progress you made in here and perhaps even hostile toward seeking help again. I want to arm you with the knowledge that this can and will happen and that that is not defeat. Now, when you both came in this morning you were happy-

"Yes, I was." He replied quickly.

Undeterred she continued.

"You were happy because you're moving back in with Sherlock which I agree is a positive step. Between now and the time you're released I want you to focus on things that you can do for yourself that make you happy as well."

"I don't understand, as you just said yourself, moving back home is something that makes me happy. Getting back to work will make me happy."

"I'm sure it will. But those are all linked to someone else, in this case, Sherlock. And that's good. Addiction is selfish and finding happiness in and with other people is vital. But, I also need you to find things that you can do, completely independently that bring you joy. We cannot pin all our happiness on others. It's just another thing we have to take responsibility for ourselves. You don't have to give me an answer now but I do need you to consider it. In that same vein, do you think you'll go back to practicing medicine?"

Despite being fired he and the clinic had parted on relatively good terms. He didn't expect they'd rehire him but he'd likely still be able to manage a halfway decent recommendation. If that was what he wanted. Was it?

"I'm not sure. I can't imagine letting my license lapse but...practicing. I don't know."

"It's ok not to know. But give it some thought."

John took a deep breath as apparently, the things he needed to 'give some thought' were stacking up rather high.

"John, you ok?" Sherlock asked as he studied him.


"On the national average? The relapse percentages are 50%-90%"

"Jesus..." John replied rubbing his temples. He knew this, of course, like everyone did. It was as common as the 50% divorce statistic but it was so different when you heard it directed at yourself.

"But the success rate for The Location is 98." She stressed

"Yeah...but those remaining 2%, what do they do?"

"I imagine they try again." She replied.
"Why do I feel so personally attacked, after that?" John asked later that evening back in the room they shared. "I know it wasn't personal but it felt it."

Hours later and the heavy fog of dissatisfaction still hadn't lifted. John was still upset by the facts the figures and what appeared to be the almost certainty of relapse. If the predictions were so dire then what was he even doing?

Coupled with this was the fact that Hanah confirmed the travel halt was lifted. Everyone would start leaving tomorrow.

At the moment, Sherlock was on his phone texting with Mycroft and frowning the entire time. Still, he wasn't distracted enough not to answer.

"Because now more than ever you have a very delicate feeling of self-worth combined with the fact that you're easily offended. In addition to this, you crave praise though whether true praise or false praise you react in the same fashion. Namely dismissing it. In that respect, you can never be satisfied because it is your nature to be disappointed and mistrusting."

Well, despite the new elements of their relationship Sherlock was still Sherlock.

John liked that even if he didn't exactly like the expressed sentiments.

"I am not easily offended." He huffed.


"I don't think that's true at all." John said with a frown. "Also, I'm fine with accepting praise."

"Well, I think you were brilliant today in therapy. I believe you held you own in an unsteady situation."

"I don't know if I was brilliant. That's a bit of an overreach-" John began but was cut off by Sherlock laughing.

It took John a second to realize what he'd done.

"Alright, fine, you're a cockwand but you're right. What's Mycroft on about?"

"It's not important."

"Sherlock, tell me."

His friend sighed.

"I refused to tell him where I was and of course he was able to locate me. He's cross and I'm indifferent." He said tossing his phone to the side.

They'd been sitting cross-legged on John's bed enjoying the simplicity that was tea and biscuits and one another's company.

"Go on."

"One of the conditions of him placing you in here was that I sever our contact. A stipulation he seems under the impression I agreed to and I assure you I did not."
John nodded slowly. That...now that made more sense. He should have realized.

"John, you're thinking about it and I'd really rather you didn't. I'm a grown man and I am capable of making my own choices. I don't need my big brother's opinions or approval. I pleaded with him to get you in here but I offered no pound of flesh in return."

"I'm thankful for his assistance, I really am but I don't appreciate being used as a bargaining chip or leverage with you."

He should have known Mycroft would never do something out of the goodness of his heart. He'd never do something that didn't work to get him more control over his brother which was always his ultimate goal. He recalled their conversation in the hospital and briefly thought back to the words "He called me from the ambulance in near hysterics as they were bringing you in."

Near hysterics.

Could he really blame Mycroft for wanting to separate them?

"Whatever you're thinking right now, you're wrong and so is he. He asked you to look out for me when you first met, correct?"

"Yeah."

"And so you have. Now, put him out of your mind." Sherlock said as he moved closer on the bed.

"You alright with us keeping..." John made a hand motion between the two of them. He wanted to change the subject, interjecting Mycroft into the solitude of their new routine was not something he wanted to pursue any further. "This quiet?"

"I'm neither embarrassed by it nor in a rush to explain it to anyone. If you choose to tell Hanah I won't object or see it as a violation. People have misconstrued our relationship from the start. Though I respect Hanah I imagine this would be no different. What we do in the privacy of our home and our bed is our business."

"I agree. Speaking of which...not looking forward to you leaving tomorrow. I only get my phone at night but may I text you?"

"You may text and write and I'll be happy to respond to both," Sherlock said with a smile. "Do you want to deal with the house on your return?"

"I..." John closed his eyes. "I can't think about the house right now."

"I can contact my parent's lawyer, he can draw up papers and go ahead with the sale if you like. I'll handle everything that needs handling."

He didn't know why he was still holding on when Sherlock was right here offering to solve it for him.

But he just couldn't agree.

"Just...let me think about what I want to do, alright?" John asked before adding hastily. "This isn't me going back on moving to Baker Street. Odd as it sounds, they're unrelated."

"I understand," Sherlock said before leaning in to kiss him, a gesture John happily accepted.

Grabbing him by the t-shirt John fell back pulling Sherlock on top of him.
"Ready for bed?" Sherlock asked with a grin.

"I'm rather delighted I don't bore you. There was a time you stalked about Baker Street with a harpoon whinging and shouting about not having a case. I don't think kissing would have stemmed the tide." John teased.

"Well, you never offered so you'll never know." He said before growing serious. "That was before I went a year without you. Boredom pales in comparison to being without you." He said seriously.

John's heart shattered a little at the honesty and pulled their faces closer together.

"I'm sorry, Sherlock, I'm sorry." He whispered before kissing him once. He had a gut feeling there were more words to follow.

"You've awakened my sentimentality, John, and there's nothing for it, I'm afraid, no cure. I worried, in the past, theoretically of course how something like this might affect my work. I went through a series of precise calculations estimating time that would be lost with were such a distraction to come into my life. But I was wrong. I thought it would dull my wits, my need for intellectual stimulation and excitement. I thought it would derail my work. When in actuality it feels the opposite. I've never felt more clear headed, more keen, more eager. I cannot wait to have you back home, to rush out on a case with you at my side." He paused and broke the eye contact he'd been making by glancing down. "I'm talking too much."

"No, no you're saying everything I'd ever want to hear."

"I...I'll just be glad to have you home. I'm lost without my blogger. I'm lost..."

They kissed softly, unhurried and John reached to the side to switch off the lamp.

"How shall we spend our day tomorrow?" John asked.

That had been the one bright spot. Hanah had surprisingly given them the next day off and John had every intention of taking advantage of it.

"I'd be content to spend it like this if you like."

John chuckled.

"Maybe the first part but I have another idea for the bulk of the day."

The next day, after the as promised morning snog, they set out with borrowed clothes, boots and backpacks for a short hike.

John had given Sherlock a last minute checkup before finalizing their plans. But after finding him in good shape, much better than when he arrived and after tiring of Sherlock's protests they began.

The snow which had bustled in with icy fury just a few days prior had left little remnants of its anger. The snow that did remain was simply a fixture of the land, ever present, solid and blindingly white.

John was no hiker but he knew from James and a few others that there were clearly marked paths not far from The Location. After getting permission to leave, a car drove them around 45 minutes away to their destination. Upon arrival the driver assured John he'd wait for them until they were ready to return.

"I think the idea of coming all the way to bloody Switzerland and not climbing a very, very small
mountain is a terrible idea."

"If there's one thing you're familiar with it's terrible ideas." Sherlock replied but there was mischief in his eyes.

The paths were clearly marked by yellow signposts and knowing this wasn't exactly either of their forte's he chose the easiest road.

They spent the next two hours touring some of the loveliest land he'd ever seen. Rocky, dirt trails, lush grasses, an old and silent forest that opened into a meadow until finally they arrived at a lake, placid, chilly and still. Throughout most of the trip John had been pointing out various sights enthusiastically and Sherlock, obliging to a fault had looked and nodded and agreed and pointed out areas of interest of his own. He'd even chattered on about a few experiments he'd done on soil erosion for a case a few years back. It wasn't quite as dull as pages and pages of studies on different types of ash but it was up there. Or at least, it would have been had he not been so please just to listen to Sherlock's voice. However, here at the water that all stopped, all the noise and prattling from either of them died down and they stood silently, staring and drinking it in.

"I forget, you know?" John said. "That there's beauty like this. I wish I knew what this lake was called. Will you take a few pictures? I don't have my phone and I'd like to have something to remember this all by."

"Of course." Sherlock replied and took a few steps back to capture the scene before them.

"Be sure to capture all this loveliness."

"I'll do my best."

When he was done and had placed the device back in his pocket John took his gloved hand and held it.

That was all. He simply held it.

They stood there in the quiet of the afternoon and looked at the lake whose name he didn't know.

After trekking back down they found the car waiting as promised. They rode back to The Location and were met with the sight of people already leaving, saying their goodbyes and heading away.

"I've a bit more time." Sherlock said to him and after setting the alarm on his phone, they collapsed into bed and slept in each other's arms for the next 2 hours.

John awoke to a darkened room and the persistent buzz of Sherlock's phone.

"I have to go." Sherlock said softly against his chest.

"I know."

They dressed silently and only parted company when Sherlock went to his unused room to retrieve the remainder of his belongings.

Their true goodbye was private. Behind the security of John's door, kisses and low voices and promises.

"I wish I was going back with you." John said.

He still worried about being quite so open and honest with Sherlock. It wasn't their nature. It wasn't
how they operated. Or rather it hadn't been. In the past, he approached Sherlock with less armor than anyone else but still there was always a barrier between his best friend and his heart. But he was now laid so bare, so frighteningly open and he wasn't sure how to regather the pieces of his shattered battle gear together again. It was terrifying.

The rawness of saying I love you which if memory served, happened more than a year ago, had only frightened him in retrospect. He recalled saying it without thinking all that much about how it might change their interactions. But it had passed his lips and had been returned moments later without fanfare. It had been easy and the door, once opened, had never been shut again. Their "I love you's" flowed back and forth, never rote, never just a thoughtless ending to a conversation, a substitute for goodbye. Rather a true expression of affection and support and a sort of repledging of their commitment to one another. Whatever fear had followed, it had been worth it.

But he still worried about expressing too much, revealing too much, pushing Sherlock farther than he wanted to go. The alcohol and now the rehab had opened a floodgate and he felt less in control of his emotions that he had since he was a child.

"You've still work to do here. When you're finished, 40 days from now, I'll come for you and we'll go home." Sherlock replied.

Then again, there were times like this when John wondered just how much Sherlock had been holding back as well. How much had he wanted to say and express but time and habit and fear had kept him from doing so. It was so bloody cliche but he felt like they were in a good place, a place that perhaps they should have reached sooner but at least they were there now.

A last kiss and an I love you, murmured against lips he'd become delightfully familiar with over the past few days. They left John's room, walking down the hall, out the front door. Sherlock got into his waiting car and offered John a smile.

"Text me." John said.

"I will." Sherlock said with a smile before shutting the door.

John watched, hands thrust into his pockets, forcing a smile as the vehicle made it's way down the mountain.

He walked glumly back inside but was greeted by James, cleary in high spirits after his wife's visit. John had thought after Sherlock's departure that he'd want to be alone but as it turns out he was glad to see his friend.

They picked a table in the commissary and sat down for dinner.

"You look like you're in a chipper mood." John said with a smile. "How did things go?"

"I took your advice. I chucked the script, I laid it out on the line. I told her things that I hadn't before, hadn't dared. I mean we went places in therapy that...well I just never imagined."

"I know what you mean." John nodded.

"I feel positive about it all now, you know? Like maybe this time things are going to be like they should. She kissed me when she left. You have any idea how long it's been since she could even stand to kiss me?"

"I'm happy for you, mate. I am."
"And uh, I saw Sherlock showed up. You didn't expect that, eh? How was that?" He asked.

"It was good. We got a lot of things hashed out as well. In a way, he's the only family I really have so...him showing up was important. Really important."

"I didn't see much of you guys about, you know at the social events and such."

"Were there social events?" John asked with surprise.

"Yeah, a few." James laughed. "I did see him at a few group meetings though, always in the back. Quiet like, a bit broody looking."

"That's just his default face." John replied trying to tamp down the surge of affection as he remembered that face. "It's mostly bark and little bite."

"You look better, John." James said seriously. "I was...worried."

"You look better too, James." He said before raising his can of cola for a toast. "To better days ahead."

"To better days." James echoed.

On the way back to his room John stopped by the front desk to retrieve his phone. He waited until he was safely inside to turn it on.

2 New Messages
He smiled as he saw they were indeed from Sherlock.

Arrived back at Baker Street safe and sound. If you were worried, don't be.

I find myself missing you more than I thought possible.

John smiled and quickly began to type a reply.

Glad you're back home. I miss you too.

The suddenness of seeing the three dots indicating a reply was being written made John's heart leap.

Was the rest of your evening agreeable?

It was fine. Odd how quickly I got used to you being here.

As did I.

Mrs. Hudson has been relentless in trying to find out more about my time with you.

Still insisting we're a couple

She just said the words "I hope you didn't "you know" too soon, Sherlock. He needs time."

Now she's saying "My sniggering is indecent." and "It's implying things."

I can't stop laughing.
You're having far too much fun.

Tell her I said hello and I intend to thank her properly for all that she's done.

She said she misses you and looks forward to you being back home.

I miss her as well.

Sherlock, as your doctor I think I'm going to request that you bed down early tonight. It was a long trip for you and you know you don't do well after multiple plane rides. You always catch cold and you seemed just on the verge when you arrived. You battled it back but I'd just as soon you took it easy for the next few days.

John expected an argument but instead and to his surprise, Sherlock agreed.

Yes, John.

I would recommend you do the same.

I will.

Sherlock, thank you.

For everything.

And I mean that.

Dating all the way back to the afternoon when we met.

Thank you.

Thank you for the same.

Tomorrow then?

Absolutely.

Good night, Sherlock.

Love you.

And I you.

As he waited to return his phone, there seemed to be a bit of a backup at the desk for some reason, he decided idly to head to Twitter.

The top trending topic was #SherlockHolmes

What on earth could have happened?

He looked at a few of the random tweets.

Replying to @ConsultingDetective221B

Shezza's Gurl @BakerStreetDeets Oh my God, I'm deaded #SherlockHolmes
What-Son? @DeerstalkerStalker This seems like good news. #SherlockHolmes #John

Replying to @ConsultingDetective221B

Gracey Grace @EmptyHearseClubbing Does this mean you're back? #SherlockHolmes

John scanned a bit lower but unable to find the tweet that had caused the uproar eventually went to Sherlock's timeline.

Once there, he saw two new tweets.

The first was a photo. In the background was a beautiful, silver lake, smooth and peaceful in gentle afternoon light.

In the foreground, John recognized the silhouette of his own profile, mostly in shadow due to the placement of the sun. But it was clearly him.

The caption read; "Wishing you all a pleasant and peaceful evening in the company of beloved friends."

He hadn't known Sherlock had gotten him in the shot as well.

Be sure to capture all this loveliness.

The most recent and final tweet was simple.

Sherlock Holmes @ConsultingDetective221B I sincerely hope one of you lot has an interesting case. If so, you know how to reach me.

In his haste, John had neglected to notice Sherlock had added a hashtag of his own to his initial tweet.

John had also neglected to notice that hashtag was the number two trend, just below Sherlock's name.

He read it. And then read it once more before handing the phone to the nurse on duty and walking back to his room with a smile he couldn't hide.

Authors Note:

Guys, how amazingly lucky am I? The lovely and talented Perfidious_Snatch_Galore left me a fantastic review recently, said that she'd created fanart for my story and here is the absolutely perfect
result!

I adore it.

I love that only John is pictured. (EDIT I was wrong! *This piece is even more special than I assumed because I was just informed by the author that John is not the only one pictured! Do you see what I see?*)

I love the raw, rough-edged scratchiness of the title.

I love the overall atmosphere. And of course, I love the barely controlled anger of the red.

I couldn't be more pleased and I am humbled that something I wrote inspired something so wonderful.

Now, what you guys should do is go straight to Tumblr and look at more of her incredible work. You will not be disappointed!

You can find her main blog here -->> Sarah McFadden

And her side blog here -->> janusjupiter

I can’t thank you enough, Sarah! :D :D
RADIOACTIVE
TREES IN A RED
FOREST

May 31, 2017
Chapter 44

Day 67

Time flew and time crawled.

Day and nights in this place, days and nights without Sherlock blended together into one giant unblinking, unsleeping eye. Whirring too fast to be seen or really understood.

Days and nights also ticked by slowly, painfully, steadily, like the beat of a leaky faucet tap.

Having peace and then losing it made him short tempered and cross. It made him want to drink and the strength of that want, it's inability to be reasoned with frightened him.

"The hard truth of it is," Reggie began "You are an alcoholic whether you drink or not. You are an alcoholic whether you think about it every moment or not. It is in you, yes. But it isn't you. You are separate from your addiction though you occupy the same space. That may not mean much to you right now. But there may be a night a week from now, a year from now, ten years from now when it could. And I hope my words will come back to you. You are not your addiction."

Reggie was right, it didn't mean much to him now because he felt they were indeed one in the same and that feeling threatened to drag him down into paralyzation.

He hated himself for it but he was giving more and more consideration to Hanah's offer of pills.

But, John intended to exhaust all other avenues first.

"You're miserable, would you like to know why?" Hanah asked him one afternoon.

It had been 17 days since Sherlock left. 17 days and he felt every single one.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said you're miserable and I was wondering if you were interested in learning why."

"I'm sorry...I...I think I know why. I think I'm homesick."

"Mmm, that's part of it."

"Alright tell me." He said with a sigh.

"You're navel gazing."

"Beg pardon?"

"You're navel gazing. You're focused completely on yourself. Your concerns, your upset, your misery. Now, I know you're not following the steps all that closely. More of the spirit than the letter, am I right?"

"Fifty percent of them are about God. Half the steps, Hanah. Six out of twelve. It doesn't work for me. I'm trying to get out of it what I can but it just doesn't work. I say God bless you and God damn it and for God sakes and Mary and I were married in a church...when Sherlock fell I begged I said...Oh, Jesus no... But I don't believe. I've seen too many things, experienced too many things to believe in a deity, benevolent or otherwise. I can't pretend and I can't have it be the lynchpin of my
recovery because I will fail."

"Did you try other meetings here?"

"No...I didn't know...I mean I assumed they were all the same."

"Ok, well the good news is this. There are meetings both here and on the outside that embrace the secular and I urge you to find them. The second bit of good news is that you're doing well and that's mainly due to your commitment to therapy. But I still need you to give AA an honest try. I think the best way to do that now is through steps eight and nine."

"Make a list and make amends." He supplied.

"You know your stuff." She said with a smile. "Every so often we need to take inventory it really helps to stave off the wallowing. Soaking in your self-obsession only clouds the real issues we haven't reached yet. So, that's your assignment. I'm not giving you a due date other than they need to be completed before you leave rehab. Other than that they'll be finished when they're finished. Ok?"

"Ok." He agreed.

"Get out of your head, John Watson. Get out of your own way."
Dear Mrs. Hudson,

You once said, when you were quite cross with me, that people, but specifically me, forget lots of "little things".

I'm learning in here that that's true. I have forgotten a lot of little things over the course of my life. Both genuinely and not so genuinely. There are so many things in fact that I thought it would be better off if I didn't remember.

I'm learning in here that that's wrong.

After Sherlock "died" I did what I have always had a habit of doing. I brought down the curtain. It didn't seem that just his life was over but my life as well. At least my life as I knew it. If I was going to go on and I hadn't decided yet whether or not I was, for sure, I couldn't do it at Baker Street.

I couldn't do it in the flat that he and I shared. I couldn't do it in that ghastly messy kitchen or next to that fireplace mantle full of mad clutter. I couldn't do it in my chair staring at his chair...talking to his ghost.

And I couldn't do it with you there.

I didn't expect you to become such a large part of my life. I thought we'd pay the rent, maybe have a word with you when something was on the blink, ask if you needed groceries if we were off out. But not much more than that.

But you became this fixture in our lives, in my life.

I never said it because...I don't say it. These sort of things are hard for me. I don't know why.

Alright, I do know why but it's not important. The important thing is that I didn't really have a mum growing up. She died and it was just me and my sister, kind of on our own. I never got tucked in at night or fretted over the way only a mother can do. The way I imagine Mary would have been with Rosie. The way she was for that short stretch of time. But I have been lucky enough to get a taste of it with you. The way you cluck and fuss and worry and care. You always care. You're always so bloody caring even when Sherlock and I are being complete twats which is often.

When that man roughed you up and when I thought you'd been badly hurt and were dying in the hospital...I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt that very specific dread. I did recall a story Mike Stamford told me though, when he found out his mother had cancer. He told me; "John, it's like this hole opens up inside you, this hole of dread and worry and horror. And it doesn't get better once they're gone, it just changes into loneliness." That's what I felt when I thought I might not see you again, might not make it to hospital in time.

Like I said it's just me and Harry and we've never been close. So when I decided to propose to Mary, when I wanted to share that joy with family I came to see you. After inexcusable years of neglect, I came to see you.

This letter is part of the 12 Steps program I'm in but I think I would have written it anyway. I'm not sure how well it's going but the point is to apologize for what I put you through, for making you worry about me.
The tea did not just magically appear. Biscuits did not bake themselves. The flat was not set to auto-clean. That was you, all you, always you. And you put up with two stubborn, ungrateful, highly emotional, that is when they weren't being highly unemotional man-children. It did not and it does not go unappreciated or unnoticed.

I am sorry for the times I took advantage of your kindness and your forgiveness. I'm sorry for how selfish I've been.

Believe it or not, and I hope you do, your admonishment that you wouldn't speak to me ever again if I didn't tend to Sherlock meant something. Because, you see I couldn't imagine a life without you.

Not my housekeeper. Never my housekeeper. But my friend, my dear, dear friend and I think I can also speak for Sherlock when I say a surrogate Mum. If that title doesn't chafe.

Mrs. Hudson, you never have or ever will be a "little thing" and I will never forget you again.

I humbly ask for your forgiveness for my behavior this last year and I apologize from the bottom of my heart.

I am so very much looking forward to seeing you soon.

Love,

John

Mrs. Hudson

Molly

Greg

Harry

Mary
Chapter 46

Dear Molly,

I’m not sure if you want to hear from me. If you don’t. That is perfectly understandable. If I were in your position I don’t know that I would either.

I’m sure you know what this is, everyone knows what this is. I’m making amends to the people that I have wronged and I certainly wronged you.

I read your blog the other day. It’s still up. I know you said you won’t be writing on it anymore and I know it’s been years but, well, maybe you should.

I never gave you credit for how bloody smart you are. You’re not just a friend, if we are still friends. You are a medical colleague, a surgeon and when you and I are in a room together, the senior physician available. Talented, clever, brilliant. But I never told you any of that, did I?

But it’s not just that. I stupidly felt sorry for you when I saw how manipulative Sherlock could be with you. I thought you didn't know. But I read what you wrote on March 25th, specifically and of course, you did. Of course, you knew what game he was playing but you went along with it anyway. Just like we all do. Even when we know what's he about we go along with it. God knows I'm guilty.

I was so cross and jealous of you when he came back. When it became clear that you knew he was alive that whole time. But until recently, arse that I am, I never gave it a second thought. I never considered what a burden that was for you to bear. Or how hard it was for you to lose him too, even knowing he wasn't dead. No one had an easy time with this, those who knew and those who didn't. I apologize for my uncharitable and childishly jealous thoughts about you.

Were it not for you the entire charade couldn't have gone on as planned, could it? Someone had to write the death certificate and I imagine that someone was you. I'm sure there was more, a lot more. But I’ve never asked how he did it. The night he came back I told him I didn't care and I still don't. I don't care about the magic behind the scenes. Not to mention the fact I know it's driving him absolutely mad that he can't spill the beans to me and be lauded with amazement and praise. :)

But, though I am indifferent to how he managed it I am not indifferent to the actions and sacrifices you had to undertake to see this through. I apologize for my uncharitable and childishly jealous thoughts about you. Thank you so much for saving our friend.

I leaned on you very heavily after Mary died. Godmother is a largely a figurehead role, an honor without obligation. No one ever expects they'll have to come through. But then the unexpected happened and I was lost and hurt and lax. Full of presumption, full of grief, full of myself. I thrust Rosie into you hands far too often, I abused your goodwill and your trust without so much as a second thought. And why? So that I could go off and drink the world away or just stare near catatonic at a wall trying to wish away what was. I'm so sorry. I know you love Rosie but it was an undue burden, one for which you didn't sign up. Also, it was ghastly of me to give you that letter to give to Sherlock, to have you serve as an intermediary. I should never have put you through that. It wasn't your place it was mine.

Finally, we come to what shames me the most. I want to say, without reservation, that I would never frighten a woman, threaten a woman or put her in an ugly, dangerous position. The John Watson I was, a long time ago wouldn't. The John Watson I want to be wouldn't. But the John Watson I was
then *did*. I did all that to you. You came to my home out of genuine concern and I treated you with nothing but disdain and cruelty. I menaced you and I forced your hand. My behavior was abominable and I am deeply embarrassed and mortified by how I treated you, dear Molly. This letter doesn't come with a demand for forgiveness. You don't owe me that and I don't deserve it. I haven't deserved half of the kindnesses you've seen fit to give me. This is only to express my regret and my true and modest and undeniably inadequate apology.

I am so sorry, Molly. Thank you for being a better person and friend than I deserve and thank you for loving my daughter.

You are one of the strongest, bravest people I know. Far braver than me on my best day.

I haven't nailed down final plans yet, but I'll make sure that my sister understands, should she adopt her, you should be able to see Rosie whenever you like. I won't take her away from you like that.

I am an alcoholic and I realize it is important for me to admit that and acknowledge it at every turn.

And I am very sorry for the havoc and madness my alcoholism brought into your life and I ask for your forgiveness. I accept the responsibility for my actions including the fact that I may have lost the privilege of having you in my life. If there's anything I can do, anything to repay all that you've so selflessly given I would be more than happy to do so. On the other hand, if you'd rather I just stay away, I can do that too.

Thank you for absolutely everything, Molly. I can't say it enough and I doubt it will ever be enough.

Please, take care of yourself.

Your friend,

John

---

**Mrs. Hudson**

Molly

Greg

Harry

Mary

---

**Author's Note:** Hi guys, very briefly, I put a lot of links in this one, all about Molly. The three Tumblr links are from an absolutely wonderful, in-depth and helpful blog and lay down a very good case for Molly likely being a surgeon. I think it makes absolute sense so I went with it. You might find it interesting so take a look if you like. The other link is directly to Molly's official BBC blog. It's no longer updated and only had a few entries but it's worth a look in as well.
Chapter 47

Day 71

Two letters in and the dam broke. Two letters in and the roof collapsed in on itself. Two letters in and every other euphemism about being absolutely blindsided became relevant.

The letters, in terms of timing, were irrelevant, it was just a coincidence. They didn't cause anything in and of themselves. It was just a way to mark the time. Two letters in.

Hanah had been right as she usually was. Coming to grips with what he had done on a personal level, not just with Sherlock but with the rest of the people in his life had been cathartic, hard but cathartic and he had told her as much.

They had another session, not nearly as grueling as it could have been. And then when he was leaving she'd said something strange.

"You still have my direct number, right?"

He nodded.

"Yeah, it's in my room."

"Ok." She said simply. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He was confused by the question but chose to let it go.

"See you tomorrow."

Now it made sense.

He woke up in a cold sweat and proceeded to retch all over his blanket. The shock of it, the shock of all of it started him crying like a child that had been startled.

The nightmare came back to him with horrific clarity. At Mary's side, holding her hand. Barely able to even plead with her to stay because doing so would be accepting the knowledge that she was leaving. Right then. Right now.


Trying to keep her quiet. Trying so hard. Shhhhh. Mary, shhhhh. Words were life and words were goodbye and the both kept flowing from her lips. All he wanted to do was stem the tide. Please don't waste them. Please, love, please. Please.

"You were my whole world."

Jesus fucking Christ almighty. Jesus fuck.

You were my whole world.

You were my whole world.
"Being Mary Watson was the only life worth living."

Christ, Mary. Oh God, she was gone.

He bundled the blanket up and took it into his bathroom to try and clean it off. That only started an endless cycle of gagging, repressing the gagging and gagging all over again until he finally vomited in the toilet.

He'd been texting with Sherlock every night, rapid fire, comforting, relaxing, peaceful, teasing. They talked about John's day and how things were progressing in his therapy. They talked about cases he was on and yes, that was *cases* as in plural. They debated the outcome, the theories, the possibilities, they bickered happily and needled one another just like in the old days. He'd been worried about that. Would this change anything, would either of them feel the need to hold back? So far, it didn't seem so.

He wished he could call him now. But they'd long ago said their goodnights and he'd returned his phone to the desk.

Not to mention he didn't know what to say. He didn't want to call him blubbering. A frantic voice in the middle of the night moaning and whinging incoherently. He thought he'd sound incoherent if he tried to open his mouth.

He scrubbed the blanket as much as he could but it still reeked of course. He felt horrible at the idea that he'd have to leave it for housekeeping to take care of. If it was a hotel he would have left a substantial and apologetic tip but here he had no money. Instead, he bundled it up in the corner and placed a note on the top that said; "I am so sorry. I fell ill. I tried to scrub it as best I could. Please accept my apologies."

He returned to the bathroom to brush his teeth and that done he sat down on the edge of the bed.

Sleep wasn't even on the table. Not after that dream.

He glanced down at his hand half expecting to find it caked and sticky with blood.

It had felt sticky for days after.

*Out, damned spot.*

He couldn't call Sherlock. Not with this. Not now. Not even if he did have his mobile.

John's eyes drifted to his dresser and he stood up quickly and walked toward it.

There under his 30 and 60-day chips was Hanah's number. Grabbing it he hurried out of his room and down the hallway to the desk.

"I need to speak to my therapist. She gave me her number and said I could ring day or night."

He'd expected a fight but the nurse simply nodded and handed him a cordless phone.

"Of course, John. Go right ahead."

"Th-thank you." He said with surprise before starting to dial the number.

"Hello?" Hanah said on the other end of the line. She didn't sound as though she'd been sleeping.

"You knew what today was. You knew this would happen that's why you reminded me I had your
"number." He said.

"Yes, I did, John." She replied and she sounded just a touch sad.

"You didn't warn me."

"No."

"Why?" He countered.

"Because it had to be organic. Because I'm on your journey you're not on mine. I can't lead you anywhere, not really."

"That is new age bullshit!" He spat. "We don't do that, you and I. We never have and I don't want to start now."

"It's not new age, it may be folksy at best but it's still true. You're in charge of this, John, you always have been. Now, what do you want to do?"

"I want to get pissed. I want to get absolutely off my fucking face."

"What are you going to do?"

He swallowed hard and let out a broken scoff.

"See you...if you'll let me."

"Of course. Come to my office. Right now. Just come as you are."

"Ok." He said in a small voice and hung up the phone before handing it back to the nurse.

Without another word, barefoot, he started to walk to Hanah's office.

Ten minutes later he was sitting there in his chair, his toes flexing against the carpet grabbing it in tufts.

"It's 2 in the morning and yet it doesn't look like I woke you up." He said gesturing to her.

"I assumed that you would call tonight."

"Of course you did. Of course. You know, this whole time I wondered why we weren't talking about Mary. Why we were avoiding the topic completely. Why we were talking about everything except Mary! Now I get it. You were waiting for this."

"Tell me why you're here, John. Tell me why you called."

"You know why I called."

"And I want you to say it."

He took a ragged breath and slumped in his chair.

"This is a year to the day that Mary died. Died in my arms."

"I know, John. And I'm sorry."

"Do you know what her last words to me were? Because they haunt me...every fucking day, they
haunt me."

"What were they?"

"The last thing she ever said to me was 'Thank you.'"
Chapter 48

"What are you guilty about John? That you weren't there sooner?"

"There isn't time to list all the things I'm guilty about. But, yes, of course."

"Actually there is, there is time. Do you think you could have stopped it? Can you stop a bullet?"

"No!" He lashed out. "But I can stop them. I could have stopped them. They're both so mouthy and careless and provocative. Always with the retorts. Always with the backchat. They can't help themselves, neither of them ever could. That's why I'm there! They both told me once...and I believe, I know they're right, that I'm attracted to the danger. That I live for it and crave it and feed off of it. Fine. Fair play. But then what are they attracted to? Hmm? Someone who pulls them back. Someone who grabs them by the collar or the ear and tells them to shut their goddamn mouths before they egg someone into shooting them! That's my job, ok? That is my duty! And I wasn't at post! I was derelict! Again! I wasn't at my post."

He felt anger surge through him, adrenaline that momentarily made him shake until he took a few settling breaths.

"I was almost too late." He began again. "From the moment I arrived do you know how long she lasted? One minute and eighteen seconds. I just happened to glance at my phone as I was running through the aquarium and then right after she died I moved in such a way that it fell from my jacket pocket. I did the math so quickly I didn't even think about it but it was one minute and eighteen seconds. And I lie awake at night sometimes, all the time just thinking, as horrible as that moment was...had the cab driver caught one or two more red lights... Had traffic just been a little worse. Had there just been an extra one minute and eighteen seconds more delay I never would have even gotten the chance to see her before she died. To touch her, to hear her voice...to comfort her."

He burst into frustrated, angry tears that as usual, he couldn't control.

That was the last of his breakdowns for that late night or early morning session. By the time it was over and Hanah tried to send him back to bed he was exhausted. His throat was raw, his head felt near splitting, his eyes burned red and dry and he felt as forlorn and lost as he had a year ago.

He stumbled back to his room. It still smelled of vomit but the blanket was gone and his bedding had been changed and the bathroom cleaned. It was welcomed but...creepy. People, the staff, moved silently here, unseen. He assumed that was the way the wealthy wanted it but he would have rather apologized in person.

Even if he'd wanted to there wasn't time to sleep before morning duties called. He skipped breakfast and lunch and instead subsisted on a steady diet of black coffee which left him shaky and wired. Everything around him was hazy and distant, the people and their voices on lo-fi if not outright muted.

It seemed like very little time had passed at all before he found himself back at Hanah's.

"John, no. You clearly haven't slept, this is not the time to do this."

"Please, I can't sleep, I can't function with this just sitting on my chest. Can't we please go on?" He begged. Hanah looked doubtful but he continued. "If you send me away I'm just going to be sitting in my room staring at the walls. Please, Hanah, please?"
Her expression essentially read 'This is against my better judgment.' but she motioned for him to take a seat.

"Tell me how you and Mary met."

He looked at her with confusion.

"That's where we're starting? What about."

"That's where we're starting." She said firmly. "Take me back to when you met."

This was definitely a gear switch. He assumed they were going back to the aquarium but perhaps not. He wanted to go back there, to the darkness and the pain and the watery silence because it seemed like perhaps the only way to move forward.

"Ok, umm...we were a little short staffed at the clinic and my old girlfriend, Sarah hired her. Sarah was a doctor and she wound up getting a more lucrative position so she left awhile after."

"You've never mentioned Sarah before."

"Yeah, I guess I haven't. She was nice, clever, attractive. We dated for awhile and it was getting serious. I think it was serious. But then we went on holiday together, New Zealand and things fell apart. We agreed the best thing to do was stop seeing each other but it was actually amicable if you can believe it. We were able to work together, you know, like adults. When Sherlock "died" she called me about a dozen times before I answered. She came over, took care of me, tried to get me to eat, to move, to care...to stop drinking. She was my boss and even though she saw me at some of my worst she kept me on. She gave me the time I needed, if not to repair then at least to fashion some sort of mask that allowed me back to work. I appreciated that more than I could say. I think...we were better as friends than we were as a couple and I thought we made a pretty good couple.

When I started dating Mary, Sarah didn't say much to me about it. Well, just one thing, over lunch "I guess I just got the timing a bit out didn't I?" But then she added. "I'm glad you're happy, John. I really am."

I didn't know what she meant about timing, except I did. She liked Sherlock, well enough which is to say he didn't put her off. But New Zealand somehow exacerbated things. Somehow him not being around made certain things clear to her, she said."

"What things?"

"I don't know. I just know that somehow she felt he factored into our split. Anyway, she helped me stand up on my feet and Mary helped me the rest of the way. I suppose I've always had people propping me up."

"There's nothing wrong with needing help."

"I suppose," he said doubtfully. "In any case, she hired Mary while I was on a short break. So, I came back and she was there. They got on right away."

"What about the two of you?"

"Well, I noticed she was pretty right off but...I'd sort of packed that away you know?"

"I've heard you say that before. You pack your heart away after loss."
John thought about it for a moment.

"I guess I do. So, while I didn't exactly see her, she saw me. She was...bold..." He concluded with a smile. "I've always like that. Always. If I had my druthers I'd always prefer a person with a smart mouth and a quick wit. I like someone who keeps me on my toes and...and someone who doesn't let me get away with shit. Sometimes it's nice to be called out, you know? It's nice to have someone who'll take the piss. And that she did."

"Did you initially keep your distance?"

"Oh yes, I mean, she was the new nurse but by the time I got back to work she knew her way around. She'd let me know who my next patient was and what was wrong with them. She'd hand me files and do some basic work up's for me. But there wasn't much reason for us to interact beyond that unless one of us went out of our way. One day she sat down with me as I was having my lunch. Mary could just draw you into a conversation by being audacious or contrary or funny or unexpected. I think she managed all four in the span of about five minutes with me. I liked it. It surprised me that I liked it. I got used to it and started to look forward to it. But, I don't think I was going to make a move. I was too frightened to make any more moves. There was one day we'd been in mid-conversation after office hours and I suddenly remembered I had scheduled an appointment with Ella. I excused myself, rather abruptly and said I'd see her tomorrow. I got a few stoplights away and received a text from her."

John smiled as he remembered the words.

"She wrote, "That was very rude just up and leaving like that. I wasn't half done flirting with you." Hanah smiled.

"So, without even thinking about the consequences I replied something like "That was indeed rude of me. Would you like to finish flirting with me over dinner? Tomorrow say eight? Maybe, get it out of your system?" She texted back "That should about do it." And that's how we started."

"How long had it been before the text since you'd dated?"

"About a year and a half, I'd say."

"How long until you got serious?"

"Not long. But that's always been my M.O., I guess. I'm picky. I'd rather be by myself than with someone and having a miserable time. But once I do find a person I get serious about them pretty quickly. Women and friendships I suppose. It's...um, passionate, I guess. For lack of a better word."

"I think that word is fine. What did you tell her about you?"

"She actually said to me one day, 'Who did you lose?'. I said I'm not sure what you're talking about.' And she said you lost somebody that meant everything to you, absolutely everything. She asked if I had been married before. I think I laughed a little, said no and then took her to Sherlock's grave and told her the whole story. She took it all so easily. Not as though it was the absurd and tragic tale it was but seriously and soberly. After so many false starts I think that was the moment I finally started to let him go. Falling in love with her just flowed naturally after that. We sort of accelerated from then on out. We got a place together and I got to wake up every day and go to bed every night and see her face. She...suddenly made life worth living again. I couldn't find that on my own. I've never been able to, not ever. It was like that old myth of Prometheus giving fire to mankind." He closed his eyes and thought of her smile. "Finally I felt warm after being so, so cold and numb. She glowed and
managed to light just a few of the embers that were left in me. We just got on. We talked, we laughed, we did things. She told me that I made her feel safe. I told her the same thing. We never delved too deeply with each in terms of ‘safe from what?’. She just...she became everything, filling my days, my nights. Filling a void I thought I'd have to learn to live with. Not the void created by Sherlock exactly but just loss. Just an empty, hollow, loss. I thought I was done connecting with people but she opened my heart. She told me, "I never expected you, John Watson. I never saw you coming and believe me, I see everything coming. You blindsided me and I love you for it. I just love you."

John cleared his throat twice, fighting against the slight and salty burn these memories brought with them.

"Anyway, I bought a ring and made reservations at The Landmark London determined to ask her to be my wife. I was tired of waiting. Despite an absurd interruption I eventually got around to it."

"What did you think when Sherlock appeared?"

"I thought I was losing my mind. I thought I was cracking up. I kept that part of my life...the part of me that still had little conversations with him separate from my real day to day. I thought, Oh God, its broken through. It's happening. I shattered the veil between these worlds. I looked at him and then I looked at Mary, praying, praying she was seeing it too. Even in that bizarre moment, I felt such relief that I wasn't mad."

"How did she react?"

"Angrily, furious for what she said he had done to me. And very protective. I only remembered that in hindsight, I couldn't hear it at the time but she just wanted me to be ok. After everything had settled, cooled a little, as we were on our way back home all she wanted me to do was forgive. Mary inherited a wreck of a man. I had destroyed and tried to rebuild myself over and over again and all I had to offer her were fractured pieces and sharp edges. How much of this she blamed on Sherlock I'll never know but I suspect it was a lot. But it all seemed to fade presumably when she saw us together. Our dynamic. Even when I was so, so angry with him. She saw the truth. She saw where I wanted to be. She's the one that encouraged us to get back together. She was always so encouraging. She told me on the cab ride back that she liked him. Nobody said that about Sherlock after just meeting him...well, nobody except me. I think that's why it hurt so much to find out she shot him. There were plenty of my past girlfriends who would have liked to at least wing him..." he said laughing darkly. "But not her. Not Mary."

"How did you feel about your wife shooting your best friend?"

"Enraged. Blind with anger. Mad with anger. Baffled and hurt and dismayed and every other word in the book. I didn't want to believe it. Sitting there, hearing her words, hearing her admit it, I still didn't want to believe it. I think if it hadn't been for Sherlock I would have done something very, very stupid. I think I would have walked away."

"Tell me why you believe that."

"I can be cruel, Hanah. I can be so cruel. I can be so hard and so unforgiving. I will go against my better instincts, my needs, my heart, I will burn the bridge I'm standing on without a second thought. Mercy and pardon don't come naturally to me, they never have. But he wanted me to forgive.

She gave me something, after the big reveal. It doesn't matter what, not now. But she gave it to me and she said "If you love me, don't read it in front of me." I asked her why. And she said "Because
you won't love me when you're finished. And I don't want to see that happen." And do you know what I did? I put it in my pocket. Because I did still love her.

We went through months of sometimes silence. Angry, furious cohabitation, seething public appearances and OB GYN visits and Lamaze classes. Screaming, brutal fights. Fights where we both said truly awful things to one another. Biting, horrible things, things you can't ever take back or un-hear. Vicious and chilly carpooling to work. She slept in the bed and I slept on the sofa and we lived our lives together and apart. I would attack, she would defend and round and round we'd go. I was mean, Hanah. I was self-righteous and cruel. I wasn't just angry with her, I was angry with Sherlock too because from day one he was trying to push us back together. Mr. I-Don't-Do-Emotion, which certainly by then I knew was bullshit, was constantly on me to mend things with her. Talking about love and fidelity and what matters. It was subtle, mind you, no grand soliloquies, but it was there. This is while he was healing from the bullet she put in him. While he was wincing in pain. While he was pale and sick and struggling to get through his day. And while Mary was at work or home tired and sore and frightened and trying to get through hers.

A long time ago I read this book and there was a quote that stuck with me and I last thought about it when I actually did plan to kill myself but...it came to me during those terrible months with Mary as well. I know it by heart.

"Here in the bathroom with me are razor blades. Here is iodine to drink. Here are sleeping pills to swallow. You have a choice. Live or die. Every breath is a choice. Every minute is a choice. To be or not to be. Every time you don't throw yourself down the stairs, that's a choice. Every time you don't crash your car, you reenlist."

I could have left. Any day, any hour, any moment. I will admit to you as I did to her one night, there was a part of me, an ugly, slithering part that wanted to torture her. To leave her guessing and gasping on tenterhooks like a fish on a line. I wanted it to hurt. I wanted her to feel unsteady, unsafe. It felt good to hurt just like when I was doing awful work with Duck. Just like when I hit Sherlock again and again and again. Just like when I pistol whipped a suspect. It felt good to dole out my judgment. The executioner doesn't wear a hood to hide his face, he wears it to hide his smile.

But after awhile, a long while, even the sick, sexy thrill I got from inflicting that pain just faded. And I was left with my wife, in our home, with our child that was getting nearer and nearer to being born every day and I thought about that quote.

I had a choice. I always had a choice. I could have left. I could have walked out of that house and sued for divorce and custody and never looked back. And I would have won because once anyone started peering into her past everything would, of course, fall apart. I could have left her broken, childless, penniless and homeless. I could have ripped apart her world with my bare hands. I will tell you this and I know it for a fact sometimes living is far crueler than dying and I could have done tenfold to her what she nearly did to Sherlock.

But I thought about that damn quote; Every time I came home. Every time I didn't walk away, I reenlisted. I had to come to grips with the fact that I wanted to be there and that that emotion of wanting to be with my wife and loving her despite what she'd done could coexist with a feeling of being beyond angry with her and feeling betrayed.

As Christmas started drawing near, well before Sherlock invited us to his parent's house, I started working, on my own, on how to reconcile my feelings. The silliest thing is, my path had already been set. Don't read it in front of me if you love me. And I didn't, I put it away. In fact, I never read it at all.

Mary and Sherlock and I live exaggerated lives. Lives that stretch the boundaries of belief. It's all too
bizarre and strange and mad. And I never invited anyone else into it. It was just the business of we three, that was all. I don't expect anyone to understand. What's more, I don't need anyone to understand. I don't need anyone to cosign on my forgiveness of my wife.

I put us both through the trials, I put us through the labours of Hercules and we came out the other side battered and bruised but together. I wanted to stay together with her. I have never taken what she did lightly and it wasn't over, I wasn't...we weren't fully healed, that's not how wounds work. But we were getting there, we wanted to get there. I decided it was worth getting there. I am thankful every day that I found Mary Morstan. And I am thankful every day that Sherlock lives. And I am thankful every day that I never had to explain to him why she remained in my life. He gave me that gift. And I never had to explain to her, after his return, why he remained in mine. They both..." He faltered as his voice broke. "They both just accepted all of this, from me, from each other. Their acceptance, their latitude in their own ways taught me how to be a better man. All I can say is bugger the rest. I doubt anyone on the outside could understand what we went through and how we made it out together. And that is a pity but it's their pity, not mine. I wouldn't and I won't shoulder it. The two of them taught me forgiveness and I am a notoriously difficult student. But they tried and they taught and I aspire someday to be more like them.

Without reservation, I loved my wife. There are only three feelings I have left concerning Mary; love, grief, and guilt."

He had been speaking non-stop. Or at least it felt non-stop. It was as though once he started he couldn't end it. Something was snowballing and his sleep-starved mind had set it in motion. This didn't feel good. It didn't feel good at all.

"You are not to blame for whatever caused Vivian Norbury to fire at Sherlock and hit your wife. That is not your fault. You don't have to feel guilty for being angry that Mary shot Sherlock or for how much time it took you to forgive. I suspect you took as much time as you needed. So, where is the guilt coming from, there's something you're not telling me."

"Because I lied to her."

"What about, John?"

"I didn't forgive her. Not fully. I mean, I forgave her for shooting Sherlock. Or, I was forgiving her... But that's not what I'm talking about. Layers upon layers. You picked up on this early on...you asked me if I often forgave when I didn't mean it. So did Sherlock. I don't know if Mary did but it's likely. We never talked about it but..."

He wanted to stop this now before it went too far.

"What did you not forgive her for, John?"

"I told her, The problems of your past are your business. The problems of your future are my privilege. That's all I have to say. That's all I need to know."

"And what was wrong with that?"

"Everything! Everything was wrong with that. I didn't want to know, don't you understand? She would have told me. She gave me everything. She handed it all over. Like a person going into a confessional to be cleansed once and for fucking all and I stopped her. It would be like a priest just saying, oh give me the highlights. I don't want to hear it all. Because I didn't. That wasn't a kind thing to say or a benevolent thing to say. That was shutting her up because I didn't want to know. How can you offer this blanket forgiveness when you don't know everything. You can't! At least, I
don't think you can."

"That's why you feel guilty?"

"NO! Yes!" He swore with frustration. "That isn't all. I can't... I couldn't be mad at her because...because I lied too. I dissembled, I kept things from her. Her story about being an orphan was patchy at best. We both knew it. She sat there and told me and waited, waited for me to press further. I don't know what would have happened but she was just waiting. But I didn't. I didn't say a word. I nodded and I agreed and I expressed my sadness at her absent family.

But I did the same thing, Hanah. I told her nothing. I didn't even mention a sister until she saw the engraving on my phone. I never told her about my father or the abuse. I shortened any information about Duck and our life together...what I did. I didn't even tell her exactly what Sherlock and I did. I kept everything vague, purposefully vague. I lied and I lied and I lied again. How could I blame her for doing the same when I kept just as many secrets? When I withheld huge sections of my life. We settled into our falsehoods and we silently agreed not to press too hard or too far. Jesus Christ...I mean, I knew her, I knew who she was at her purest and that matters, that's who I fell in love with and I hope she would have said she knew the same about me. But that doesn't mean I didn't lie. And that I never admitted to her I lied and I hypocritically withheld forgiveness even when pretending I wasn't. And after all that I cheated on her. You know even if it hadn't turned out to be Eurus and just all part of her ridiculous, unhinged plan it would still have been awful. She died thinking I was a good man. She died believing she had let me down. Over and over again. She died thanking me. Mary got a lot of things wrong, a lot. She did many a stupid, impulsive "This-is-for-your-own-good" kind of thing but she was faithful. I broke my marriage vow. I broke a vow. Not her...not Sherlock, me. It was never because I didn't love her. It wasn't even because I wasn't in love with her. I was. I am."

"So what was the reason?"

He'd started to clench and unclench his fists at his sides, nervous energy warring with exhaustion.

"I wanted to blow things up. Or maybe I just wanted to bring them to a head. I wanted something I couldn't have. I wanted to have my cake and eat it too. I wanted to gorge. I wanted both halves. I was so greedy. Fuck."

"Ok, ok, John, slow down. I'm not following. You have to slow down."

But he couldn't slow down, he was talking so fast, breathing so fast, great gulps of air but it wasn't enough. His head hurt, his heart hurt and his skin felt like it was on fire. Things were happening here. Something was building and he didn't like it but he couldn't stop it. He had said more now, right here in this past hour than he had perhaps ever with Hanah. Just a fountain of words and concerns and truths and confessions and the more he spoke the more wanted to come out. It was too much. It was damning but he couldn't stop it. That distant feeling was back again. Palms on warm, smoldering wood, heating him up from the inside, dead but alive but dead. Lost in the forest and getting closer and closer and closer to what frightened him.

"That's all." He said before quickly. "There's nothing more to say. That's all."

"Is it? There's still something you're not telling me." She said searching his face. "There's something else. And you want to tell me, John. I think you've wanted to tell someone for a very long time. That's why you're here. You may feel better when you get it out."

He got out of his chair suddenly and paced briefly before pressing his back against the farthest wall of her office. He needed space, space between the two of them and space to breathe.
"I can't."

John folded his arms in front of his chest, closing his eyes as he lowered his head. He wasn't sure when he'd started to lose it. When the tethers had come undone. He was frayed and stretched to near breaking and so, so very tired. Everything on his shoulder, his chest, his heart sat so heavily he felt like he could barely breathe. And still, no matter how much he wanted to stop, prevent it, bottle it up it was coming and he could feel its approach.

"Tell me, John. Say it out loud. Why are you so guilty?"

God, it was true.

The realization broke in his mind and heart like the dawn. It was all true and it always had been. And he had almost said it a dozen times, a hundred times. He had whispered it to a polished, obsidian headstone and an empty chair and into the darkness on those endless nights and not saying it now didn't make it any less true. Oh God, what an arse. He was such a stupid fucking delusional arse. So stupid. So fucking stupid.

"I feel guilty because...because..." He shook his head still, a part of him hoping in futility he could just leave it there, unsaid, unspoken, untrue.

"Because?"

He shut his eyes as hard as he could. Hard enough to see lights. Hard enough that he felt the blood rushing and pounding in his ears.

"Because when I married her I was in love with someone else."

He thought he might shout it. He thought it might erupt from his mouth in dramatic fashion. Instead, it fell like an ordinary fact, simple, subdued, true.

If he'd expected a break or a pause from Hanah it wasn't forthcoming.

"Who John?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her, his vision taking a moment to bring her face to focus.

"Sherlock." He said quietly. Less than a whisper.

And there it was. Not with a bang but a whimper. All that pressure and tension, all that energy and fear that he had felt barrelling toward him vanished.

There was only the sound of his ragged breathing in the room. Hanah was quiet and still, letting it happen as he suspected she felt it needed to.

He couldn't take it back now. It was out. Another living person had heard it. Not an object but a person and his breathing went from ragged to gasping and the world blurred at the edges. Christ, a panic attack, he was sure of it. Heading at him furious and unstoppable. It had been a while since he had one of these but the feelings were familiar and terrifying. His legs felt weak and he let them slowly go out from under him and he slumped against the wall. Sliding down he eventually came to rest on the floor.

"I didn't marry her because he wasn't there." He said slightly defensively speaking more toward his outstretched legs than her. "That isn't what happened. She wasn't my second choice."
Hanah got up from behind the desk walked over and say cross-legged before him.

"OK, so what did happen?"

He'd never voiced it out loud, no one had ever asked him to explain it before. But also, he'd never even asked himself.

"I loved them both. Sherlock first, Mary second. And then when he came back...would that it were so simple, right? Imagine if all I had to do was look her in the eye and say, "Sorry to throw you over, love, but the bloke I've been pining for for years resurrected himself from the grave. Let me call you an Uber." Or just turn to him and say pretty much the same. "Sorry, Sherlock, only room for one love of my life in my life right now. But if you'd still like to bring the wine we'll have a bottle for the table." He laughed sadly. "To be that guy, that big of an arsehole. Cruel yes, but simple. So fucking simple. Just a transfer, like moving money from one account to another. I am an arsehole but not quite to that level. It wasn't either or. It was never either or. But loving them both like that, that isn't possible. I must have been lying to myself."

"Why?" Hanah asked. "I think you're under the impression that love and affection are something solid, something with weight and mass. We're taught in school that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. But that's not how love works. That's not how the heart works. You were in love with Mary?"

"Yes." He said letting his head thump back against the wall behind him.

"You were in love with Sherlock?"

"Yes."

"Then if I were you I wouldn't be so worried about trying to mete it out and make sure it adds up. Trying to measure love is an excellent way to tie yourself up in knots. Now, answer me honestly, do you believe any of your drinking or anger issues stemmed from being in the closet?"

"No. No." He said shaking his head. In the closet. He didn't know what to do with those words just yet. They didn't feel right. They didn't feel as though they fit. All he did know was that he could say is he felt no inner turmoil about...about loving another man. "I'm not drinking because of Sherlock."

"I'm not being that obtuse in my questioning and I think you know that. I also think you understand that when you came back from the war you had a blank slate. You didn't know anyone in London, you were estranged from any family or old friends with the exception of Mike. You yourself admit Mike to be more of an acquaintance than a mate. You meet Sherlock, young, single, attractive. Did you consider it? Did you consider that that might be the moment to take a different path? Did you consider coming out?"

In a second his thoughts took him back at Angelo's. The small table by the window, Sherlock opposite him.

What do real people have, then, in their 'real lives'?

*Friends; people they know; people they like; people they don't like ... Girlfriends, boyfriends ...*

*Yes, well, as I was saying – dull.*

*You don't have a girlfriend, then?*

*Testing. Testing it out. Testing the waters. Entering in without even knowing how to swim.*
Dangerous. Stupid. Foolish.

Girlfriend? No, not really my area.

Not his area. Then...maybe... Could it maybe be this easy? To fall into something without even trying?

Oh, right. D'you have a boyfriend? Which is fine, by the way.

I know it's fine.

A sharp reply. Offended that he presumed he might be gay? Or offended that the addendum of "Which is fine by the way." telegraphed that it wasn't fine at all?

He pressed forward.

So you've got a boyfriend then?

No.


At that point, his mind had flooded with thoughts of "Too much! Oh God, too much, what are you doing?"

John, um ... I think you should know that I consider myself married to my work, and while I'm flattered by your interest, I'm really not looking for any ...

End this, you idiot. End it now.

No. No, I'm not asking. No. I'm just saying, it's all fine.

And it had remained "all fine" for six years.

"I think I might have considered it...for a moment at least. But I got frightened."

"Are you still in love with him?" Hanah asked.

"I don't know." He lied before adding, "Yes."

"Does he know?"

"He has a blind spot sometimes when it comes to me. If he knows he's never said."

"I want you to tell me how you feel when I put forward the idea that your sexuality isn't as clear-cut as you've imagined. How does the term bisexual sit with you?"

John opened his mouth and shut it again with a small shake of his head.

"I've only ever dated women."

"Ok, not what I asked." She said kindly.

"And I've only ever felt this way about one man." He continued.

Hanah just gazed at him...and waited.
A face flashed before his eyes. Brief but recognizable.

Oh.

Oh. Of course.

He stayed silent for a minute. A solid, silent minute as he processed and reprocessed.

"Duck." he said simply at the end of it all.

"Duck." She agreed. "So, again, how does the term bisexual sit with you?"

"Does it count if I've only ever fancied one, sorry, two men?"

"It's not a numbers game, John. No one is keeping count or score. It's not about percentages or a ratio of women to men either. Bisexuality does not have to be 50/50. That's not how it works. This is about how you feel, right now, in this moment. How you feel about your wife and how you feel about your best friend. When you weren't in my office what were your interactions with Sherlock?"

He flushed at the memory.

"Good. Quiet." He said before adding, "Perfect. We shared my room...and my bed."

"Did you have sex?"

"No. We didn't have sex but we kissed. On the lips."

"More than once?"

"Many, many times."

"Is this something you'd done before?"

"Only the time he told you about, at Baker Street. That was the first time."

"How did you rationalize this?"

"That we were broken and lonely and had both sworn off romance and dating and we...we just needed the familiar. We needed intimacy and safety. We needed each other."

"Ok." She nodded before glancing at the time on her phone. "We have been at this for a long time and you haven't gotten any rest at all. I'm going to call an end to today's session but first I want to thank you for your honesty. This, all of this, was very, very difficult and emotionally draining. You did an excellent job today, John. Tomorrow we're going to work on dismantling some of that guilt and seeing how it ties into your drinking and self-destructive tendencies."

He nodded again and wiped at his face, his hand coming away wet.

"I understand all that...That's what we tackle tomorrow. But what do I do now?"

"Rest. Maybe hold off on talking to Sherlock about this until you've had more than 2 consecutive hours of sleep."

He nodded and rose from the floor. Once he was on his feet he extended both hands to help her up.

"Thank you." She said with a smile.
"Thank you...I think," he said running his hands through his hair. "So I'll, um...see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, and you can still always call me, day or night. That wasn't a one time only thing."

He nodded and placed his hand on the knob to leave.

"Let me leave you with one thing, John. It's the great secret of therapy. My job is just to help you realize things of which you're technically already aware. Nothing was said here today that you didn't already know. Nothing has ever been said here that you didn't already know. Only a few things that you maybe weren't ready to admit."

Author's Note:

The quote John mentions is from the guy who wrote "Fight Club", Chuck Palahniuk, and the book is called "Survivor".

I've been more vocal about this in other stories I've written but just a line or two here; The John I'm writing and I believe the John we were given, likes and loves Mary. I like Mary, I've always liked Mary. I don't, can't and won't subscribe to the idea of her being this unrepentant, malevolent harpy and I absolutely won't write her that way. The point, at least the point of the story I'm trying to tell, is that they are all incredibly damaged people. All three of them. Complicated, dangerous, careless, foolish people who each made awful mistakes. But those mistakes and the destruction caused don't need to be weighed on a balancing scale. And if they are weighed we don't have to discard or vilify the person who might this time cause the unbalance.

We don't need to beatify John or Sherlock to love them. Likewise, we don't need to damn Mary.

All three of them have paid for their sins.

All of them are square with the house.

But that's just my opinion...
Chapter 49

Sherlock, are you free to text a little?

Of course, John. Just got in. How are you?

I miss you. It was a rough day.

I miss you as well. What happened?

Before we get into that can I ask you something?

Of course.

Will you tell me about the last bad dream you had.

Alright. I was in the ocean. Adrift. Just floating.

It doesn't sound so bad.

I was alone. No ship that I had fallen off. No lifeboat or flotation device.

What do you do? Do you call for help?

I call for you.

Sherlock, I'm sorry.

It happens from time to time.

It's recurring?

For awhile now, yes. And you? I assume you're asking me about bad dreams because you've been suffering from one or more yourself.

No, I asked you because you told me when we were in bed that it kept the darkness away. You also said you'd visited Ella for nightmares. I didn't ask about it and I should have.

It's alright. I rarely have pleasant dreams. It's been that way since I was a child. Your asking wouldn't vanquish them, John.

Still, I'm your friend. I should have asked. I didn't know you always had nightmares.

It's why I've adapted myself to require little sleep.

You've done no such thing. You've deprived yourself of sleep and convinced yourself you've managed to do what people are incapable of doing it.

So little faith in my abilities.

So little faith in my medical degree.

...
Sherlock, I can see you're typing something but not sending it. Bite the bullet.

When you come back home will we still share a bed from time to time?

Of course, we will. If you want us to that is.

Yes, I would like that very much.

So would I. Glad it's settled.

Do you like bees?

I'm sorry...is that a typo? Do I like bees?

Yes, bees. The insect.

Well, um, never really thought about it. I'm not allergic to them. I've been stung once or twice and it just hurt a little. Why do you ask?

I quite like bees. My Uncle Rudy was an apiarist and when I was a boy he taught me how they're kept. I think I would like to keep bees one day when I retire.

Ok...why are you talking about retiring?

It pops into my mind from time to time. Have you ever heard of a type of honey that acts as a drug?

Can't say that I have. Tell me about it, Sherlock.

It comes from Turkey and it's called deli bal which means Mad Honey. Of the 700 rhododendron species in the world, only three create a nectar that produces a neurotoxin called grayanotoxin. When bees make honey in this hot and humid region where the flowers are plentiful no other nectar gets mixed in and the result is deli bal. Now, the reason it's called Mad Honey is because it's been known to cause incredible hallucinations. Rumor has it that when Romans attempted to invade in 67 BC, locals surreptitiously placed honeycombs along their path. The soldiers greedily consumed them and were so intoxicated they became easy prey.

I've heard of hallucinogenic plants, of course, but never one introduced into a food via pollination. Fascinating.

I found it to be as well when I heard about it while in Turkey many years ago.

You've tried it?

Of course. I had it boiled in milk.

How did you feel?

Lightheaded. Warm. It was pleasant. Not an incapacitating high but the shopkeeper refused
to give me anymore when I requested some. Too many foreigners apparently suffer *deli bal* poisonings. It's not fatal mind you, it just puts you off your face for awhile.

So, considering how ridiculous you are how have I not mistakenly added this to my tea some lazy Sunday morning and wound up starker on Oxford Street claiming to be Napoleon?

I didn't bring any back with me. It wasn't exactly that sort of trip. I'd meant to always send away for some but it's expensive and you have to be careful of forgeries.

How expensive?

130 quid for a pound.

Jesus.

That's not even close to the most expensive. That would be Elvish honey. It's over £5000 per kilogram.

For honey????

It comes from a very deep cave also in Turkey. It's supposed to taste absolutely lovely but it doesn't have any of the hallucinogenic properties of *deli bal*. One day when we're retired old men in Sussex and unable to get into any more trouble the way we are now we'll consume slightly more than recommended and become quite silly. We shall go mad with mad honey.

What's in Sussex?

The cottage we'll retire to.

It sounds as if you have things all planned out.

I'm sorry.

...

...

...

No, Sherlock, **stop** panic texting. I like the idea. I like it very, very much. Really, I do.

Oh. I thought I had presumed.

You did. Correctly.

Ok. Will you tell me of your bad dreams now?

No, I don't want to talk about my nightmares. Tell me something pleasant. Tell me more about the bees.

As you wish.

...
"For some of you, your time here is drawing to a close and to your surprise that may be causing feelings of stress and panic." Reggie began and John's ears instantly perked up. "This is absolutely normal and it means we've both been doing our jobs. You've been working hard and felt and seen progress and we've created a safe space for you to learn and grow and heal. It's only natural that while you're eager to resume your lives on the outside you're a little fearful of actually being out there. Let me let you in on a secret; there's nothing magical here and even if there was, you would have brought it with you we didn't supply it. I remember when I first got clean the words 'Your sobriety is in your own hands' sounded awful to me. Truly awful. I didn't want it in my hands. All I did was screw things up. Here someone, anyone, you take it."

This was greeted by understanding laughter from the room and John too.

"But once you're on the other side, once you can see the light at the end of the tunnel you start feeling gratitude that you're the one holding the reins. After spending so long out of control the idea that you can grab the wheel, stop this and enter a new destination is of leaving here means you're taking your sobriety very seriously. That's good. You likely didn't hold it in very high esteem when you arrived and now it's something precious that you want to protect. Latch on to that feeling.

There's a very old saying in AA: Spend enough time at the barbershop and eventually, you'll get a haircut. There will be temptation to return to your old ways, that's not the time to retreat into yourself. That's the time to do just what you would have done here, reach out to people, friends, and family who understand, look for a meeting, get in touch with your sponsor or your therapist. You ultimately make the decision as to whether or not you're going to drink again but that doesn't mean you're doing this alone. Don't do this alone.

Change can be scary, absolutely, it usually is. But it can also be bloody wonderful. But, you need to think about what you want to change. Not in a vague I-don't-want-to-drink-or-abuse-fill-in-the-blank again way. But definite goals. Real positive actions for your life. It can't be all about what you don't want to do. It has to be about what you do want to do as well.

So, what do you want to do?"

John had been preoccupied with a lot of things the past few days. One of them being the question of what was kinder?

Was it kinder to tell Sherlock what he had "discovered" about himself now or wait until he arrived on Day 90 to pick him up.

And if and when he did tell him, to what end? What exactly had they agreed to be when they began this...platonic kissing.

It had only been a year since Mary died. Did he really want to leap back into a relationship? Or was he already in one? Would asking Sherlock to...to what date? Be his boyfriend? His lover? Well, since nothing was working perhaps not lover... But, would asking him to be, to do any of those things be more or less than what they already shared?

He didn't want less and he was afraid of more.
Could this rock the boat?

Plus, what more *did* he really want? They were going to live together again. It was to be just the two of them. John had no intention of dating and neither did Sherlock so didn't they already belong to one another? For God sakes he had already tacitly agreed to retire with him in Sussex and raise bees. And the idea didn't even scare him. He was happy.

Should he say anything at all?

How exactly would Sherlock Holmes react to a confession of love?

Yes, he had changed. A lot. He was not the same stunted oddball John had met when the woman in pink had been murdered. But he was still Sherlock.

That was, of course, easy to say as memories of opening his eyes and seeing Sherlock's staring back at him faded a little. His lids heavy with sleep, his hair a delightful curly mess, his lips soft, eager, drawing closer. Wanting, needing a kiss even before a good morning.

Hanah had asked him to figure out what he wanted before broaching anything with his mate.

So, he went down the list.

He wanted to live at Baker Street.

He wanted to continue their work for as long as they both could manage it.

He wanted to practice medicine again, at least on the side.

He wanted to let Sherlock know how he felt.

He wanted to make amends with everyone.

And the last one surprised him most of all. It had hit him in the middle of the night like a sudden pain, a sharp and persistent ache in his heart.

Rosie.

He wanted to see Rosie again.

Forgotten Rosie. Neglected Rosie.

She'd be so different now. A year and 3 months old. He hadn't seen her since April. Almost a full year.

So as it turned out she and not Sherlock was the first thing on his mind when he saw Hanah.

"I think I'd be a shit father." He said by way of greeting.

"Ok, good morning to you as well. Have a seat, John."

He did as requested and gave her a sheepish smile.

"Sorry, that was rude of me. Good morning, Hanah. It's just I've been thinking about Rosie."

"You are a true military man. Like clockwork you are. I was planning on bringing her up today and yet again you beat me to it."
"I'm that predictable."

"Nothing wrong with being predictable now and then. So, tell me what you're thinking.

"I gave her away."

"I know, tell me about that. Did you want children?"

"I did. But I’d kind of given up on the idea. I never thought of myself as the marrying sort and I was always of the mind that having kids was something you did while you were younger. Mary and I used protection but we figured we'd talk about it later. You could set your watch by the regularity of her period and we'd never had any mishaps or close calls. I think the truth is we thought if we did it we'd adopt but neither of us seemed all that eager about it. We just weren't in a rush. But then we found out we were having Rosie everything changed. It was like my mindset changed. I got happy. I was happy. Absolutely surprised and shocked but happy. I know it was the same for Mary too. We went on our honeymoon and were like We're actually going to do this, aren't we? Just dive right in. I'm totally not ready but yeah, let's!

Because of our problems I didn't get to really enjoy the pregnancy and all the anticipation and planning that comes with it. I made sure things were running as smoothly as possible but I detached. There was no happy painting of the baby's room or choosing tiny clothes. It was all very rote. Once we'd mended things we got back into gear before it was too late. We did buy toys and clothes and a car seat and that bouncy thing you hang in doorways so they can...well...bounce."

"So you were back to looking forward to her arrival then?"

"Absolutely. I was elated. I didn't realize how badly I wanted a family until it was almost taken away. But after Mary died, I lost it. I moved Rosie to the category I put everyone else in. She was just a connection to a world I no longer wanted to be a part of. I would never hurt her, it wasn't like that but I just felt nothing. I went on all these message boards full of frantic, exhausted mothers saying the same thing but they had a valid excuse. It was postpartum depression. I could and would have diagnosed all of them with that, assured them it was normal and offered them whatever help I could had they been my patients. But that's hormonal and expected and though it feels the opposite maternal. There were no fathers on these boards saying the same thing."

"How did you feel?"

"Have you ever felt like nothing mattered anymore? Like, there's a limit on how much of yourself you can put into the world and you've reached it? You've reached your limit? You dig and you search but there's nothing there anymore. Have you ever felt that way?"

"I have."

"I could feel myself slipping. Losing my grip and she was there and small and helpless and when I did finally fall I didn't want her to be anywhere near me. I was going down a path alone and I needed her safe and far away. The thing is I never planned on coming back. I never made provisions for a trip back. And now here I am and I'm alive and I'm as well as can be expected and I gave away a daughter I have no right to reclaim. And it's not that I'm starting to regret the decision to give her to Harry but..."

"But you want to see her again. You want to know if in a way that isn't detrimental to her you can have a place in her life."

John nodded with relief as she had perfectly summed up what he'd been thinking.
"She won't even know me, it's been so long but I'd like to maybe get to know her."

"When did you start feeling this way?"

"When I saw the kids running to their mums and dads on Family Weekend. It was jarring to remember I had a child too. And then shameful to recall how I'd abandoned her. I think I just want to start with a visit or two. I think...I think ultimately this has to be left up to Rosie. I don't even know what she calls Harry and Clara. I mean, if they're Mum and Mum then I can't blunder in like "Oi, I'm your Dad, come with me." Fuck that. If I have to remain on the edges then that's something I need to accept."

"I think you have reasonable expectations, John. You'll need to hang on to them. You need to understand that prioritizing your addiction over a relationship with your daughter limited your rights, perhaps not legally but emotionally, ethically."

He nodded sadly but her assessment was essentially like his own.

"I understand. I just...I miss her. For the first time in a very long time I miss her. But I get that Harry can't just be a convenient dumping ground one minute and unnecessary the next."

"If this goes badly. If there's conflict or stress can you accept that it isn't an excuse to return to old habits. That's when what you learned here should kick in and not when you should drop it all together. That's going to be the temptation. That's where your mind and body are going to want to go. The sad truth is there will be times it seems they are fighting against you getting and staying well. I think it's good to prepare for that."

"I'm prepared, I think, as much as I can be."

"So, when I asked you what you wanted, how you saw your life I can assume that Rosie is now a part of that in an as yet to be determined way."

"Yes, absolutely."

"Where are things with Sherlock? Have you told him what you've uncovered in therapy?"

John sighed and shook his head slightly.

"I think I started to but...I chickened out."

"Are you afraid of his reaction?"

"Yes, of course. I'm afraid he'll think I'm being disingenuous. I mean who the hell comes to some sort of revelation about their sexuality in their bloody 40's? It's absurd."

"Plenty of people do, John. It's not as unlikely as you seem to think."

"Well, it makes me feel like a bloody teenager. Not to mention the fact this isn't just about me telling him I'm...bi. It's about saying I...I want us to give it a go. He could say no."

"He could." She agreed.

"You're always just so full of sunshine."

"I mean this in the least cheeky fashion, but you'd have me no other way. You don't want a therapist who's just going to blow smoke up your arse, John."
"He grumbled his agreement because of course, she was right."

"If he says no, that's going to hurt." She continued. "But it's going to be something you'll need to deal with, on your own, without pulling him into it. If he rejects the idea of being a couple do you still want to continue your friendship?"

He shutter blinked at the idea.

"Of course, I mean, I'm not one of those idiots who'd trash something meaningful because someone turned me down. I love being his friend. I love him. If we go this far and no further...so be it. Sherlock is my best mate. I'm staying put."

Hanah nodded but tapped her pen against her lip thoughtfully.

"There's more..." She said.

"That'll never stop being creepy." He said with a nervous laugh.

"Go on."

"Alright...I've never told you about this or anyone. You know Chernobyl right?"

"Ok, not where I thought this was headed but yes."

"After the cleanup, it was unlivable, right? It had absorbed this massive amount of radiation, a deadly amount. The government bulldozed some of the trees and buried them in these trenches and then they covered the trenches with sand. So, now there are these dead trees still standing tall and they're not decaying and they're red because of the radiation. They're dead but they're still standing. And the ground beneath your feet is mushy and uneven because of the sand and the other dead trees. Anyway, recently the forest caught fire. And I mean everything there is dry it's basically just acres of kindling. The fire brigade who went into battle it, they were able to contain it but they came out with these stories. Stories about what it felt like, the heat, this different kind of heat not from the fire but from the trees and the ground. They said they felt itchy and prickly, it made their skin crawl. It set off all these primitive sensations that just made them want to run away. It just screamed danger and the further they went in the worse it got. I read that story in one magazine or another or online or something and I became kind of obsessed with it. What it must have been like and felt like. Then it started to creep into my dreams and my nightmares. Then...it started to affect my waking life as well. I would...you're going to think I'm crazy. I would get close to Sherlock and I'd start to feel hot, like he singed me. But it wasn't him. I mean, I knew it wasn't coming from him it just happened around him the most. But occasionally others. Anytime I thought about getting close to someone, letting them back in I would think of the Red Forest and the fire and the radiation and the poison and the death. It's ridiculous, I know. I know it is. But I would come close to Sherlock and that tingling would start and I would think 'Well, this is a warning. This is a message to stay away.' I just never figured out if it was a warning for me or for him...or them. And that is my recurring nightmare. I'm in the forest, surrounded by all this red, red wood and walking on soupy, dry ground and the heat is unbearable. Sometimes it just warms my skin in this sickly way. Sometimes I catch fire. But I'm trapped and I can't get out and it goes on for miles and miles and miles and it's burning and I'm burning and it's dead and I'm dead and we're one. We're the same thing. I'm the Red Forest."

He was shaking by the time he was done and he'd barely taken a breath during the whole lengthy speech. He hadn't stopped, hadn't allowed himself to stop because it took all his courage to get this nonsense nightmare out from where it was wedged in his throat. He hazarded a look at Hanah whose eyes he had purposefully been avoiding. As always she was the picture of non-judgmental cool.
"When Sherlock was visiting did you feel as though you were in the forest?"

"No, that's the thing. I'd forgotten about it and by the time that I remembered...well...we had already been in very close quarters. We were already in bed together by then. But the dreams are still there. The last time I thought about it in daylight was..."

"Was when, John?"

"When I came...out."

"You're still stumbling over your words. You pause before bi and coming out."

"It hasn't been that long. It just doesn't feel as though it fits."

"Do you want to take it back?"

"No." He said suddenly but before he could add more she went on.

"Because as it stands, only you and I know. This is a real and genuine question. Do you wish you could take this discovery, this admission back."

He swallowed hard.

"I guess I thought...I thought that once I admitted it, it would snap into place. Everything would feel right."

"Does it feel wrong?"

"No, not wrong, just very different."

"Different isn't bad."

"I just thought if the unsaid was finally said I'd feel so much better about it all."

"You would be very special indeed if all your inner conflict was resolved so quickly," Hanah said with a smile. "It's a process, John, like any other. It's going to take a lot of time and you'll find that there are points where it intersects with your addiction and points where it veers off in the other direction. That is fortunately or sometimes, unfortunately, the nature of being human. Everything is entwined with everything else. But if this is who you are and who you want to be then you're on the path to embracing it and that's not a bad thing."

He nodded, digesting her words thoughtfully

"What does my dream mean to you?"

"That I'm going to tell you on another day. What confluence of stars needs to happen for you to tell Sherlock?"

"I don't know. I keep putting it off, trying to think of the right words. Trying to not spring it on him. I don't know if I should do it now or when he comes to get me on day 90. I don't know."

"What do you want to do?"

"Tell him this second, even though it scares me. Just put it all out there, heart on the line. If I'm going to breakdown I'd rather do it while I still have access to you. While I can still drag myself out of it."
"Why do you assume you'll breakdown?"

"I don't really but...Sherlock and I didn't used to do emotion. It's still hard for me to come to grips with the fact that we're far more open than we once were. I like it but I sometimes worry he might...revert."

"Or that you will?" She pointed out.

"Yeah...sometimes." He admitted.

"You want to be on solid ground? Have definitive answers."

"Exactly." He paused and smiled softly. "This is your way of telling me I should tell him isn't it?"

"Not at all, I can't make that decision for you. But I can tell you that people and life, in general, are going to be in flux. That doesn't however, mean we can't lay down a solid foundation with truth and honesty. It's up to you when and how you want to share it. But I will say this, you have repeatedly expressed a desire to get on with things. You're frustrated by your stagnation. You're upset by the time you feel you wasted. I think you should consider that when making your decision. Consider the trajectory of the rest of your life."

So he did. He considered the trajectory and everything within him, save his fear, was telling him it was the right time.

Tonight. He'd do it tonight. And by the time tonight did roll around he was resolved to the action if not the possible outcome.

"John," The nurse began as he stood at the desk to collect his phone. "Are you ever going to use your points?"

"My points?"

"Yeah, your good behavior points. I thought maybe you were saving them."

"I get points?" He asked utterly confused.

"Yeah, privilege points for chores and stuff. They explained this to you in the beginning and it's in the handbook."

As she spoke he did vaguely remember some mention of points. But for the entirety of his time here it had slipped his mind.

"Can I use these points to keep my phone out past hours?" He asked hopefully.

"You've got enough points to keep it for a week straight." She laughed. "But seriously, you can have it overnight but we need it in the morning."

"Great, thanks, thank you. You have no id...thank you."

He texted Sherlock as soon as he got back to his room.

_Sherlock, you busy?_

_Yes._ Came the rapid and short reply.

Ok. Busy. Understandable. He refused to take this personally. He'd asked a straightforward question
and gotten a straightforward reply.

*Can we talk later?*

**Later.**

Ok. Later. Ok.

He took a deep breath.

Fine. He could wait.

That was 7:40 PM. He tried to pass the time, tried to read, to write a bit in his journal, read again, listen to music all while keeping an eye on the phone. 8 o'clock, 9, 10, 11, 12. By 1 AM he had curled up in the bed still decked out in his clothes like a child having drifted into an uneasy but deep sleep At a quarter to 2 his phone rang.

Jolting awake he answered.

"Hello?"

"Oh." Came Sherlock's surprised voice on the other end. "I thought you'd have had to return your mobile by now. I was going to leave you a voicemail apology."

"No need. You alright? Home safe?" John asked sitting up straighter on the bed and stretching out tired muscles.

"I'm fine. There was some nasty business earlier concerning a man and a khopesh sword. But it's all sorted. Are you ok? Why do you still have your phone?"

"Apparently I earned some goody-two-shoes points and I get to use them by having my phone for longer. You really ok?"

"Fine, John. Nothing to worry about."

"I'm actually glad you called instead of texting. I wanted to speak to you tonight."

"Oh really? Why is that?" He asked but before John could reply he interrupted them both. "It isn't."

"What? What isn't?"

"Everything isn't alright. And you haven't eaten."

"How could you possibly know that? Or is this one of those times where you didn't know but I just revealed it?"

He hadn't eaten, of course, he'd been too nervous which Sherlock was about to deduce.

"If you want to speak you're upset and it's likely this is something that's been building meaning you've been upset for the entirety of the day. You never eat when you're upset. I want you to go to the cafeteria, select a small meal and return to your room."

His mate's typical bossiness which was so tinged with affection made him smile.

"Sherlock, it's the middle of the night they're closed down."
"Nonsense."

"No, not nonsense. For the time being I live here. That means I know better. I'm really not hungry but you're right...I have been thinking about something for a good chunk of the day." He inhaled deeply before continuing. "What if we told each other the truth, you and I? Once and for all?"

"I have no objection to that." His friend said after the smallest of pauses.

"If I ask you to do something will you do it without questioning me?"

"Yes." Came the reply.

"Get in bed. Under your covers, get comfortable and just relax and listen."

John heard Sherlock make his way to his bedroom, the sound of his body situating itself on the mattress and finally the rustling of covers.

"Done."

"Good, thank you."

"Now what?"

"Now I'm going to start talking and you're not going to interrupt me."

"Alright. Begin."

"Well, ok, so you know how you can know something in the back of your mind? Deep in your subconscious? And it's there, it's always been there just sort of waiting but you have to come round to it. You have to accept what you've technically already accepted but if you hadn't accepted it on some level you wouldn't even be thinking about it."

He could swear he could hear Sherlock's confusion over the phone. And why not? He was babbling uncontrollably.

"Then you have to think about what's more important; what you have or what you could have? Is it worth possibly ruining something because you're what, too greedy? What can you really expect the other person to say? How can you possibly know how they'll behave? Maybe they'll feel put upon."

"I know I promised to remain quiet, John, but I'm not following. What are you talking about?"

"Maybe I shouldn't say anything at all," John said as the paranoia of speaking the words aloud began overtaking him.

"Shouldn't say what?"

"I mean, it's bog-standard, isn't it? It's ordinary. People say it every day."

"What's ordinary, John? What?"

"Sherlock...I fancy you." He blurted out. And it was done. Just like that. "Actually fancy isn't the right word. It's too bloody small. I...love you. I'm in love with you and have been for ages.

There was silence on the line. Dead silence and were it not for a soft movement of what he assumed was Sherlock on his bedding he might have thought they'd been disconnected or he'd hung up.
"You are silent, dead silent and it's making me feel quite queasy actually."

No reply but he was certain he heard a hard swallow.

"Sherlock, goddamn it."

Still nothing.

"Sherlock Holmes you Skype me and you do it now. Hang up and call me. Now." He demanded. His body was thrumming practically shaking with adrenaline. Fuck, had this been a bad idea?

The line went dead and his Skype started to ring. He answered trepidatiously. And there he was on his screen, his forehead pinched, his mouth tight, the light from his bedside lamp casting him in a soft, warm glow.

John did not begin with; Hi.

"So typically, as I understand it, when someone pours their heart out to you you're meant to respond." He paused and swallowed.

"I wanted so badly for you to like the flat." Sherlock said suddenly.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"When we met at Baker Street for you to look it over and decide. I tried to clean up so it would be presentable. Spent hours at it."

John gave him a surprised smile, he didn't think this was where the conversation was going. He did, however, remembered the complete disarray he'd seen in the flat upon arrival. He also remembered a certain fretting worry to Sherlock's voice as he promised to tidy up. God, he'd had no idea all that was in store.

"Then when you didn't like the website I knew I had to go even farther to impress you. I thought, I have to do something grand or he'll just walk away."

"Sherlock, I was never going to walk away. I was already quite hooked...and smitten."

"But I didn't know that. I can read the simple things off you, John." He said speaking earnestly to his screen. "I know where you've been, where you've slept. I know what new habits you've picked up or what old ones you've dropped. That's easy, that's surface. But I've never been able to penetrate into you. What you're thinking, what you want, what you need. Trying to figure out where you were with me that night was like trying to read a brick wall. Impenetrable. I was overjoyed once you started laughing before Angelo returned your cane. Once we laughed together I could see you, if just for a moment and I knew you'd say yes."

"Of course I said yes. That was the first time in ages I'd felt alive and it was all because of you." John sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I suppose this is a bit obvious and redundant at this point but I'm...bi."

"I know, John."

"Yeah, of course. I mean, I couldn't fancy you if I wasn't."

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean I knew you were bisexual."

"Wait...what? How long have you known?"
"Since I met you." He said calmly, his face softening.

"Well, why didn't you...?"

"Why didn't I what? Anytime it was even hinted at that we were a couple your objections were strenuous and vehement. You have in all ways presented yourself as a heterosexual man. Meaning that, for me, you would be a dead end. I do not make it a habit of pursuing dead ends."

"But you said you knew I was b-bisexual."

"Yes."

"So..."

"My knowing was irrelevant. You needed to know it. Even now you stumble over the word. You aren't a case, John. I cannot make this deduction for you, present it and expect you to agree. No matter the evidence I might have had. Bringing you to an idea you're not prepared to face, why, I'd have better luck turning lead into gold. We are two intractable, rigid men, John. It is in our nature and we come to things only in our own time. Not to mention-" He bit off whatever he was saying, closing his mouth, his lips pursing briefly over the unsaid.

"Not to mention what?"

"Not to mention I could have lost you. You're not a Neanderthal, I didn't think you'd be offended or angry but...discomfort can act as an unseen wedge, it can lead to erosion. One moment you and I might be standing side by side and the next separated by a great chasm. I could not and would not risk losing you."

"You wouldn't have lost me."

"You don't know that."

"So what about now? Where does this leave you and I?"

This was not going the way John had pictured it. Not at all. In fact, when he imagined how he believed it would go he felt a little ashamed. It was supposed to be simple, easy. Sherlock happily, eagerly jumping at the chance for them to be together. Even now as he held the phone he cringed. Fuck, but that was a lot of presumption.

You're a real goddamn prize, John. Why shouldn't he jump at the chance to be with you?

Maybe Sherlock had gone as far as he wanted and had no intention of going further. Maybe sleepy, platonic kisses in bed every now and then was more than enough for him. Why shouldn't it be? What did John really have to offer after all this time? A broken down middle-aged man with an alcohol habit, anger issues, and a glaring disconnect when it came to his own sexuality. It was nonsense. What had he been thinking? Of course, his mate would be hesitant. Of course, he'd turn him down.

That was only fair and right and above all logical.

John was too big a risk.

Of course.

With that in mind, he started to backtrack.

"Scratch that. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that question. I mean, I realize I..."
"John, look at me." He said and only then did he realize he'd been glancing away. He was regretting demanding they Skype. He really didn't want to see Sherlock's face as he did whatever his version of letting someone down easy was. He really didn't want to be seen either. Glancing at his friends face John felt a very real surge of pain in his heart. Oh God but that face, his face. And everything that came with it. The feeling of his body against his, holding his hand, soft, gentle discussion, the same old loving teasing. God, he loved him. How stupid it had been to deny it all this time.

"Better." Sherlock said and it wasn't a question."Now, ask me what you wanted to ask me."

"I-I didn't want to ask you anything, really. I just wanted to tell you about um...my breakthrough in therapy.

It was cowardly and poorly performed. He knew that. He wondered if Sherlock would give him a pass.

Sherlock worked his jaw for a moment and John saw a coldness in his eyes. It didn't last.

"I wanted to see if you'd lie to my face and you just confirmed that you would. I'm tired of lies between us, John."

Shit.

"No, ok...there is, was something I wanted to ask. But I think I know the answer. Alright, I was trying to save face and maybe exit this conversation with a little, admittedly undeserved dignity."

"Ask the question." Sherlock insisted.

"Do you just want the pleasure of saying no?" John replied before adding. "Though I guess that's your right after all this time."

"Ask me!"

"Alright! I wanted to know if you'd consider giving us a go. You and me a proper go. I want to date you... I don't want our nights to end with me going up to my room and you going to yours. I don't want it always up in the air when or where we'll kiss. I want to share my life, such as it is, with you. I don't want to just work with you. I want to make love to you. I want you, Sherlock. Just you. I want you. I want a relationship. I want there to be an us."


He kept the phone steady but let his head thump back against the wall behind his bed.

"Why?"

"Why?" John asked incredulously. "Because it's you. It's always been you. I don't want to be me without you. Not anymore. But I understand if you don't-"

"Ok."

John was sure he'd heard him wrong.

"What?" He said raising his head to look at him.

"I said ok." He said his eyebrows raising for emphasis.

"Ok...what?"
"Ok, let's give it a go. You and me."

John stared at the screen in shock and tentative joy.

"Really?"

"Don't ask silly, redundant questions. You asked me if I'd been in love before. I said...yes but it was unrequited."

"I'm in love with you." John said in a rush.

"So I gathered," Sherlock said with a nervous laugh. "I'm quite hopelessly in love with you as well. There's nothing for it, I'm afraid. Though, it seems it's no longer unrequited."

"I really thought you were going to say no." And suddenly he felt nearly breathless.

"In the past I have been a stupid and wasteful man, but I like to believe I've learned better. I've no intention of wasting a chance with you. Though, I must warn you, I'll likely be rude, thoughtless, I'll unintentionally step on your toes or feelings and the work, our work will still take precedence during working hours..."

"You say this as if I don't know who you are," John said with a smile. "I know what I'm signing up for. And I'll likely be grouchy and short tempered, and we're going to have arguments about the weekly shop and body parts in the fridge but I'm all in, Sherlock. I've got a lot of fucking baggage but I'm all in if you'll have me."

"I'm all in as well." He smiled. "Do you feel better now?"

"Better doesn't come close to describing it."

"Good. Then you'll eat breakfast in the morning."

"Yes," he laughed. "Yes, I will eat. You know, I thought about not telling you until you came and got me. I thought about not telling you at all."

"The first scenario would have been quite dramatic. Not that this wasn't. The second one plain stupid." Sherlock paused, glanced away and then back. "About what you said...I thought you weren't interested in lovemaking," Sherlock said and John had to press his lips together to not telegraph the pleasant little shiver he got when his mate...sorry, boyfriend...said that word.

"What? Why would you think that?"

"Because of what you said." He insisted with marked shyness. Though he seemed unwilling to repeat just what it was John had said the latter was able to extrapolate.

"I said I was-" John looked around his room and suddenly realized how silent he had been in there for the past almost three months. This was really one of the first times he was doing anything but crying or humming along to music. Glancing at his door he could see it was locked but he lowered his voice anyway. "I said I was having a difficult time...getting hard. Not that I didn't want to."

"Oh. And you want to have that with me?"

"Well, yeah, of course. Eventually, I mean when things are working properly and...I mean, I'm not supposed to do it right away. They want you to remain celibate when you first get out of rehab."

"Oh." Sherlock said again and John could swear he saw a look of relief pass over Sherlock's face.
"You know, we don't have to rush into anything?" John added.

"I know."

"It's fine if we take things slow. I mean, my God, we only agreed to be a couple 3 minutes ago."

"Yes, I know it's fine." Raising his chin slightly. "Does it bother you to talk about such things?"

"No. Are you asking me because it bothers you?"

"...no."

"Do you...I mean are you interested in sex? You mentioned the faucet was off and you had no idea where the spigot was. I don't want to just assume."

"Well...um...to continue the metaphor...I...I'd be willing to do another search for the spigot for you. I'd be happy to. It must, after all, be around here somewhere."

John grinned at him and Sherlock grinned back.

"We're on no one's timeline, ok? I think we've proven that again and again. Things will happen when they happen. But yes, to clear things up completely I want to date you and I want that to lead to a regular, intimate sexual relationship between us."

The smile grew brighter, the smile John realized he'd loved for ages.

"I want that too."

John settled down into the covers his body finally relaxing. It was out. It had happened. It was happening. My God...the relief he felt.

"And we're to be exclusive?" Sherlock asked as he too moved beneath his covers.

"Yeah, I can assure you I have no intention of trolling gay bars for dates. I only want you. No one else."

Sherlock nodded.

"Do you want to date anyone else?" John asked.

"No!" Sherlock replied with alarm. "Don't be absurd."

"Good to know."

Am I keeping you? It's quite late."

"No, love, you're not keeping me."

"Are we to have endearments?" Sherlock asked seriously.

John burst out laughing.

"I guess I slip into them naturally. You don't have to force anything though. I've always like how you say John."

"Are you scared?"
"Of you and I? No, maybe I should be. Maybe I'm being overly confident but I'm not scared. It feels like a natural progression. I am scared of leaving this place though. But Reggie said that was normal."

"Speaking of, I understand what Hanah said, that I'm not to be your sobriety minder but I had a spare moment and gathered together a list of local AA meetings. I've listed them in terms of near to far but also made accompanying lists ranking religious affinity, volume, men to women ratio, convenient times, days of the week, open and closed meetings, LGBTQ acceptance, and freshness of coffee. I've emailed it to you and also printed it out."

"You made me eight lists?"

"I wanted to save you the trouble."

"You'd only know some of those things if you'd gone yourself. Freshness of coffee?" John grinned.

"I may have done some preliminary scouting." With a small shrug.

"Thank you, Sherlock."

"You're welcome, John." He paused. "Should I order a bigger bed?"

"I think we'll fit fine in a queen. We did here and that's what you have at home."

"Yes, we did. I miss that. I find myself missing you a bit more every day."

"Not much longer now."

"I don't know how comfortable I'll ever be with public affection." He warned.

"Yeah, I understand, Sherlock. Me neither. Look, you're worrying. But maybe, for the first time in a long time, we have something that the two of us don't have to worry about, ok? I mean, we've done a lot of the hard bits. Living together, arguing, getting through a fight, not infringing on one another's space too much. When you really think about, we survived a breakup, you and me. Not to mention a marriage. Think of it that way."

"Alright." Sherlock glanced down before making eye contact with John again. "About Mary-"

"I'll always love Mary, as complicated and strange as it was. And there are still things I need to work through regarding her. Hanah can attest to that. But none of it changes how I feel about you."

Again there was that smile of absolute relief.

"Ok, good, very good."

And that was that. Though John had worried about a change in mood a shift in temperature an awkward silence a relationship irrevocably shifted, none came. They talked and chatted as normal, bridging away from questions about sex and worries about fitting together as these new people with a slightly different or additional impetus. They just talked. As they always had. As John and Sherlock. As consulting detective and colleague. As best friends.

John was in no hurry to hang up but as the sunlight slowly infiltrated Sherlock's bedroom and as his mates blinks became slower and eyelids heavier he knew it was time for rest.

"You're tired, Sherlock. Go to bed."
"I'm fine." He said groggily.

"Under your covers, close your eyes. Doctor's orders."

Sherlock sighed deeply, his eyes already shutting.

"'kay...G'night, John."

"Goodnight, Sherlock. I love you."

"Love you too."

John ended the call and lay there for a moment unable to stop the smile that was spreading across his face. He was exhausted and wired. He wanted to rest and also jump on the treadmill and tick off a few miles.

In the end, he decided to head down to the commissary to grab something to eat.

Just as he promised his boyfriend he would.

__________________________

Authors Note:

Let me start off by saying this is not in response to Vaztorg or Into_the_Ether or anyone else who I may be forgetting who recently and respectfully expressed their opinion and who I may respectfully disagree with. We don't have to all join hands and sing Kumbaya about who Mary is and that's fine. But none of the commentaries have been rude. 99% of you have been absolutely delightful and I thank you. Friendly discussion is fine and welcomed. It's natural we might have a difference of opinion. We can and have disagreed without being disagreeable. :) And I thank you for taking the time to read a different spin on and characterization of a character you're not all that fond of. I thank you for, if only for a moment, considering a different point of view even if you ultimately discard it. So, again, I value you all as readers and thank you because writing this has and continues to be loads of fun! You're all lovely.

This is for the 1%

I've made no secret that I have an affinity for Mary since the first chapter so if anything took you by surprise that's more of a reflection on your poor reading comprehension than me springing a gotcha. That being said, I'm no longer going to entertain or respond to endless anti-Mary "reviews". And they have been endless.

I am in the minority in my affection for Mary meaning there is no dearth of stories casting her as a villain or worse. I encourage you, if you find my limited, positive mentions of John's wife in this story so egregious or laugh out loud ridiculous, to hit the back button and search elsewhere.

Let me help you with some AO3 tags that already exist;

Evil!Mary, Mary Is A Villian, John discovers Mary is Evil, Bad Mary, Mary Bashing,
Unapologetic Mary Bashing, Mary Morstan Bashing, Mary is Awful, Mary is not nice, Cheating Mary, Mary gets her comeuppance, Mary is a bitch, Mary Is A Lying Bitch, Mary Is A Cheating Bitch, Mary is a homophobe, Mary is a bastard, Mary is not good, Mary lies about things, I hate Mary, Anti-Mary sentiment, John doesn't care about Mary, anti-Mary etc. etc, ad infinitum.
There you are, plug those in and you're all set. There are, at last count, 49,686 Sherlock stories that pair John and Sherlock. I'm more than certain out of those you can find multitudes that denigrate John's bitch wife at every turn. Run along and seek them out.

Save your vitriol for someone else (or better yet don't. Leave people to ship what they ship and just stay in your lane) because I am honestly tired of it cluttering my inbox. I've never deleted an honest comment in my life and I won't start now. But these aren't real critiques of the story. These are people deciding to unload because I mentioned their least favorite character in a positive light. It's grating and it's exhausting and I'm done. It has ramped up considerably since Chapter 48 and I'm tired of being inundated.

This is not an anti-Mary piece. And while I am loathe to use a shit-ton of tags, the tags of this story have nevertheless been changed to reflect that.

Here endeth the rant.

Ok, that's all.

I hope to maybe get another chapter posted before the weekend is out.

It's about time to change the rating on this story. No idea why I started off at M knowing damn well it was gonna be E. :)

As always, if you see a sentence or paragraph that repeats, let me know. I try to keep up with the bug and delete them when they happen but I usually miss a few.

Thank you for reading.
Chapter 51

Day 84

In the army, they called it demobbing.

The process surrounding breaking down your encampment, packing up, standing down, getting ready to move on.

He'd been doing it, emotionally for the past few days but James was doing it for real. He was leaving the next day and he and John were having their final dinner together underneath the Swiss sky.

"You scared?" John asked him.

"Me? Nah." I mean maybe I should be but I'm not. I think I got it right this time, you know? It feels different. I feel good. I've done this part quite a few times before but this is the first time I've felt ready. I'm chomping at the bit."

John smiled at his mate and gave him a few friendly pats on the shoulder.

"Really glad to hear that."

"What about you? You're off soon, aren't you? Hot on my heels."

"Yeah, not much longer now." He said leaning back against the steps and setting his food aside. He wasn't really hungry but he did crave the company.

"Scared?"

"Out of my mind. It's all so...so snow globe-y here. Makes you feel like you can do anything. It's all in order. Very few surprises. Out there it's..."

"Madness." James supplied.

"Yeah, madness."

"Where are you going to live?"

"Going back to Baker Street, actually."

"I think that's good," James said sipping his tea. "Back where things make sense, back to someone who loves you. You know...try it all again."

John looked at him askance something in his tone garnering his attention.

"You know." he said after a stretch of silence.

"I deliver the mail, John. That was my main chore around these parts. He got an express and I tried his room multiple times but he was never there. I left all these little sticky notes that he'd have to rip off or break through to get inside but they were never disturbed. Finally, I caught him in the hallway once and was able to deliver it. He looked just a bit flustered when I said I'd been trying to track him down. Didn't know Sherlock Holmes could look flustered." James paused. "You know, everybody pretty much figured that was the way things were anyway."
"It wasn't," John said quickly. "But it is now. Early days, mind you...but it is."

"Good on you, then." He said returning the shoulder clap. "What the hell are we trying to get clean for if not to take yet another stab at happy?"

"Cheers to that. Look I don't know if this is done but we should keep in touch, yeah? I'll give you contact stuff."

"I'd like that a lot, actually. I don't have many friends when it really comes down to it."

"Yeah, me neither. Being here kind of pointed that out."

"Didn't it just."

**Day 85**

"Have you told Sherlock about your dream?" Hanah asked.

"No, sounds pretty offensive, you know? My feelings for you put me in mind of nuclear disaster second in catastrophic nature only to Fukushima. Not terribly romantic."

"Give it some thought, it wouldn't be such a bad thing to air between the two of you. How are you feeling about approaching the relationship in fact as opposed to theory?"

"Good. Yeah, excited. Nervous, you know. I expect it will be quite...different."

"Because he's a man?"

"No, because he's Sherlock. Because from our talks I'm 100% certain that a romantic relationship is completely new to him. He doesn't know what to expect. I'm assuming it might, at times, be sensory overload for him. I'm trying to prepare for that."

"What about for you?"

"No, I feel good. I mean once you set your mind to something and commit to it, it should work, right?"

"Is that something you've found to be true?"

"In certain ways, yes."

"John, I think it's my duty to temper some of your expectations."

"You mean toss cold water on them?" he replied with a short laugh.

"No, I mean what I said. You're still grieving, you're still a recovering alcoholic in the infancy of sobriety, you need to take it slowly."

"What is it?"

"It is everything. Don't expect too much of yourself, don't expect to leap buildings in a single bound. There is a reason why one of the hallmarks of recovery is one day at a time."

"Duly noted." John sensed that she sensed his reluctance to go rooting around for the negative in all of this. But if he knew Hanah it wouldn't be a deterrent.
"Ok, we're going to circle back to this but switch gears for now. I want to follow a hunch. We don't have as much time as I'd like to explore it but it's relevant."

"Ok, shoot."

"Overall how would you characterize your sex life, not just with Mary but in general."

"Ummm..." He was more than a little surprised by the question. "Good, fine...why?"

So you would say your interaction was healthy?"

He paused for a second.

"I don't know that I'd use the word healthy in the context you likely are but it was exuberant, fun. I've had a lot of partners...apparently, as Sherlock recently pointed out. That's not bragging just a fact, I guess."

"How many would you say? If you had to ballpark it?"

"Ballpark it?" He said repeating the Americanism. "Uhhh...I don't know, by my 20's I was in the mid 40's I suppose. My 30's were equally as active...It's high, I guess. Not Don Juan high but noteworthy."

"You'd say then you've had a minimum of 40 sexual partners possibly double if we account for your 30's?"

"Yes, on the whole." Alright, well...that did sound like a lot.

"Have you ever considered the idea that you may have sexual dependency?"

"No... I don't think that's the case at all. You think I'm a sex addict?" He laughed, the idea seemed ridiculous. He liked to have it off. So what?" Considering his past and recent behavior it seemed like perhaps the most normal thing about him. "Where is this coming from?"

"I was going over my notes and there were a few things you said recently and things you didn't say. Am I right in assuming you typically indulge in promiscuity when your life is at it's most traumatic. When it calms, when you're ready and have moved to a different stage you're much more willing and able to find a steady partner."

"I'm not sure that's true." He said haltingly. "Addiction is that it's supposed to disrupt your life. Sex did not disrupt my life."

"No, because your life had already been disrupted making your actions a symptom and not a cause. John, from what you've told me in our time together your upheavals are catastrophic. Addiction can be easily identified because it upends norms but you typically, especially when younger, saw to it that any norms were the first things to go. How many sexual partners did you have after Sherlock's suicide?"

He went silent. He didn't like to talk about that or really remember it. Woman to woman, bed to bed. It was a blur and he was thankful for a shoddy memory.

"Alright...ok, point taken."

"How many?"

"I don't know." He said throwing his hands in the air helplessly. "A lot. London is absolutely mad on
any night of the week. You can pop round to a pub, find a girl, chat her up, she likes you, you like
her and the next thing you know you're fucking in an alley round back. And it's good, it's great and
that's what I did. I did that night after night, week after week. I drank and I fucked and I mourned my
best friend who I loved more than life itself. That was all.”

Hanah nodded calmly and scribbled something into her notes. John flexed his fingers alternating
between making a fist and splaying them wide. He hated thinking about this time. He'd put it to bed
when he'd started to climb out of his funk. In fact, he'd considered his STI test the topper, the full lid,
a promise to himself that he was going to stop this reckless shit. He'd gone to the clinic and gotten a
full workup and the dreaded blood test. He'd been safe and careful...when he remembered, that is,
when he wasn't so trolleyed he couldn't find a condom much less put one on. Somehow,
miraculously he'd been fine and that had marked the end of trolling for random women.

"Exorcising negative feelings and expressing suppressed anger through violence, the excitement of
an affair, alcohol abuse, chasing down a criminal and even extreme sexualized behavior, all of these
flood your body with endorphins and or adrenaline. Those are very potent drugs which produce very
potent feelings. Not to mention this behavior is all part and parcel of PTSD and depression. I need
you to understand, John, that your addiction didn't start in January of 2015. It didn't start with your
wife's death and it didn't start with Sherlock. You need to realize that both you and your sister have
been functioning and no-so-functioning addicts, likely since childhood. Do you know why men are
under or misdiagnosed when it comes to depression? It's because it often manifests itself as drug
abuse or elevated sexual behavior both of which, to an extent, are encouraged and socially accepted
in men. You may have found a more socially acceptable outlet for your depression than she did but it
still stands. How long were you in Afghanistan?"

"Three years."

"And that was before they lengthened the tours of duty from six months to eight months in 2013. So
you did six tours. You kept re-upping. Why?"

"Because...when I had my R&R I freaked out. I didn't know what to do with myself. Two weeks,
alone with my thoughts. Nothing to do, nothing expected of me but to just sit. I didn't have any
family I missed. Lucy and I had split up already. I actually asked to forgo it but that was against regs.
They put me on a flight back to the UK, I spent the next 14 days drinking and whoring myself
around and just being your average cockwand until it was time to go back. Even when I felt good I
felt awful. I didn't want to be that guy."

His uniform had attracted the women like flies and he'd indulged fully in the distraction they
provided. Hopping from one pair of knickers to another and drink to drink because he was young
and anxious andcallow and an orgasm here and a beer there did make the time pass. He was ecstatic
when that time was up. He wanted to leave the women behind to forget their faces and their voices
and the slimy sort of bloke he became around them. Once it was all over he wanted to crawl out of
their beds and out of his skin for good measure. They were lovely and sweet and silly and young. He
hated himself not them. So he'd drink to hate himself a little less...or at least until he didn't care.

"That's essentially what I figured. With Duck, I believe it was different. The trauma was concurrent
with the relative stability. But in most other cases you pursue destructive behavior following a loss or
sudden change, you drink or become highly promiscuous or both, indulgence leads to guilt,
depression, a static period and a leveling out until the next time there's an external trigger. Does this
sound familiar?"

It did, when he pulled back from it all and looked at it with clear eyes it did, but he only nodded his
head and Hanah went on.
"Emotional trigger, Preoccupation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, relapse. How many serious sexual relationships would you say you've had in your life?" She pressed.

Surprisingly he didn't have to think about this answer. It came easily.

"Three. Sarah, Lucy, and Mary."

"What about after Mary died? Was your drinking in any way matched up with seeking out partners?"

"No, I...I wasn't interested in that then. Not at all. I had sort of lost the...the desire for it, I suppose. The last time Mary and I had actual penetrative sex was a month or so after the honeymoon I guess...so..." He paused...had it really been that long? Really? "Jesus, I haven't had sex since summer of 2014. That's almost two years."

"I assume you're planning a sexual relationship with Sherlock."

He reddened slightly. For some reason, it was a little easier to talk about the sex he'd already had as opposed to the sex he planned to have.

"Yes, I mean...when we're ready. Whenever that is."

"I know you've probably heard this in your meetings already but especially given your history I want to caution against jumping into a sexual relationship too soon."

"I don't believe that will be a problem. As bizarre as it may sound we were both content with the platonic kissing. There wasn't any physical arousal beyond that."

"None?" She asked with a surprised frown.

"No, none. I mean, morning wood, of course, but that's just maintenance, isn't it. Neither of us has control over that."

"So, just to clarify. Neither you nor Sherlock experienced an erection when you were in bed. Despite the fact that you've described it as..." She paused to look back through her notes. "Intense. Draining. Passionate. Emotional. Erotic. Dizzying-"

"Ok, I got it. I said all that and yes, it's true and yes we still didn't. You make it sound like a crime."

"Not a crime but unusual. You can pretend it isn't, John, but I know you know better. Did you ever get the impression he was holding back?"

"No, not at all. In fact, I found him quite...free. The time we spent in bed, not just the kissing and touching but the talking...it was one of the closest experiences we'd ever had. I don't know what I'm allowed to tell you." John said faltering. Something about continuing this without Sherlock present seemed indecent and unfair.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...the Sherlock you know, the Sherlock that presents himself to the public that happened pretty early. Mycroft, in what I imagine to be his twisted form of protecting his little brother, taught him caring was a bad thing. Sherlock is seven years younger and of course he took it to heart. He doesn't...didn't know how to interact with people. How to communicate. How to touch them or be touched. And my God is he starved to be touched." John said softly before continuing. "He never had a real steady boyfriend, he never had someone who loved him in that way. He's never had sex before. This is all newer than new for him."
Hanah exhaled through her nose and John could sense her frustration at these last minute bombshells.

"That offers an explanation for him but what about you?"

"It's not exactly a concern now because of certain...performance issues."

"Can you expand on that?"

He cleared his throat.

"You know we've talked about a lot of not so good things in here and I would never have guessed that masturbation was where I so desperately wanted to draw the line but here we are."

"Are you unable to maintain an erection?" Hanah asked undeterred.

"Achieve. Unable to achieve much less maintain."

"For how long?"

"Early 2015 I guess."

Hanah looked taken aback.

"John that's relevant. It's relevant to our discussions over the past almost three months."

"It's really not. I wasn't interested in sex or wanking it was just as well it didn't work."

"As a medical professional you know that masturbation is healthy. Normal sexual release is healthy. Abstaining from sexual activity or not showing an interest in sex is perfectly normal. Even losing interest is absolutely normal. But you're not saying that, you're saying you've tried, at least as far as masturbation goes and been unsuccessful. You're also saying that you've been in an intimate situation with a man you're sexually attracted to but didn't experience a genital sexual reaction. When was the last time you achieved orgasm?"

He clamped his mouth shut and looked away. But this time it wasn't out of embarrassment, rather shame.

"John?" She asked again.

"I was texting with that girl on the bus who turned out to be Sherlock's sister and...texting turned to sexting and we got off together. Or I suppose I got off, I imagine she was just laughing like the Mad Hatter somewhere. I guess that's the excitement of the affair you mentioned."

Hanah sighed and rubbed her temple, something he'd not seen her do before.

"I didn't realize I had to give you the whole 'I can't help you if you don't tell me everything' lawyer-speech, John."

"I'm sorry, alright?" He said defensively. "I didn't think it was relevant. I still don't but I know now you think I can't get it up because of that."

"Again, it's not that black and white, but is it a factor, likely yes. Anxiety, boredom, sex, alcohol, adrenaline, guilt. That is your very elaborate, very cyclical cocktail. It's a cycle you need to break but first you need to understand it. I'm imagining you would argue that you felt very engaged, maybe even exceptionally alive when you were bedding these women. I would argue the opposite. This was a dissociative action. You weren't trying to experience anything you were trying to experience less. It
was never just about alcohol. This is a piece of the puzzle and you need to see where it fits."

There was something so demoralizing about all this. Another piece of the puzzle. Just how goddamn big was the puzzle going to be? Was there any move, any choice he'd ever made that wasn't tainted or scarred?

"You're angry." She said simply.

"Yes, I'm fucking angry." he said louder than he meant to. "Sorry, sorry..."

"You're feeling attacked? As though this is an assault on your person? Your choices? Maybe you even feel it walks the line of moralizing. And I would agree with you on all points if you hadn't so clearly telegraphed that you feel guilty. Addiction is a hydra, John. It has many heads which can be discouraging. But it only has one body. Forget about the heads, we're going for the body. You have set yourself up again and again and again to be in a position where you could keep at a distance. You said that Mary and Sherlock told you, you made a choice in terms of who you picked, a sociopath and an assassin. And that's true. You picked two people you liked and loved very, very much who you always knew would in some way be partially unavailable to you. They would keep you at a distance and you could do the same. You gambled, you played the odds because deep down you knew these people were hiding behind a mask. And they were, you just picked the wrong masks as the fake ones. And then you found yourself in so, so deep. So deep with people who despite their lies and their subterfuge and even the image they held of themselves, were painfully, wholly honest and open. And it scared the shit out of you. You thought you had an accord with them, an agreement, marry me a little, love me just enough, as the song goes. But they unintentionally tricked you and you were trapped. That's why you sense danger, John. That's why the Red Forest flames. Because your entire life has steered you away from truth and contact and touch and intimacy. You have been running since you were a child. That has to stop."

Was she right? Had Mary lived would he have felt the same from her, the same danger, the fire? He tried to imagine a world where Magnussen was dead and the ugly mysteries of AGRA were gone. Where all the secret keepers had been eliminated. Where every sword of Damocles that hung above her head had vanished. Where she was Mary Watson, nurse, mother, wife and no one living could ever take those titles and the name he'd given her from her again. What then when she no longer held the secrets? When that equal footing was gone? When all the lies were locked in his soul and his soul alone?

Would her touch, her glance, her attempt to get closer set him to burn?

Sherlock was open and free. Sherlock had no Pandora's box. Sherlock had laid himself bare and while he missed his presence and his touch desperately the idea of being face to face with him, every day, speaking the truth, exposing his fears and pains and wants and needs was terrifying, fiery and terrifying.

"Jesus..." He muttered to himself. "So what do I do?"

"An open conversation with your partner is always a good place to start. And he is your partner, John. Long before you decided to become an item he was your partner. Have you at all discussed your childhood, your father?"

He shook his head in the negative.

"I think you need to. I also think there are likely things he's not discussed with you. This might open the floodgates, in a good way. Tell me, ideally, how you want your relationship with Sherlock to go?"
John took a deep breath. He was feeling shaky all of a sudden...out of his depth. He tugged at a loose string on the chair as he spoke.

"I want it to be different. I hate carrying around secrets in my mind, in my heart. I hate the weight of it all but I don't know how to get rid of it. I don't know how to let it go. I just want to be normal. What I do know is I don't want to bring it with me all over again. I want..." He paused as the gravity of what he was about to say hit him. But he didn't want to take it back. "I want this to be the last relationship I ever have. I've used language with him like, let's give it a go and let's try it out and let's see where it leads. When I know damn well where I want it to lead. Sherlock and I haven't dated, true and I imagine it will be different and odd and hard but he's not a stranger. I don't know if I've ever been closer to someone than I am to him. Even Mary because...I was not going to tell her all the things I'm thinking about telling him. I just wasn't."

"There's a saying in AA which I'm sure you've heard by now. It isn't the load that weighs us down. It's the way we carry it. Don't let the black and white thinking get you. And don't let other people who, at least present, as non-addicts. Everyone is carrying something. Even the normal. Everything that you just listed that you want is admirable and achievable but it's going to take work and lots of it. And that's work on your own and together. Normally I would never advise that you two live together this soon. But this is a unique situation, I realize. But I need you to grasp as soon as possible that in terms of your recovery, you and Sherlock are not going to be the "easy part"."

He was still breathing deeply but not taking in what he felt was enough air. It didn't necessarily feel like a panic attack just a general lightheadedness.

"Can I...can I have some water or something...anything."

"Of course." She said quickly before handing him a bottle of water and a bottle of orange juice. He downed the juice first and then after a moment unscrewed the top on the water.

"Christ, Hanah, I thought I'd come out of here with more answers than questions but it's not looking that way. I...I don't know if I can face this without you."

She smiled and let him continue.

"I came in here so angry, angry at you. I just had this chyron running through my mind "I'm a Goddamn doctor too. You're not better than me or smarter than me."

"I know." She laughed. "I could practically see it on your face."

"I'm sorry about that, I am. I'm just glad I pulled my head out of my own arse long enough to give you the chance you deserved. The rub is you've helped me so much I really don't know how I'm going to manage the outside without you. I know, I know there are probably other people just as qualified and knowledgeable but...the idea of starting over. Even thinking about it exhausts me while also scaring me shitless. Plus, you have clearance, you understand, I can't be honest with what basically amounts to a civilian. I'm back to hiding, crafting some story like I did with Ella hoping to squeeze out the truth between the lies."

Hanah tapped her pen rhythmically and gazed at him, something he'd never seen her do before.

"What?" He asked.

"I shouldn't do this."

"What shouldn't you do?"
"Your last day is technically my last here too. I'll stick around a little to clear out my office but I'm going on sabbatical. Essentially open-ended leave. I did some traveling when I was younger but it always felt incomplete and I wanted to take it up again. I'd also maybe like to finally test my mettle with regard to that book I've always wanted to write."

"Oh, cheers, yeah that sounds good."

"The problem is...this," She said gesturing between the two of them. "Feels incomplete as well. I don't like half-assing things and I don't like passing off my work to someone else."

John waited not certain where she was going but he dared to feel a glimmer of hope.

"We can have Skype sessions. Not every day but I'll send you my schedule and when I have internet access which will not be all the time, we can work something out. I don't do this, John. I really, really don't."

"You'd do that? I don't even know what to say." He was thunderstruck. He'd been carefully trying to wean himself away from the idea of having access to someone he trusted this much. It was only in the past few weeks as he realized their time was really drawing to an end that he started to panic about never seeing her again. It wasn't just that she was smart and tough and unflappable. He just plain liked her.

"So is that a yes?"

"Yes, yes that is an absolute yes. I don't know how to thank you. I mean, I will pay you of course."

She handed him her phone which was opened to her address book.

"Enter your phone number, email and handle and I'll be in touch. And you'll still need to find a local therapist. I have a Location provided list so no worries about lying. They contracted, they have clearance and if you decided on one of them they'll be briefed in full. You can speak freely with whoever you choose. I strongly encourage it, ok?"

With a hand that was slightly shaking but growing steadier and when exactly had that started? he entered his information.

"Thank you, Hanah." He said again as he gave her back her phone.

"Let's see if you'll be this grateful in a month's time. You're asking to keep it going with one of the few people you can't bullshit."

John gave a surprised laugh as Hanah never swore and yet she'd done it twice today.

"I think that's what I want. You are a relentless, tenacious hard-arse and I like it...even when I don't."

"Ok, well, good because I'm not going to change. And because once you get out there the real work begins. This was just the warm up. Not long from now you're going to start the main event."

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A/N Thank you for your kind response to my little rant last chapter, I do appreciate the support so very much.

And thank you for some truly lovely reviews. Certain ones have touched me so much that I'm
a bit paralyzed in terms of writing a response. But trust me, they haven't gone unread or ignored, I'm just thinking of what to say back to your incredible kindness and generosity when it comes to my little tale.

As always, thank you for reading.
"I just want to start off today's meeting by telling you all how proud I am of you. Every last one of you. The ones who are just starting their journey, the ones in the middle and the ones leaving us to begin a new chapter. I am proud of you because you showed up. I am proud of you because you came back. And I am proud of you because you are leaving stronger than you arrived. Because The Location like many places runs in cycles, we often have times where a big group is coming in while another group is leaving and that's where we are today. I see a lot of new faces and I see a lot of old faces that I'm going to be saying goodbye to in a short time. We're going to be handing out a few chips today and because of that, I'd like to speak to the new people first. Now we are not only glad for each and every day that you spend sober we're glad for each and every hour. There are likely going to be some days where you have to take it minute by minute and that's ok. I want to make sure you hear me when I say that's ok. Because when we hand out chips I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea that it's only the bulk days that matter. Every day matters. If you go from head-on-pillow to head-on-pillow, day to night, sunrise to sunset without a drink, congratulations, that's a victory. I'm sure you may have heard this saying before but it's no less true; This is a 'One Day at a Time' program. If you are clean and sober today, you are tied for first place in AA. You got that, everyone is this room is in first place. Give yourself a hand. Come on, right now, I know you think it's corny but do it anyway."

The assembled, John included, started to clap. Reggie had given a good speech but then again he always did. John hadn't given him much credit on arrival and took a grass is greener view when he heard about other meetings. But as time wore on he'd started to relax and listen and to his surprise, he wound up quite happy that he'd ended up here.

The topic for today's meeting, John's last meeting at The Location was transition. Transition from the outside world into here and vice versa. Transition from a life of dependence to a life that was substance free. Transition from the old, ineffective, damaging way of relating to people to a new healthier, happier balance.

For the most part he was attentive but his mind did occasionally drift to Sherlock who was already on his way. John had spent his final night at The Location and this night would find him back in the comfort and security and familiarity of Baker Street. Back up those creaky stairs into the musty, warm, comfortable flat with the scent of food from Speedy's wafting up occasionally. Back in his chair, just across from Sherlock's chair, checking their inbox, researching, debating, bickering, theorizing...and now, other things too. Back in...no...in for the first time...Sherlock's bed, sharing it with him. The thought made him shiver happily.

"John?"

Reggie was speaking to him and he snapped out of his musings.

"Yeah, oh, sorry."

"That's ok. A lot of things on your mind I imagine. Would you come up please?"

Standing from his chair he walked to the front of the room.

"Now John is also leaving us today with 90 days sober. In celebration of that achievement please accept your 3 months sobriety chip."
John opened his hand and Reggie placed the small purple coin in his palm. John gazed at it for a moment unable to deny the small surge of pride. The group clapped for him and Reggie leaned in.

"Would you like to say anything?"

Before he could say no, his mouth for some reason, was saying yes.

As everyone quieted he ran his thumb over the relief writing on the coin.

"Yeah, um, hi, I'm John." He said before clearing his throat.

"Hello, John." They replied in unison.

"So, yeah..." He inhaled deeply closing his fist over the coin. "Three months ago, well a little bit over three months ago, Christmas Day, in fact, I decided to kill myself."

There was a shocked gasp from the newer people and he felt and saw some either lean in or draw back in surprise.

"Um, but before I could go through with my plan I had a paroxysmal attack, commonly known as a seizure. I had two seizures actually both of them brought about by my excessive alcohol consumption. I passed out whilst on the phone with my best mate. He rushed over and had to resuscitate me. He called an ambulance they came and took me to the hospital. I woke up strapped to the bed for my own safety. I was on a psychiatric hold, the second of my life and the second one in two months. When I was as lucid as could be expected one of my first thoughts was "Oh shit, I failed at this too."

John took a minute to steady his voice before continuing.

"When I was presented with the gift of treatment I didn't want it. I wanted to finish what I had started. When I did accept it was grudgingly, angrily. And before I could be picked up to be brought here I found the nearest off license because there was no way I was going to enter rehab and not be pissed."

This was greeted with laughter and smiles as he'd hoped. He was winging it. None of this was planned but it was flowing more smoothly than he could have imagined.

"I drank while I waited for the car to pick me up. I drank on the plane. I drank on the second car ride. I was a real bastard as I was being registered in that office and I threw up in the poor woman's bin. I was a mess. I guess what I'm saying is the guy who came into this place didn't want to be here and in fact only came for someone else."

Just as he said it, just as he spoke the words he looked up to see Sherlock standing there in the doorway. Silent. Serene. Listening. For a second it broke his rhythm but then he couldn't help but smile before continuing.

"The guy who showed up here that day didn't think he'd make it 90 days. He didn't think he'd make it 1 day. And he sure as hell wouldn't have given a shit about some stupid little trinket like this. But I like to think that I've left some of that guy behind. Because I'm tentatively hoping I can do 90 more and 90 more after that. And because this chip actually means an awful lot to me." His voice cracked and he cleared his throat.

"I came to realize a few things about myself in here. I'll be honest a lot of them were things I didn't like. I am an alcoholic. I have anger issues. Trust issues. I am prone to long bouts of depression that typically coincide with self-destructive behavior. And I may very well be a sex addict. All of these
came as a surprise to me. All of them.

Treatment was rather like walking up to my reflection and realizing I was meeting a stranger. But it's a stranger I'm stuck with...forever. So we'd best make the most of it, eh?

So, I...I've been doing the steps I suppose, just quietly, which may defeat the purpose I'm not sure. Ok, so, Step One; I admit that I am powerless over alcohol and my life...My life had become unmanageable. It's not easy for me to say that. It's not easy for anyone to say that, I imagine. To admit defeat. But that's what I was. That's what I am, defeated, I suppose.

To be honest, I found this to be a bit of a double problem, AA, I mean. Not only do I spend every day of my life, including today, wishing I had a drink in my hand or both hands."

There was a soft rumble of understanding laughter and he caught a slight smile on Sherlock's face as well when he glanced over.

"But 50% of the 12 Steps involved God. Now, I was married in a church and my daughter was christened in the Church and I say all the wildly inappropriate blasphemes that everyone else says but...I don't believe in God. I don't know how to believe in God. I don't want to believe in God. And I certainly don't want to surrender to him.

What I do believe in, right or wrong, is that...that there is something far greater than me in this universe, of this universe. Maybe it is the universe, I don't know.

I made a friend here, his name is James. He left a few days ago, got his 90 in as well. The night before he left James and I sat on the steps here and we looked up at the stars. It had actually become our dinner time habit and I highly recommend it. When we were out there I always felt just this small bit of peace and comfort looking up at that clear sky and all those incredible stars. I felt sane again, just for awhile. I want to recapture that feeling, even if just for a bit every day. I am committed to doing whatever it takes to make that happen. I am committed to turning my life over to the truth that I need that feeling to be ok. And if that's what I have to surrender to then I'm ok with it.

I'm doing the program and I'll continue to do the program. It's a work in progress, I guess, just like I am. I think what I've learned is that maybe I can't go back to that life I used to lead before I got here. Maybe it's gone, the good and the bad of it." His voice wavered again as he tried to just plow through. "But maybe I can make a new life. A better life.

For you new people...people with 2 days, 1 day, 5 hours I know you're looking at me and you're thinking "God, I wish he'd just shut the fuck up and sit down. And don't worry, I'm about to."

This was met with more laughter and some grudging smiles from those of the group who looked especially worse for wear.

"If you're thinking, what the hell does he know? You're right. I don't know anything. I've got 90 days today. And before I realized I was an alcoholic I likely had 90 days then too but I wasn't counting and I didn't care. I am absolutely thick-headed when it comes to this. I'm no smarter than you or stronger than you. I'm just another bloke who whinged and bitched and complained and raged and talked and cried and shut myself off and opened myself up and managed to put another 24 hours on the clock. That's it. That's all 90 days is. I wish there was some secret formula, I truly do, but there's not. I'm just 90 days ahead of you. Looking ahead scares me. I don't know what's coming, what I'll do, who I'll be. The only John I can account for is the one standing before you today. The one rooted in this 24-hour cycle. And he's decided to take a hard pass on having a drink. I hope he'll make the same decision tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. I'm going to make damn sure that he tries. That's all. Um, thank you so much for your support and for this." He said holding
up the chip.

He caught Sherlock's eye as he made his way back to his seat feeling slightly embarrassed. This was different than therapy. This was a different kind of vulnerability and he hated the idea of his boyfriend seeing him as possibly weak. But there was no judgment in Sherlock's gaze only a tenderness in his eyes that John was still getting used to.

The meeting drew to a close, Reggie dismissed them and John said a few goodbyes. After all, this was it. No more meetings here. No more gourmet meals, no more invitations to hikes or horseriding, no more lavatory duty. He shook a hand or two, offered hugs and words of encouragement and received the same in return. He got more than a few kind well wishes from Reggie who was as earnest and positive as ever. All the while Sherlock waited patiently in the back of the room.

He was beyond anxious to get to him.

They hadn't set the rules for displays of public affection. While John wasn't much for hiding he didn't know how Sherlock felt. He was, after all, a private person. On the rare occasion where he'd give an interview it was about cases and cases only. If they tried to steer it toward personal issues he became even more truculent than usual and bitingly cold. They'd often gotten requests for human interest stories. The inner workings of the mind of Sherlock Holmes. The crime fighting duo and how they function. All that sort of stuff. Once Sherlock got an idea of what they wanted he'd hang up. Emails sent? Deleted. Tweets, DM's, letters? Trashed. He was not interested in putting anything out into the world except the image of the calm, cool and capable consulting detective.

All these thoughts ran through John's head as he walked over all the while gazing at his face and lips and thinking how badly he wanted to kiss him.

"Hi." John said and it sounded absurdly inadequate. Not at all what he wanted to say.

**You came.**

**I love you.**

**I'm so proud to be in your life.**

**I love you.**

**I feel like everything that was upside down is righted again.**

**I love you.**

**I'm so happy we belong to each other.**

**I love you.**

**We can do this right? I can do this?**

"Hi. I hope you didn't mind my skulking about. I first went to your room and then Hanah's office. I wasn't certain of your schedule today."

"No, of course, I don't mind. Things were a little up in the air. But I'm all checked out, papers signed, bags packed."

"Yes, I know. I've already placed them in the car."
"Thank you, you didn't have to do that." John's wiggled his fingers at his side anxiously. "Can we drop by my room? I just want to pop in for a second."

"Why?"

"Because there's something I want to show you." He replied trying not to put too fine a point on it. "I assure you the room was vacant when I left it."

John sighed and leaned in closer.

"Because I want to snog you until you beg for air and I'd rather not do it here." He said lowering his voice.

His boyfriend's eyebrows shot up in surprise before he gave a quick nod.

"Oh! Ok."

They quickly covered the short distance back to John's room and once inside with the door closed behind them he tugged the detective close.

"I missed you." Sherlock said before he could.

"I missed you too." He replied bringing their lips together.

Though he'd never tell him, this kiss was especially important to John. Their first official kiss as a couple. A signifier that this was real and true and happening. A signal that with no hesitation they were jumping in full force.

Sherlock's hands moved to his waist but John could immediately tell it was less sexy and more appraising.

"Could you not grope me like I'm a prize Holstein?" John asked nipping at his bottom lip. "Trust me, there are much more entertaining ways to feel me up."

"Concerned. Thin." Sherlock said but only after making a soft little "Uhh" noise following the nip. He was only speaking in one-word sentences which John considered a triumph.

"I'll eat at home." He breathed as he parted Sherlock coat before sliding his fingers over the smooth material of his shirt and up across his chest.

"Restaurant?"

"Takeaway."

"Brilliant."

That now settled John darted his tongue into Sherlock's mouth deepening the kiss. His boyfriend responded with enthusiasm shoving John gently against the door as he cupped his cheek with a large palm. They broke away for air and John's eyes darted toward the made bed. He wanted to get Sherlock flat on his back, he wanted to press down on top of him, he wanted to unfasten those trousers and-

"John, there's something I want to tell you."

"Ok." John replied, surprised but not surprised Sherlock wanted to have a conversation now.
"Perhaps I should have told you soon-"

His words were interrupted by a knock on the door and John was suddenly being nudged aside as someone tried to enter against the impediment that was his body. He stepped away and he and Sherlock were greeted by the smiling and apologetic face of a nurse and the surly, grimace of a young man who couldn't have been more than 18. John was pretty sure he was in a boy band, or he had been in a boy band. His rowdy, drunken shenanigans had put him all over the news for the past two years making him recognizable to likely even the most disinterested adult.

"I'm sorry, I thought this room was empty. It's on my sheet the occupant was checking out today."
The nurse said glancing down at her paperwork.

"No, you're right. I'm the occupant or the former occupant." John said raising his hand. "We were just leaving. I was checking to make sure I hadn't left anything and just, um...saying goodbye."

The teenager scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Berk." He said as he entered the room and dropped his bag on the floor.

"Well, we'll be off. Best of luck." John said grabbing Sherlock by the sleeve and tugging him out.

"Yeah, whatever." The kid who John supposed was likely called Caden or Camden or Cennedy replied before adding. "Wait! I know you!"

John was already out the door but Sherlock who was just behind him paused and turned.

"I wouldn't think so." Sherlock replied.

"Yeah, I do." He said. "From the news. You're fucking Sherlock Holmes."

"No, I'm Sherlock Holmes," Sherlock replied before hooking a thumb in John's direction. "He's fucking Sherlock Holmes. Or at least he will be. Afternoon"

The kid looked at him blankly, John let out a bark of laughter and he and Sherlock swiftly headed down the hallway towards Hanah's.

"OK, last day. I want to hear your final thoughts, both of you." Hanah said.

Her office was littered with half filled boxes, the walls were noticeably bare and her computer was nowhere in sight. She was clearly near ready to leave herself but she had still greeted them both in the same easy, non-rushed manner.

"I'm pleased John will be returning home. He seems happier, healthier, too thin for his own good but we can remedy that. I...missed him and as I believe you have been instrumental in returning him to me. I thank you, Hanah."

"John is nothing if not an apt and willing patient. He did all the heavy lifting." She replied with a smile.

"Still, he is particular with regard to whom he listens. I've witnessed your intuition and persuasive reasoning firsthand. You've helped us both a great deal."

"It was my pleasure, truly it was." She replied before turning to John. "John? And believe me, though I appreciate Sherlock's praise, that's not what I'm asking for. How are you feeling?"

"Nervous. Actually more nervous as the minute's tick by." He said swallowing dryly. "I didn't realize
just how attached I'd gotten to this place. I didn't know I felt safe here, you know?"

Hanah nodded.

"But I've been reading the post-rehab literature. I created a schedule pretty close to the one I follow here so that things won't be disrupted. Sherlock was kind enough to make a very detailed chart for me of local AA meetings, so I'm all set there. I know where I'll be living and who I'll be living with and I know his sobriety status." He said looking at Sherlock with a smile. "I think I'm prepared, as prepared as I can be. I think I feel fairly confident that I can manage this. But it's easy to be confident here when reaching the nearest pub would require a sherpa."

"I've always been honest with you, John, and I'm not going to stop now. This is a dangerous time. Relapse is most likely to occur during these first few days. It's going to be difficult to acclimate to life back home. Difficulty can cause stress and anxiety and that can lead right back to addictive habits. Your first full day, tomorrow, you should find time to go to a meeting. In fact, I recommend 90 meetings in 90 days. There are likely countless ones in your area that you can get to. If you can't make it physically, there are online meetings. If you can't do online there are phone meetings. There is no reason not to pursue your sobriety as vigorously out there as you did in here.

I also want you to keep reading and keep writing. You've got the Big Book, use it. If it doesn't work for you find a self-help book that does. In all this time I've never asked to see your journal and I never will. It's for you and only you and I encourage you to take some time tomorrow and give it a read. See how far you've come, notice how your thinking has changed and areas where you might still be stuck. Give yourself time. Time to adjust to being home and time for the people in your life to adjust as well. When they last saw you, you were an absolute wreck, that memory won't easily be supplanted in their minds with who you are today.

I want you to talk to and engage with your partner. You two have the whole working together thing down pat. You also have a very strong, very well healed friendship that you fought hard, right here to fix and maintain. But you've never been in a relationship like this with one another before. There are going to be things that need to be discussed other than whodunnit and who didn't buy milk.

Finally, I just want you to take it slow. I don't think you should leap, full throttle, back into detective work, or medicine. You should work on this gradually. I would also strongly advise against leaping into a sexual relationship. In my professional opinion, I don't believe you're ready, John. There are things you still need to address and share with Sherlock when you're able."

John shifted uncomfortably. It wasn't that he didn't trust her and he certainly trusted Sherlock but talking about sex was never that easy. Not to mention, sex aside, he was eager to get back to work, to be occupied, to be overwhelmed by anything other than the thoughts inside his own head.

"I miss working, Hanah. I miss feeling useful. I have all this pent-up energy and I want to get it out." He began. "Sherlock is aware of my problem. I'm hoping it resolves itself soon. If it does are you saying we still have to abide by the whole idea of celibacy? I thought that was more for married couples who'd already burned some bridges in the bedroom. I just don't think he should have to wait."

"There are other ways. You mentioned you used to bike, you can go back to that. You started a jogging regimen here, you could take that up as well. I want you to engage your body in ways that weren't typical of your behavior before rehab."

"Yeah but..." He felt flustered but he also wanted to go on.

"I don't mind waiting." Sherlock interjected.
"I know." John replied. "My point is you shouldn't have to."

"John, listen to him," Hanah interrupted. "He's saying he doesn't mind waiting. You should acknowledge that."

"I do, I do but...what if I don't want to wait. I mean, this is a unique situation. Don't get me wrong if he wanted to wait for himself I would, of course, be happy to but it doesn't seem very fair to put things on hold like this. I mean, this isn't a new relationship...not exactly. ...And I can tell by the way you're looking at me that the rules still apply to us, don't they."

"You're good." She replied. "They're not rules. But the are suggestions. This doesn't mean I want you to avoid physical contact. But what I just said about exercise and engaging your body in different ways applied here too. You can absolutely explore your sexuality with one another without having sex. It might not be a bad idea to try couples therapy for navigating these early steps. Neither of you has fully engaged your sexuality as a gay man or a bisexual man. Now that's something I want to encourage you to do both together and on your own. John, for you specifically, you're going to need to rethink your relationship with sex and the connotations you have regarding it."

The sex addict thing wasn't exactly something he and Sherlock had discussed and he'd purposefully avoided looking at him when he'd spoken of it not a half hour ago in the meeting. Yes, he'd mentioned that he'd had a lot of partners when the detective had been there for Family Week but for the most part they glossed over it, much to John's relief. It looked at though that couldn't continue.

"Sherlock, we're also going to have to address your relationship to sex as well and how, if at all, it played into your addiction."

Sherlock looked surprised but she filled in the silence.

"If I'm still providing John with supplementary therapy you're going to have to play some part in it too. Now, John, because you say I always tend to throw cold water on things I want to leave on a decidedly positive note. You have done incredibly well here, John. Even when it was sometimes grudging you were always willing to put in the work and the hours required to find answers and get better. And you have gotten better. If I may say so, I'm proud of you. I'm proud of what you've accomplished, the decisions you've made and the steps you've taken to better understand yourself. Most importantly, you should be proud and I hope you are."

It would have felt, well...prideful to say he was proud. He wanted to wait. Sink back into life in London, in Baker Street. He wanted to get some time under his belt before he started patting himself on the back. He wasn't one to be superstitious but to have anything but a cautious and fragile optimism seemed to be inviting trouble. He knew where every bar was within walking distance of their flat, he knew the ones he could easily reach by cab as well. All of them waiting, patient neon eager for his return. Shops with row after row and shelf after shelf ready to soothe and abate and erase anything he needed them too. Was he a truly different man today than he was December 25th? Had he killed that John Watson as he'd wanted to? Perhaps not in suicide but murder. Murder by way of sobriety. He hoped against hope that son of a bitch was dead.

"Thank you, Hanah, your words mean a lot. And I have to echo Sherlock. I wouldn't be where I am without you." He glanced over and Sherlock. "We wouldn't be where we are."

"You're both very welcome. Now, ready to face the world?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." John said with a nervous laugh. He rose from his chair and decided not to fight the urge to embrace her. "Thank you." He whispered once more in her ear.
"There are a rainbow of colors between black and white, John. Make sure you're seeing them all."

As they broke apart Sherlock approached and extended his hand for a shake.

"Safe travels, Hanah."

"Safe travels to you both." She responded before adding, "Oh, John in the chaos of my office I almost forgot. I have a few things for you." She rummaged through a nearby box and came away with several books and more than a dozen photocopied bundles stapled together. "Some light reading for you." She joked. "Just look through it when you get a chance. It's supplemental and some of it is situation specific but it may help you."

Rather than handing him the books and loose papers at the last minute she emptied a box and dropped them inside.

"There." She said shoving the box in his direction. "Oh and there's something on top that's a little more pressing. Read it when you can."

He looked down at the box and on top, she had placed an envelope with the name "Pripyat" scrawled across.

He nodded and glanced at her his face no doubt revealing his curiosity about the contents of the envelope.

"I will."

"Ok, well off you both go. John, I'll be in touch and we'll set up our first Skype session soon. Best of luck to you both."

They stepped outside her office and John hesitated. This was it. This was the last day before the next first day and suddenly he was overwhelmed. He took a deep breath and then another, steeling himself.

"Look at me," Sherlock said quietly and steadily at his side.

He instantly obeyed.

"Yeah?" John asked as he settled his eyes on that face he knew so well.

"You did the first leg all on your own. All the rest you'll have me. You and me. Just the two of us against the rest of the world." Sherlock held out his hand and John reflexively, as though they did this every day, linked their fingers and palm to palm, squeezed. Feeling confidence surge through him they started down the hallway and toward the door.

"People will, of course, talk." Sherlock said with a knowing smile.

John glanced down at their joined hands.

"God, I hope so." He replied.
Chapter 53

In the backseat of the SUV, they sat on either side, still holding hands, finger intertwined together. They didn't talk much but it was a comfortable silence. Sherlock seemed to sense that John was in a contemplative mood and perhaps he was as well. John stole a glance at him occasionally in the car, on the plane and then in the car that would take them home. Each time he looked at him he smiled and when Sherlock caught him looking a bright smile lit up his face in return and he squeezed his hand. It was late evening by the time they arrived back in London and as they neared Baker Street John felt his heart rate shoot up.

"Sherlock...are they planning a party for me?" He asked suddenly as he took a deep breath. The thought had occurred to him out of nowhere but it felt right.

"Well done, John. As a matter of fact, they are."

"Fuck." He sighed. "I mean, that's not an ungrateful fuck it's just...an I'm-absolutely-knackered fuck."

"I got them to move it to tomorrow. I knew you'd be tired and there was no telling when we'd get in. Tomorrow at 3 I'm to take you out to a late lunch. When we arrive back at Baker Street, there they'll be. Cake, streamers, noisemakers all sorts of other ghastly party fare, I imagine. They missed you." Sherlock turned to look at him. "I know the feeling."

John relaxed considerably at this news as the car pulled up to Baker Street and stopped out front.

They unloaded his bags quickly. Then they were climbing the creaky, familiar stairs. Then opening the door. And then they were home.

He inhaled, exhaled and looked around. God, but he'd missed this place. He'd missed who he was when he was here.

In an effort to distract himself and stop any tears before they started he spoke.

"I expect Mrs. Hudson will be popping in any minute."

"No," Sherlock said setting his luggage down and taking the rest from John's hands. "I encouraged her to take another little trip for her nerves you see. She left Tuesday last and won't be back until tomorrow morning."

"So it's just us?" He asked not quite able to believe his luck. No, it wasn't luck. It was Sherlock's orchestrations. Just the way everything good or sometimes bad was always Sherlock's orchestrations. This was good, however. Really, really good.

"Just us." Sherlock said standing before him a gentle smile on his face. "So, if you're hungry we can order-"

"Come here." John said grabbing him with rough affection and pulling him into a hug. That was what he wanted and needed now. Just a hug. They could kiss and touch and caress later and he had no doubt that they would. But right now he just wanted to get his arms around this man and feel the same in return. Sherlock needed no coaxing to reciprocate and his arms went easily around John's body, encircling him, warming him.

They stood there silently because, as it always had, it felt good to just be silent in one another's
presence. After a few quiet minutes, John angled his head to share a soft kiss.

"Mind if I take a shower?" He asked against Sherlock's lips.

"Not at all."

"Order whatever you like for dinner, ok? I'll be back soon."

"Take your time."

John did take his time and stood there under the spray as it went from lukewarm, to the point where it nearly turned his skin lobster red, to the water running lukewarm again. When it finally grew cold he stepped out and stared at his steamy reflection. Wiping away the condensation on the mirror he took a long look at himself.

"John Watson. New life. Second chance. Don't fuck it up. Please...please don't fuck it up." He whispered.

His voice broke but he worried because it seemed his reflection remained implacable and unmoved. Refusing even now to promise anything. But it was just his tired brain running riot. That was all.

In his haste, he'd neglected to bring in anything but a dressing gown. No pants, no trousers, no shirt.

He toweled off and then cinching the tie tightly around his waist he left the bathroom to find Sherlock.

He could smell food...Italian? Some sort of pasta with red sauce and his stomach voiced its approval. He headed toward the kitchen and had a look about. The food sat on the countertop in familiar takeaway containers untouched. When he'd bothered to eat he had enjoyed the food at The Location but a part of him had craved fast, greasy, junk; sloppy pizza, artery clogging Chinese food and carb loaded pasta. He wondered what Sherlock had eaten in his absence. Had Mrs. Hudson taken full control of his diet. he hoped so. He hoped someone had been looking after him since he'd dropped the ball.

But closer inspection of well... everything stopped his train of thought. When John truly looked the flat was surprisingly different. The endless packages of plastic utensils sealed in more plastic are gone. John opened a drawer and saw they had been replaced by silverware. Actual silverware. Heavy as shit and lovely to boot. Sherlock must have gotten them from his mum. The takeaway containers that littered the counter and essentially every free space in the flat were gone. He opened the fridge and freezer to discover them scoured clean. There were actual, proper containers now, stacked neatly on shelves. The sink was empty and gleaming. The table top while still a shade cluttered with his experiments and equipment had clearly been wiped down.

Directing his attention back to the living area he noticed it was decidedly cleaner as well. Everything had gotten a thorough dusting, moving or airing out.

Even the skull had a bit of a shine to it.

Jesus, he'd done this for him. Or rather for them both.

It made his heart hurt just a little to think about it and propelled John to again go in search of Sherlock.

As it happened he found him in his bedroom turning down the bed.
"You cleaned," John said smiling at him as he leaned against the doorframe.

"Oh, yes." he said before brutally fluffing a pillow. "The books I read specified that someone returning from rehab should be greeted with a warm, clean and uncluttered environment"

"Books? As in plural?"

"Yes." Sherlock replied without looking up from his task.

"You didn't have to do that."

"But I did. I thought perhaps my chaos was not beneficial to your recovery. I can't promise it will stay this way, in this state of immaculate disuse. I'll still need to conduct my experiments but we no longer need to live in squalor."

John chuckled.

"It was never squalor. It was just odd. I like clean but I like odd too. You certainly made it clean and uncluttered and warm. Thank you, Sherlock." He said walking fully into the room. He'd been in Sherlock's room a few times before. About as many as Sherlock had been in his. Mostly they'd left that space that personal space untouched. A respite, a retreat from each other when necessary. He hoped neither of them would come to regret this change. That being said, despite his worry he was looking forward to it.

"I came back from the dead for you. Throwing out a few takeaway containers was hardly a sacrifice."

John watched him for a string of moments while he continued the rhythmic assault on the pillow before speaking.

"You can keep beating it but I don't think it's going to talk." He quipped.

"I'm sorry?" Sherlock asked turning to him.

"I said you can't get it any fluffier. You ask yourself how much more fluff could this be? And the answer is none. None more fluff."

Sherlock continued to stare at him blankly.

"God, you haven't seen Spinal Tap, have you?" he said taking the pillow out of his hands and setting it gently on the bed.

"Have I seen a spinal tap...what?"

"It's a movie. And now as I have been promoted from best friend to boyfriend I can force you to watch things I deem important. And next on the agenda is Spinal Tap."

"I don't believe I agreed to that," Sherlock said as John took his wrist and gently pulled him against his body.

"It's implied, and then explicitly stated in the John Watson relationship fine print."

"Is it now?" Sherlock said quirking the corner of his mouth.

"Mmmhmm," John replied brushing his lips against his.
"I'd like to take a closer look at this contract at some point."

"It's a doozy. But I think you'd much rather be surprised." John grinned before kissing him fully.

After a minute or so Sherlock unexpectedly started to giggle.

“What are you laughing about?” John asked with a smile as he pulled slightly back.

“Your hands are on my arse.”

And indeed they were as John had slid them down the landscape of Sherlock back to land there. He liked the way it felt; muscular, high and inviting. He wanted to give it a bit of a smack. Maybe later. “Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's 98% of being boyfriends. Having our hands on each other’s arses.” John teased. “Do you like it?”

"Yes, very much."

"Good." John replied giving him a squeeze.

"But...you need to eat." He said his voice tinged with regret.

As if in reply John's stomach groaned like a house settling.

"Yeah, you're right. Plus, I'm not wearing any pants."

"I..." Sherlock started to sputter. "That is an intriguing non-sequitur."

"I forgot them when I went to shower. Forgot everything except this." He said motioning to the dressing gown. "I'm going to run up to my room and change and then we can eat, maybe watch a bit of telly."

"Sounds lovely." Sherlock smiled.

They shared a parting kiss, leaving the bedroom and heading in their own separate directions.

John went up the stairs and entered his old room. He always left clothes there even once he and Mary had tied the knot. It only made sense. He figured he'd sometimes need to spend the night at Sherlock's and it wasn't exactly the kind of job where you knew when to pack a bag. He grabbed underwear, a t-shirt and some track pants, hastily dressed and headed back down.

Whoever worked the kitchen at Angelo's was notoriously heavy on the garlic. It didn't matter what dish you ordered it was going to come with the flavor that each mouthful had a full clove. For some reason, they were both still fond of it though. John had always made sure not to have any if he had a date that night...or frankly the next day as the scent did linger in the pores. Sherlock, well his metabolism didn't seem disturbed by anything and while he would comment that he tasted it, it never seemed to disturb his chemistry or his breath.

The point was, with Angelo's you knew what you were getting.

Except tonight.

Someone...that someone of course likely being Sherlock had clearly said go easy on the garlic. Very easy. The taste was subtle, light and delicious. Something that would only require a good tooth brushing and a few swishes of Listerine to disperse once the meal was done.

Something that would leave the mouth perfect and fresh for kissing and more kissing.
John smiled to himself as he ate another mouthful of the pasta. It was good. Good, easy, hot comfort food.

They'd decided to settle on the sofa, pulling the tv in front of them as they ate. Barefoot and comfortable they were each wearing robes and t-shirts and track pants. Both quiet and at ease in one another's company. Every 20-30 minutes John would blink and again be amazed that he was home and safe and loved.

Sherlock would occasionally focus his eyes on his plate clearly wanting to make sure John's fork was in an almost continuous motion from dish to mouth and back again.

"You haven't been eating. We'll need to change that from here on out. We often skip meals and I no longer wish for that to be the case."

"Ok." John said simply.

Sherlock glanced at him as he had almost certainly been preparing for an argument.

"Oh, well, good."

"Will the party tomorrow interfere with a case you're involved in?"

"No, I wrapped everything up and checked the inbox. There are things that need to be handled but nothing that's a matter of life or death. I can take an afternoon off."

John smiled and sprinkled on more parmesan.

"Great. I guess I'll hit a meeting tomorrow morning. Be sure to leave the list out, ok?"

"Of course."

"Maybe we can grab some coffee while they're preparing the surprise or go see a movie or something?"

"I'd like that very much."

"I should also make up a grocery list. The place being clean makes it clear when we're running low on stuff."

"Yes, I agree."

John paused for a beat.

"I love you, Sherlock."

"I love you too, John."

They finished dinner and John packed away the extra food despite Sherlock's protests that he could do it. The last thing he wanted or needed was to be treated like he was helpless in his own home. No reason to get into that habit. They were equals and partners as they always had been. The balance of it all was important.

Once done they both excused themselves, first one then the other to brush, floss and gargle.

Even as he was doing John found it delightfully silly how neither of them acknowledged the shift in the evening.
They returned to the couch, Sherlock first and then John, the latter putting his arm around the former's shoulders bringing him close. They stared at the tv for a while, some movie about a wizard and rings and elves but it wasn't really keeping their attention.

Knowing that bedtime was nearing they turned slightly timid, pecking at one another's lips, kissing softly like nervous teenagers. Sherlock had the beginnings of stubble along his jaw line and John traced it lovingly with his thumb.

"You must be exhausted," Sherlock said after a bit.

"Hmm...?" He was focusing on his boyfriends slightly swollen pink bottom lip, and thinking about how he wanted to continue sucking on it. "Oh yes, I am."

"We should go to bed."

Kissing Sherlock had revealed a lot of different things. First his mouth was just larger than that of anyone he'd ever kissed, but that made sense, men's mouths and heads in general tended to be larger. So were his hands and while in the early days, the very early days when he let his mind wander for a split second he wondered would it feel odd to have a large hand, larger than his own touching his face, cupping the back of his head, roaming his body, the answer was a resounding no. There were a thousand little things like that, the differences between the masculine and feminine. The lack of a difference between the need and want and arousal he felt for Sherlock and the women he'd been with. But none was more shocking than the fact that he could, in fact, enjoy himself without an erection. As much as he wished it to be otherwise he was as flaccid as ever. But he was still having a good time. Every touch and kiss and caress mattered, it registered, he felt something. Just not all that he wanted to feel but maybe it would do for now.

Concerned about getting Sherlock's hopes up he said "I guess we shouldn't. And even if we could I...I still can't..." as they rose from the couch. His boyfriend cut him off.

"I know, John. No need to explain. Hanah said we shouldn't just yet anyway. We're going to snog a little more and then go to sleep. alright? That's all. I expect nothing more from you that to have you lying by my side or in my arms."

"Yeah, I can do that." He said softly switching off the tv and tossing the remote on the sofa.

Once they got into bed it was actually Sherlock lying in John's arms which seemed to please everyone. John rested his chin atop the crown of Sherlock's head, nestled in his boyfriends hair...his lovers hair. Could he call him his lover if they hadn't yet...? Oh never mind.

"You know, when we first met I was under the impression that your hair was raven black. But over the years and especially now I see how wrong I was."

"Hmm?"

"It's full of all these different colors. There's black yes, but dark brown and chocolate and deep, auburn and red..."

"Will you always be this saccharine?" Sherlock said trying and aiming for irritation. He only ended up sounding relaxed, fond and hopeful.

"Yes, if you like." John replied with a grin kissing the top of his head. This caused Sherlock's arms to snake around him tighter and he pressed more firmly against John's chest. "Did you think we'd ever be here?"
"When I allowed myself to...dream, we were here every night."

Jesus...the time they'd wasted.

But was wasted the proper word? How do you knit a life together, a life with such disparate ends? If he and Sherlock had pursued this in 2010 how would things have been different? Mary could not so easily be wrenched or dismissed from his memory or his heart. She couldn't so simply be labeled a mistake nor could Rosie. Not to mention the fact that Sherlock, and truth be told he himself, had been so much less mature back then. So much more shut off and frightened. What if they had come together? Yes, it would have been exciting and fun and they likely would have had many, many frenetic bed shaking fucks.

And then what?

Where would that lead for a Sherlock who wasn't even a fourth as grown up as the one here?

Or for him, angry, battle-scarred, barely able to stand his own company much less the company of others. Quite incapable of maintaining a friendship much less a relationship that melded the two.

They might have split up in under a year and without a solid friendship as a foundation drifted apart. Would he even know Sherlock Holmes now if they'd tried to date all those years ago? Upon analysis, it seemed very unlikely. It was hard to accept considering the rocky, tumultuous, deadly road they'd walked to get to this place...but was it possible things had actually happened as they should?

"Is this what it's like when I go quiet and focus on my inner thoughts?" Sherlock asked. "Because this silence is interminable."

"Sorry, love." John said with a smile. "Miles away. But firmly back now."

"Good."

John ran soft, massaging fingers through Sherlock's curls, alternating between gently scratching and rubbing his scalp. He could feel his boyfriends body stretch and relax, settling into the attention.

Sherlock's bed was wide and comfortable. Neither too soft nor too firm but almost impossibly perfect. That was the thing John knew well about him. When he felt it was worth it, Sherlock splurged. This was clearly an expensive mattress and the thread count on the sheets was likely higher than anything John had ever rested his body between before. While eschewing excess Sherlock demanded quality and likely wouldn't lay his body against something he found to be inferior.

John felt inferior a good deal of the time.

And yet here Sherlock was, lying against him.

In fact, his body was growing heavier as he was being tugged down toward sleep.

"Finish the quote, Sherlock, from that night." John said softly.

"Quote?" He asked in puzzled sleepiness.

"That night. Give me a man...I forget now but it was something about being a slave to passion, I think? I asked you to finish it but you wouldn't."

"Give me that man that is not passion's slave, and I will wear him in my heart's core. Ay, in my heart
of heart. As I do thee."

Ah, so that was why he didn't finish it all those months ago.

Sinking them both deeper beneath the covers John reached over and switched off the light and in the home, he shared with his boyfriend who was still his best friend he closed his eyes.

"My heart of heart," he repeated softly and then once more. "My heart of heart."
Sherlock had an uncanny way of knowing when John was awake before John knew Sherlock was awake and it was something John was going to have to get used to.

"I was worried I'd wake up and you'd be gone." Sherlock said out of the blue, cutting through the quiet.

John had been resting dreamily in the dawn silence. Sherlock was heavy against him providing an all too welcome reminder that this was real. Really real. He'd been stroking his arm idly, assuming his boyfriend was asleep, as he let his mind drift to nothing but pleasant thoughts.

After the initial jolt caused by hearing that resonant voice in a previously silent room John recovered enough to say; "Why would I be gone?"

"Because you would never have been here in the first place." Sherlock replied.

"Do you think you're imagining us?"

"It's happened before."

The Location had gotten him in the habit of waking early and his eyes had popped opened as birds were still singing outside. It was hardly a sacrifice though when he looked down to see the man still in his arms.

Sherlock for all his coordination while conscious was a clumsy cephalopod in his sleep. He had latched onto John in several ridiculous positions during the night, changing suddenly with an irritated harrumph that at least once resulted in the doctor being elbowed in the ribs. But it was all ok and funny and sexy and sleepy and warm and as it turned out he quite liked sharing a bed with erratic octopus Sherlock Holmes.

"Sherlock, look at me." he said and the detective moved his head from where it was laying on John's chest to do as he was asked.

Christ Almighty but he was lovely. The morning light shining through the window hitting him just so. A good nights sleep having revitalized him into looking even younger than normal. Almost as young as when they first met when John had described him in his blog as looking about 12.

"I'm not going anywhere, ok?" He said running his thumb over his cheek. "I can't make very many promises I feel equipped to keep at the moment but here are two. I'm not going anywhere. And I will stay sober. Ok?"

"Ok." He said in reply before ducking his head down to kiss John's chest. "Did you sleep well?" He asked.
"I did indeed. Best night I've had in a very long time. Best night since Family Weekend."

"For me too."

"Want some breakfast?" John asked slipping both his hands in the morning mess that was Sherlock's hair. He let his nails graze his scalp, rubbing, massaging and sometimes tugging his curls gently. The response was immediate. Sherlock's blinks became slower and John was sure he was nearly on the verge of purring with contentment.

"We've nothing in." The detective managed after a moment with what appeared to be great effort.

"I can pop round to Speedy's. Get us something nice."

Sherlock hummed noncommittally.

"Or," John offered. "You could go back to sleep while I head to my meeting and when I come back I'll make you blueberry pancakes."

Sherlock's eyes brightened.

"Yes?" He asked.

"Yes, if you like." John agreed tugging him up for a kiss.

Good God, morning kisses with Sherlock. Sweet and tender and gentle. Soft and slow and lingering. Wet and lovely and eager.

Sherlock who had hidden so much, concealed so much but never learned how to conceal this. It was never presented as an option so he'd never put up a wall. Everything about the way he kissed was so unabashed, so open, so lacking in self-consciousness. And there was passion there as well, determined, focused, eager passion that felt powerful enough to overwhelm John if he let it. And he wanted to let it. John was learning to keep pace, to open himself up just as much, just as fully.

At the moment he needed to pull away just to take in a breath.

"Christ, but you're good at this." He said.

Sherlock only blinked and ran a tongue innocently over his slightly swollen bottom lip. The gesture made the innocent look sinful.

"No need to tease." He said uncertainly.

"Who's teasing?" John replied. Did he really think he wasn't good at it? "Now come back here, I just needed to catch my breath but it's back now."

Sherlock grinned shyly and gave him another kiss this one a bit more chaste.

"You need to get up and get going I'm afraid."

John, unfortunately, knew he was right and sighed heavily.

"Ok," He said with a groan. He would have liked to lounge in bed with his boyfriend all day but instead got to his feet once Sherlock had rolled off his body.

"You go back to sleep. I'm going to shower and slip out, alright?"
"Mmhmm" He replied already half vanished beneath the sheets.

John exited the bedroom and grabbed the sheet Sherlock had left for him on the kitchen table. It was Friday and it looked like there were several meetings to choose from. Checking his phone it was a little after 8 AM. There was a meeting at 9:15 at a local church, St. Boniface and as it seemed just as good as any other choice he made up his mind. John hurried upstairs to his bedroom and grabbed a set of clothes for the day before heading back down to the shower.

Morning one. Here it was. He was home, he was with his boyfriend. They'd shared a bed. Now, as promised he was off to find a meeting and get that under his belt. Then they'd to a late lunch, then his welcome home party. This was good, right? This was life. Living again. Expectations. Obligations, Commitments. His heart and mind seemed to be in lock step. He felt good. Every part of his day was planned. Every part of him was on board. Every part of his body knew its job.

Except one.

John was never a shrinking violet. He enjoyed a morning shag just as much as a lunchtime quickie or an after-dinner romp. He was up for it. He was always up for it.

At least in the past, he had been.

He'd never thought much about impotence during the previous months because it hadn't affected him. But he supposed before now he always figured, once a person eliminated the physical or mental reasons, or say a fear of failure, fear of something new, lack of attraction to a partner everything would resolve on its own.

But he felt healthy and strong mentally and physically. And he wasn't afraid of Sherlock and he wasn't scared of something new. In fact, every part of him every single inch but the inches in question reacted with a hunger toward the detective. He'd wondered if maybe his last remaining scraps of what he'd thought was heterosexuality might put up a fight. But Sherlock's hands on his body, lips on his neck, groin pressed firmly up against him felt nothing but right. So if he wanted him, if they wanted each other, and if he was healthy, what the hell was the problem?

Maybe it was the fact that rehab wasn't the sexiest of places. Maybe it was the fact that he had lost weight and had been eating and sleeping like shit. Maybe it was the fact that psychologically and emotionally he'd been hit with bombshell after bombshell both externally and from within over the past three months. Maybe his brain figured getting a hard-on wasn't the most important thing to tend to at the moment.

Still though, Sherlock lying on top of him making those soft delectable little noises, Sherlock's tongue in his mouth, his hand on his arse, the way he groaned when John tugged his hair, the way he smelled, the way he tasted, and yes, the ridiculous primitive lust that arose in John when he recalled that Sherlock was a virgin and that he would be his first and last and only lover. And finally, the simple, easy, indisputable, joyful fact that he was in love with him. Utterly besotted. Every single thing should have compelled him to stay in that bed and have them bring one another to orgasm after orgasm after rollicking orgasm. But Sherlock hadn't pushed it. In fact, John had noted he'd kept his crotch decidedly away from him. He had no idea if Sherlock was back in working order either but as he seemed just as pleasantly warm and eager he imagined he wasn't if he didn't pursue things further. At least that was alright, at least maybe they were even. John would hate to be the one who'd fallen behind.

Even thinking about it while he stood in the shower John closed his eyes imagining them pushing things further, clothes coming off, those first touches of flesh against flesh, it made his heart race. That was what confused him. Even though being a doctor he knew better, he hadn't imagined you
could have arousal, need, want, desire, hunger and every other adjective available without an erection.

What an awful, frustrating irritating lesson that was to learn.

Reaching down he took his limp cock in hand and started to stroke himself.

"Sherlock..." He whispered softly as he let himself slip into his fantasy.

Sherlock pressed close behind him in the shower, licking, sucking, biting at the column of his neck. Calling his name, bending him forward, spreading his legs, lubing up. A finger. Two. Three. Stretching.... Then that first feeling of Sherlock's cock, pressing, pressing, pressure, then inside him, so tight, so bloody fucking tight. Hips rocking, slowly then faster, gaining speed, gaining confidence, hands gripping slippery tiles, cries echoing off walls, driving harder and closer, closer, closer and-

John let his head drop.

It was no use. He was just as flaccid as before.

"Fuck..." He swore under his breath and balling his fist hammered it against the tiles. But as he felt himself growing angrier still he shut his eyes again.

This wasn't helping. He knew that. He couldn't start fucking up so soon. Giving into the fury and the frustration and the self-doubt.

It was early yet. There was time. He needed to adjust.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Give it time.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Give it time.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Give it time.

He showered quickly, toweled off, dressed and gave himself a final once over in the mirror.

Quietly he peeked in on Sherlock one last time and found him sound asleep. He was all but buried underneath the covers only a few stray, dark curls were visible. Good, that was good, he wanted him to get some rest. John tip-toed over and placed a kiss atop his head.

"Love you. I'll be home soon."

Sherlock only "Mmm"d in reply. John laughed softly and exited the bedroom.

Silently he grabbed his keys and the Big Book and left the flat. He hadn't heard any activity from below so it seemed he'd manage to make it out before Mrs. Hudson arrived home. He wanted to greet her, of course, but more than that he wanted to get a jump on his day first. He was already more than a little nervous about a new routine. He quickly hailed a taxi and directed the driver to St. Lucian.

A/N: More than a few of you mentioned that AO3 didn't update you that I posted two chapters last week. So, I hope you get this one! And if you haven't seen something from me in over a week, you might have missed one or two. :)
Oh and I've upgraded, ratings wise, from M to E.

*Samuel L. Jackson voice* Hold onto your butts.
Chapter 55

St. Lucian was old. He'd been expecting, perhaps, one of those newer model churches. The ones that from the outside could be a dentist's office or a museum or a place to rent vacuums cleaners. This was one of those ancient goliaths with fortified brick walls, a steeple, a rusty looking bell, grotesques, and turrets. He stepped inside and cursed himself for being nervous. It was stupid. He'd done this before. Nearly every fucking day for the past three months even. Why was he going all weak sister now? He took a steadying breath and stopped in front of the bulletin board.

St Lucian AA Meeting

9:15 AM

CP

Basement Conference Room A

We welcome you!

John followed the signs to the basement

C meant that the meeting was closed which was basically a necessity for him at this point. Open meetings might be fine in a pinch but the fact that anyone was allowed in was an unappealing thought at the moment. As much as he'd balked at the idea at the time, now, he accepted the fact that he was an alcoholic and speaking to or in front of people who might not be similarly suffering was something he couldn't bear.

P designated that it was a Promises meeting meaning it focused on the 12 Promises of AA. Meetings at The Location had covered every variation and combination and there were certainly some he preferred more than others. Promises wasn't a favorite but it would do for today.

It was a few minutes after 9 when he arrived and as he entered the conference room he was surprised to see it so well attended. There were around 10 people there not counting him, some sitting and flipping through their phones, a few grouped together speaking quietly and a handful picking out donuts and adding cream to coffee in styrofoam cups. He took a seat in the wooden chair with the pink seat cushion identical to what you'd find in any physician's office waiting room. The chairs were already arranged in a half circle and he made another quick count of the attendees to be sure he wasn't taking someone's spot. There was likely still time before things got rolling so he took out his mobile as well and pretended to studiously look through it. It was just something to do to kill the time and more importantly quell his nervousness giving him something to do with his hands. If nothing else, it gave him time to look through Sherlock's Twitter.

As expected it was 90% cases with a good dose of snark when he felt his patience was being tested or his time wasted. There was the random proclamation of "Bored!". But every now and then there was a picture of a flower or a bumble bee or just some random prettiness he had come across during his day. Those he hashtagged #CaptureTheLovliness. Of all the things John imagined would or could stick, that wouldn't have been it. Which was likely why it made him incredibly happy.

He was smiling down at his phone when a voice sounded.

"If everyone wouldn't mind taking their seats and shutting down their phone we're ready to begin."

John raised his head and watch as the assembled slowly ambled to their seats. He dutifully shut down
his phone, shoving it in his pocket.

"Good morning everyone. My name Jan and I'm an alcoholic. I'd like to welcome you to this regular
closed meeting of Alcoholic's Anonymous. Now I'm going to invite all who'd like to participate to
join me in a moment of silence for those who are still sick and suffering, both in and out of the room,
followed by the Serenity Prayer."

While not one for prayer John did take the time to send his thoughts and best wishes to some of those
he'd met at the Location, James especially. He wondered how he was doing now and hoped he was
well.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I
can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen." He recited along with everyone else. The
sentiment was hard but valuable and he said the words earnestly.

Jan took her seat and offered everyone a smile.

"I see we have some new faces so if you wouldn't mind introducing yourselves and maybe telling us
a little about what brings you here."

John looked around, the plural faces meant he wasn't the only one so he waited to see if someone
would volunteer to go first. When no one seemed eager he raised his hand.

"Yes?" Jan said.

"Hi, my name is John and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hello, John."

He thought he saw a few keen eyes on him and for the first time in months remembered who he was
and how people might actually know him. That feeling had been sharp and frightening the first few
days of rehab but had dulled to nothingness. First off, there were far bigger 'celebrities' there than
him and second, well, those people had become if not quite friends at least acquaintances. There'd
been a loose sort of loyalty amongst them as they all began to focus more on their problems and
getting/staying clean than who someone was on the outside. Once again, just as he did when he was
leaving, he got the feeling that The Location had been safe. Which meant, logic dictated this place
was unsafe.

It felt different, he felt different and faltered before going on.

"Um, I just got out of rehab yesterday as a matter of fact. I have 91 days clean and I'm hoping to
keep it that way." He concluded.

"Thank you, John." Jan said with a smile. "Anyone else?"

Admittedly John had a difficult time paying attention, he felt...conspicuous. And whether it was
genuine or all in his mind he couldn't shake the feeling that they were studying him...perhaps even
judging.

All that aside, the meeting went much like any other. That was, after all the point of AA; uniformity.
A meeting here should be the same as a meeting in the States or a meeting on the moon. That was the
comfort and predictability of it all.

But he wasn't feeling much comfort and was honestly glad when it was over. After the sharing,
which he politely declined to participate in and after dropping a few pounds in the passed around
basket, after the "Keep coming back. It works!" chant and after they were dismissed he hurried back up the stairs and into the nearest taxi. He didn't want to talk to anybody, to hang around, to find out for sure if their questions would be innocent, friendly or probing.

"Nearest Tesco, please." He requested and was quickly taken to a location so close he could have walked. He exited the vehicle and entered the unfamiliar yet due to its predictable layout completely familiar store. Ticking off the ingredients from the recipe permanently fixed in his mind from many a childhood breakfasts with his sister he went from aisle to aisle grabbing the items for pancakes. 45 minutes later he was back in their flat and surprised at the level of relief he felt.

"The last thing I need is to become an agoraphobe." He muttered to himself as he headed for the kitchen. The sound of the shower running could be heard through the closed bathroom door and he smiled. Just thinking about Sherlock made him smile. He went to work combining the ingredients and heating the skillet. He added the blueberries last and by the time Sherlock emerged he had three pancakes completed and ready to eat stacked on a plate.

"You're back." Sherlock said from just over his shoulder.

As his boyfriend swooped in, and he did swoop, John recalled something Mycroft had said in passing years ago, likely meant to embarrass his younger brother.

_Sherlock was demonstrative, overly demonstrative as a boy. Quite the hugger if you can believe it. So very emotional. Our parents indulged it despite my warnings. I wanted him hard and unbreakable. People only pretend to enjoy open, fragile, gentle things because they like to watch them shatter._

At the time, Sherlock had pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes shooting daggers at his brother, none too happy with such a reveal.

At the time, John had felt Mycroft's assertion couldn't have possibly been more unlikely.

But it was all proving to be true. The giving, loving little boy Mycroft described sounded like precisely the genesis of the man whose arms now slid around John's waist and whose lips were immediately at his jaw line.

"How was it?" He asked.

"Good. Fine. Pretty standard." John replied. He then yanked the skillet off the eye so nothing would burn before turning in Sherlock's arms to kiss him properly.

"Will you tell me how it really went later?" Sherlock asked softly.

"Mmmhmm," John replied before aiming his lips toward that cupid's bow again.

"Can my bedroom be _our_ bedroom, John?"

"Of course. Yes, of course it can."

"I'd rather not sleep without you now that I've a taste for it."

"You won't, I feel the same way."

"Ok." He said kissing him again.

"Ok. Your breakfast is going to get cold." John said against his lips. "And I made it special."
"John..." He said and it sounded so breathless, so full of anticipation and want that John's own breath caught in his throat.

"Yes?"

Sherlock pulled back and seemed to settle himself.

"I...Shall I grab a plate?" he asked. It was an innocuous question but his gaze was still surprisingly penetrating. He wanted them to go farther, at least that's what John sensed. He wondered how new all this must feel for Sherlock. Was everything running wild in him? Blood pumping hot like a teenager. Frantic and eager and mad the way he felt about that boy he fancied back at school. Was it hard to control? Did he want to control it?

"Have a seat and I'll bring it to you. Don't get used to this though. I'm just feeling domestic today."

Sherlock dutifully took a seat and John went about making a fresh plate for him.

"Blueberry, as promised, a tall glass of milk, tea and..." John reached into the last shopping bag and took out a jar. "Not exactly mad honey, but it might do."

Without much ceremony or thought John unscrewed the top and dipped in his finger. The viscous substances pulled out long and amber as he raised his hand. It was more, for lack of a better word, butter than he expected, less drizzly than ordinary honey, a little more like melted caramel. It was room temp warm and immediately perfumed the air around them. He popped the finger in his mouth and closed his eyes at the flavor. Honestly, he was surprised. He'd had honey before, of course, but it always came out of a container in the shape of a bear or a little plastic packet. But this...this was something different. This was richer, thicker, it coated his tongue with a sweetness and a slightly acidic burn. He'd splurged on this. It was sort of foolish but he did have three months of pensions checks banked away and what was one small trifle? Still, he'd debated with himself a little about whether it was worth it. Until now. Now he could admit it, there was a difference in pricier honey and it was damn well worth it.

"Oh that's um...that's really good. Want to taste?" John dipped his finger in again and held it out, sticky and inviting toward Sherlock.

Sherlock glanced up at him and raised an eyebrow before extending his tongue and swiping it across John's fingertip.

"That's lovely." He agreed with a studious frown. "Floral. Heady." He licked at John's finger again. "Oh, I think you can do a bit better than that." John drawled. He had no idea where this was coming from. Before he'd opened the jar, before he'd tasted it, smelled it he could and would have sworn on a stack of bibles he only bought it as a treat and topping for the pancakes. Something to show Sherlock that he had paid attention when he'd spoken of his fascination with bees and drugged honey and that it meant something to him as well.

He truly hadn't been planning this. But then again he wasn't complaining.

"Is that a challenge?" Sherlock asked with obvious interest.

"If you like."

John watched as Sherlock took hold of his wrist and directed the doctor's finger back to the open jar. Once the finger was again slathered with honey Sherlock brought it to his lips and slowly took it in. He bobbed his head on it, tip, to joint and nearly to knuckle, all while never breaking eye contact.
Bloody hell, he knew what he was doing and they both groaned as Sherlock essentially fellated his finger. It was cheeky and sexy and filthy and exactly what John wanted. Sherlock seemed eager to oblige, puckering his lips as he took his boyfriend's middle finger in and out.


Sherlock groaned again around his digit and just as he pulled back and swirled his tongue around the tip there was a familiar "Ooh-ohh!" and corresponding knock at their front door. As it creaked open John regretfully removed his finger and he and a flushed and frustrated Sherlock tried to regain their decorum, such as it was.

"Sherlock? Is he back yet?" Mrs. Hudson asked coming round the corner.

After wiping off his hand he stepped away from Sherlock to greet her with open arms.

"Back home. Hello, Mrs. Hudson."

"John!" She exclaimed and rushed into his arms. He held her small frame against his body and felt a surge of guilt for the worry and strain he must have put her through. "We missed you so much! Sherlock especially."

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Hudson." Sherlock said from his chair at the table.

"He was absolutely lost without you. Couldn't manage anything."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hudson." Sherlock intoned.

"But oh, when he came back from seeing you he started playing his violin again and taking cases and I even caught him singing once or twice."

"Mrs. Hudson!" He shouted.

But Mrs. Hudson ignored Sherlock's bellow and John's laughter as she clung to him.

"John, you're far too thin. Why a stiff wind could blow you over. Weren't they feeding you there?"

"I admit I didn't have much in the way of an appetite." He said rubbing her back gently.

"Well, you have to eat something!"

"Actually, I was making breakfast, blueberry pancakes. Why don't you join us?"

"You're cooking?" She asked incredulously.

"I cook." he said taking mock offense.

"If you say so, dear. But I should unpack."

"Unpack later. Have breakfast with us now." John insisted. "I've missed you."

They had a leisurely breakfast and when John wasn't just watching Sherlock dip his pancakes in little pools of honey, he was listening to Mrs. Hudson excitedly prattle on about her holiday in Ibiza. John had doubled the recipe and kept the pancakes coming until they both begged for mercy. He sent her back to her flat with a stack to place in the fridge.

"Those were extraordinary. Thank you, John." Sherlock said.
"You're welcome." He replied taking their dirty dishes to the sink.

"I'll do the washing up."

"I don't think those words have ever come out of your mouth before." John teased him.

"Then you'd best take me up on it now, hadn't you?"

"No, please, I'd like to. We had a list of rotating chores at rehab. It made me intolerant of idle time. I'd like to keep busy, at least for now. Is that ok?"

Sherlock had come to stand at his side as he filled the sink with hot, soapy water.

"As you wish."

John turned his head and their lips met easily, as though they'd been doing this from their first day together.

"Mānuka, by the way."

"Beg pardon?" Sherlock asked as he settled his hand on the small of John's back.

"The type of honey. Mānuka. It's from Australia and New Zealand."

"Well, it was delicious. Both on the pancakes and on your finger."

"Liked that, did we?" John asked feeling a bit smug.

"I see your waistline may have unnecessarily shrunk while your ego was equally and unnecessarily made larger," Sherlock replied heading to his chair. "You already know I liked it quite a lot.

"Enough chatter. Find us a case, you."

"Are you sure you're ready?" Sherlock said reaching for his laptop.

"As I said, I can't stand idle."

Clearly needing no further encouragement Sherlock went to work as John continued the task at hand.

He washed the dishes.

He rinsed the dishes.

He dried the dishes and drained the water.

And through it all Sherlock didn't so much as make a sound.

Finally, tea towel in hand John made his way to his own chair.

"Nothing, in all this time? You haven't said a word."

Sherlock glanced up and back at the screen.

"Just a lot of nonsense. I've mostly been deleting."

"I could help." He offered and suddenly felt exposed. It had been awhile. Perhaps Sherlock didn't trust his judgment or for him to take the lead anymore. "If you wanted. If...you hadn't changed your
"Why would I change my password?"

"I don't know." John said with a noncommittal shrug. "Want me to get on my computer? Help you sort?"

"No, no that's not necessary." He replied and John tried to push down any twinges of hurt. "I was thinking you need your own account. People should be able to contact us both. I have a feeling you might get a different sort of mail than I."

John was more than a little surprised. Sherlock had never been short or cruel about the website he'd simply been...well...Sherlock. Though they linked to one another's there was a clear line of delineation between his blog and *The Science of Deduction*. This...well this was a big step.

"You're going to add me to the site?"

"No, you're going to add you to the site. I can't be arsed. Phrase it however you like. And add your blog link back as well. I'm sorry I..." He trailed off.

"No, it's alright. I understand," he added quickly. "I wanted you to."

"I'll set up an email for you. You might want to consider getting a Twitter account as well. People have their own ways that they like to get in touch. Some of the more annoying ones like to tweet. Though I have managed to glean a few good cases from private messages."

"Yeah, sure I'll get on that."

"Nothing flashy. Just your name will do. Once you choose it, follow me and I'll do the same."

"Right."

John reached for his laptop and fired it up. It hadn't been turned on in months and immediately reminded him there were an obscene amount of security updates due. He authorized them all and used the time to surreptitiously eye his boyfriend. His hair which had been wet when he'd left the shower had now dried itself into perfect curls. He was drumming his fingers in rhythm on the arm of his chair. There was the small crease of his forehead as he read the information on his screen. His long legs were crossed, one over the other, his body stretched long and lean.

John pulled his attention away for a few moments and created the Twitter account as requested. Within seconds he had located and followed Sherlock, who immediately followed back. That brought the number of people Sherlock was following on Twitter to a grand total of 1.

"Now, close your DM's." Sherlock instructed.

"Why? I thought that was the point. So people could reach both of us." John asked in confusion.

"It is but...I think they should stay closed for now. For awhile at least. For the time being, I'd like you to lock the account. That way you can screen the people who are allowed to follow you."

"Ok, what's going on?"

Sherlock looked up and John could tell he was debating what to say.

"Upon hearing of your return, there may be...undue attention. I feel the best way to mitigate this is to introduce you back slowly."
John flashbacked to the press coverage following his aborted suicide attempt. The harassment of his friends, Sherlock's name dragged through the mud, the press surrounding his home and Baker Street. Then his own feelings today at the meeting.

"Do you really think people will care? I mean, I saw the red tops this morning at Tesco. There are much more salacious stories going on than a second fiddle returning from a dry out."

"John," Sherlock's eyes darted away from him momentarily and then back again. "There have already been rather cruel things said. Things I'm glad you were shielded from. I'd like to keep it that way."

"You want to protect me." John stated rather than asked. He suddenly felt that wave again, that overwhelming crest of affection for this man. And the delightful thing was, it wasn't new. It was old, just as Sherlock's desire to protect him was old. He'd always been like this. They'd always been like this. This is who they were at their core, they only had to build on it.

"It's just not conducive to the work." Sherlock dismissed with a wave of his hand.

"Alright." He said deciding not to push it for now. "Locking down DM's and the account as a whole."

"Thank you."

"Speaking of work, I thought today was your day off?"

"This sounds interesting. I keep seeing my husband on Instagram but he's been dead for five years. I tried to message him but he blocked me."

"Sherlock?"

"I think I have a secret twin my mother never told me about."

"It's never twins." John replied with a smile. "Sherlock?"

"Dear Mr. Holmes, are you seeing this? I fear I may be a ghost. No one ever notices me-

"You're making these up!"

Sherlock laughed and shut his laptop.

"Not the first two, and I've already replied to them. But, yes, the last one was fictional. So, what do you want to do? You are correct, I promised you this day."

"Well, I did have a few questions." John stood from the chair. He wanted to be moving through this conversation and it afforded him the perfect excuse to get more tea. John motioned toward the kettle to see if Sherlock wanted some as well but he waved him off. "Do you...want to announce it? Not just you, I mean, you and me. Do you want us to announce it jointly, together?"

"That we're together? I have no objection to that."

"Oh, great. Good." John said trying to not grin like too much of an idiot. "Um, what about kissing? Are you ok with kissing in public? Just affection in general."

"I don't exactly enjoy being on display, John, but if the need arises."

"If...the need arises?" What once might have made him bristle now just made him laugh.
Sherlock paused.

"Am I being rude?" He asked wincing slightly.

"No, you're being Sherlock. I just didn't want to grab your chin and plant a kiss on you outside of Speedy's if you didn't want me to. I mean, I'm not going to be shoving my tongue down your throat at every crosswalk but, I just wanted to know "

"I wouldn't see an issue with that. The kissing, I mean, not the shoving your tongue down...well, you know what I mean. My point is, I'm not as prudish as you imagine me to be, John."

"I don't think you're a prude. I think you're private, like me. But I also don't think you've been in a relationship before and it's always a good idea to lay down boundaries and ground rules."

"Very well. I have some ground rules and boundaries of my own. The first was about sharing my bedroom which we've already covered. The second, with your permission, I would like to amend my will to ensure that in the event of my death all that I have goes to you. Number three-

"How many numbers are there?" John teased as he watched Sherlock with adoration so blatant and naked he couldn't hide it. He didn't like talking about his death much less thinking about it so he put it aside. Far aside.

"Number three," He said ignoring him. "When we do make love I believe we should take turns to figure out who prefers which position. I would like to try out both topping and bottoming unless you already have a choice. Or, if perhaps you have some sort of internalized homophobia maybe you have an objection to being penetrated."

John coughed at Sherlock's bluntness before responding.

"I...no, I don't have any problem with trying out both."

"Good." Sherlock nodded. "Number 4 it's always been rather uneven with regard to who makes the tea. You've borne the brunt of it. I intend to pull my own weight."

"Your tea weight?"

"Yes. Well, with more than just tea. Think of tea as a metaphor if it helps you."

"Ok, anything else?" John said as he sat down with a fresh cuppa. "So far we've gone over sleeping arrangements and by the way, I'd love the idea of sharing your room and bed. Our room, our bed. Your will and by extension your death which you know I can't bear discussing. But yes, you have my permission. Metaphorical tea making and the duties that surround it which, by the way, I am fine dividing. And versatility in our lovemaking. All of which I've agreed to. Is this a complete list?"

"The list will be added to as need be as I imagine so will yours."

John relaxed his body, slumping in his seat so he could extend his legs far enough to rest his feet on Sherlock's chair.

"I'm happy, love."

Sherlock dropped his hand to squeeze John's foot affectionately and leave it there.

"I know. So am I." he said a smile playing on his lips. "So, what shall we do now?"

"Want to go back to bed and snog?"
"You're proposing that we get back into bed and kiss until it's time to leave so they can prep for the party?" Sherlock said with a disbelieving shake of his head.

"I am, indeed." John said nodding.

"Works for me." He answered bounding out of his chair with customary grace.

They found themselves back in bed only moments later

Sometimes to John, it felt like he was collecting as well as delivering on every hug, every touch that he eschewed or banked or bookmarked over their years together. Every new caress at this point was a collection on an IOU they gave each other from that first meeting in the lab arranged by Mike.

I owe you a brush of my lips against your ear.

I owe you fingers entwined.

I owe you a warm circling of my hand on the small of your back as we hug.

I owe you.

His need to touch Sherlock, to be touched, to have him close was overwhelming and so they fell back into the comfort of soft touches and conversations and voices and kisses. They were neither platonic nor lusty instead settling somewhere in between. They were just *them*.

And the safety of Baker Street was whittled down to the expanse of their bedroom, their bed and promises fulfilled and promises owed.

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_A/N_ Hoping to get another chapter out before the weekend is over. I was on vacation this week so I had a lot of time to think about where this needs to go. Hope you're still enjoying it!
"I thought the rest of you was just transport. Since when does the transport have a preference for where we eat?" John asked.

Sherlock had given the cabbie an address for a restaurant that was unusually out of the way. John wasn't complaining. A card ride with Sherlock suited him fine. It was just...strange.

"I thought we could try some place new. It's lighter fare than we're accustomed to but the pancakes were quite filling."

His answer satisfied John who was always up for trying something new.

When they arrived, just from the way it looked outside, John decided he might like the place.

The restaurant was small, intimate and not at all busy. The hostess was young and bored and didn't seem to recognize either one of them which was definitely a plus.

As they were seated John noticed the stricken look on Sherlock's face.

"What is it?" He asked quickly.

"I wasn't thinking, I apologize."

"For what?" He asked as the waitress came up.

"Hi, I'm Pauline, welcome to Rustic. Could I interest you in some starters?"

"Uh, yes thank you." John said with a smile as she set two menus down in front of them.

"And if you'd like to peruse our wine list. We have a special today, a 1981-"

"No, no wine. Thank you." Sherlock said quickly.

Oh, that was why he was upset.

Pauline looked confused at having been so summarily dismissed and John immediately apologized on his boyfriend's behalf.

"Sorry about that. Can we get back to you?"

"Of course, sir." She said before heading off.

Sherlock had busied himself with looking at the menu avoiding eye contact.

"Sherlock, you can order a glass of wine if like."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not. Look, your issues are very specific. In fact, I don't believe you've ever really strayed from..." he left the space after from blank not really seeing any need to fill in heroin. A thought did, however, occur to him. They'd never really talked about whatever else Sherlock had tried or been keen on. Cigarettes and smack. That was all he knew. He should ask. They should talk about this. But obviously not here.
"I just don’t think you should be punished for my troubles."

"And I would think you would have the decency not to shoot up in front of me even if you were so inclined. I intend to show the same courtesy. I don't need a drink. John."

"Alright, I'm just...there's not going to be many places we can go in London or the world at large where they don't serve alcohol. I'm going to have to get used to it, you know?"

"Perhaps," Sherlock said lowering the menu. "But you don't have to get used to it from me."

It was touching. Really it was but something about Sherlock having to shoulder this weight made John uneasy. In all their years together he'd seen his boyfriend enjoy wine, typically with his brother and they'd all downed a beer or two. But the only time John had ever seen him drunk was on his stag night and that had been purposeful in a way. Just getting absolutely munted for the fun of it. All the more reason he hated the idea that Sherlock felt the need to go dry. It was terribly sweet, though.

"Thank you, love." He said quietly.

"No thank you required, John."

They ordered a light snack of cheese, crackers, bread and fizzy drinks and just talked, chatted, relaxed. John felt like a free man breathing free air on the verge of something new.

At some point when Sherlock excused himself to head to the loo John took out his phone. No messages or missed calls but he did notice an alert from Twitter. Pulling up the app he saw that he had no less than 700 follow requests.

He stared at the number and refreshed the page to make sure it wasn't a mistake. When Sherlock returned to the table he showed him the screen.

"Can you believe that? It's only been four hours." He asked with disbelief.

Sherlock looked momentarily troubled but not surprised in the slightest.

"As I assumed. They were alerted when I followed you." He sighed heavily and pushed his plate away. "Things may intensify now, at least for awhile. I think you should prepare yourself as much as possible. The countdown has begun."

"You know...I did feel as though people were watching me at the meeting."

Sherlock leaned forward.

"Watching you?"

"Yeah, like, they knew who I was. It seemed familiar. It was that way at The Location for the first few days."

"Really?"

"Yeah, trust me, I was just as surprised as you are but apparently I'm just a bit well known. It was...unnerving but after awhile it faded. I truly hope this will too."

"If I know anything about the cycles of the press and human nature, in general, it will. But it will take some time. John, if there's anything I can-"

"No, no really I'm fine. I'm not going to let this curtail my life or my plans. I got clean so I could live
and that's what I'm going to do. It's just going to be uncomfortable for awhile, I suppose. I mean, what's the worst that could happen?"

Sherlock nodded but didn't say anything.

"Do I have to approve these people one by one?" John said with an irritated gesture to his phone.

"Take your time, there's no rush. I can do it for you, some of the names will likely be familiar to me. Or, we can simply wait a few weeks, and open up your account to the public eliminating the need."

"Ok, I won't worry about it now." Glancing at the time on his mobile he saw it was nearing 5pm. "I guess we should be getting back. It's nearly time."

"Right. I'm to text them twice. Once to let them all know we on our way and the second time to alert them as to when we arrive at Baker Street. Nervous?"

John reached for his wallet to pay the check but Sherlock waved him away with a hand gesture and the former relented. They'd need to talk about finances at some point.

"Suddenly, yeah, I'm not exactly eager to be put on display. Paraded about. They have every right to judge me for what I've done and I'm...well I feel as though I'm about to pay the piper."

Sherlock paid the check and they rose to exit the restaurant.

"I can assure you this isn't an ambush, John. It will only be attended by a few friends all with the best of intentions. I'd be feeling the same way were it me. But we'll grin and bear it together and know they mean well no matter what they might say."

"I couldn't manage it without you," John replied as they hailed a cab.

"You could," Sherlock said. "But you won't have to."

Sherlock sent the second text as the cab idled in front of the building.

"They'll be assembling now. Hiding behind our chairs I imagine for a pop-out. Try and look surprised."

"How's this?" John teased as he pretended to practice the look for him.

"Dismal. I'm sure they'll love it." Sherlock replied dryly. "Come on, once more unto the breach."

"We few, we happy few."

When they arrived in the flat some of the guests seemed confused as to whether or not it was a true surprise party. Some of them hid, some didn't. But either way, they all greeted John with sincere smiles and he was surprised overwhelmed with how happy, truly happy they all seemed to be to see him.

There was Mrs. Hudson, Greg, Mike, Janine, and Molly. That was all, mercifully because John honestly wasn't sure he could handle more. Whether she should have been or not he was relieved his sister hadn't shown.

"She phoned earlier while you were at your meeting, said she was sorry but she couldn't make it. She promised to set something up with your later on in the week." Sherlock had told him quickly as he'd scanned the room.
There was cake, biscuits, punch, streamers, balloons and a banner that said "Welcome Home!". It was actually quite lovely and he felt a tightness in his throat as he looked at the faces of all the people he’d, in varying ways, wronged. And yet for some reason, they were all still there for him.

He wasn't sure how to approach them, how to enter their group and thankfully they all came to him. Janine was first, she walked over, touched his arm and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Welcome home, John."

"Thank you, Janine and thank you for being here."

"Were you surprised?" She whispered.

"Oh yes, absolutely." He said with a quick nod of his head.

"You're a terrible liar." She laughed and this time gave his arm a squeeze. "You look handsome and healthy. If there's ever anything I can do..."

"Yeah, actually there is. Can we talk just a little bit later? There are just some things I'd like to say to you. Won't take more than a few minutes."

He'd meant to write her a letter. He owed that to her and to Greg as well but things had just gotten away from him.

"Of course. Just let me know when."

John noted she'd dressed up for the occasion which was both unnecessary and absolutely lovely. He also noted this was the time his brain chose to remind him of all the things Sherlock told him the two of them had done. All the ways his partner has touched her body and all the ways she'd responded and-

**Not the right time, John, really not the right time.**

He smiled again at Janine as she turned to walk away and caught Sherlock’s eye in the process. To his surprise, his boyfriend, ever the mind reader, was looking at him with amusement. It was now his turn to blush and he quickly glanced away but not before chuckling softly.

Mrs. Hudson hugged him somehow still overcome with emotion despite them having had their initial greeting earlier. He embraced her tightly just the same and thanked her for such a lovely surprise.

Mike was next and he gave him an awkward hug. John thanked him for coming but sensed there was something more.

"You alright, mate?" he asked.

"Am I...? Yeah, I'm fine, I just..."

"Mike, what is it?" He asked quietly as he pulled his friend aside. It was unusual to see him upset, it just wasn't his nature and John wondered if there was something else going on.

"I feel as though this is my fault."

"Your fault?"

"Yeah, I mean I was always inviting you out for a pint, getting us drunk. I wasn't there like I should
have been after you lost Mary-

"No, Mike, no. This isn't about you or anybody. Just me. Look at me, I'm glad you're here, ok. And...honestly, I wanted to apologize to you. I know we had a run in or two when I was in the middle of one of my multiple benders. I wanted to apologize to you directly. My behavior was unacceptable and I put you in positions I shouldn't have. I worried you and added extra stress to your life and I'm sorry. I'd like to make amends for that and I hope you'll forgive me."

To John's surprise, Mike started to tear up. He hadn't known his friend to be the overly emotional sort but he pulled John into a sudden rough hug and mumbled his acceptance of the apology against his ear.

John felt both grateful and slightly uncomfortable at the display. Everyone was watching. Everyone was listening. But still, he had known this was coming and this was the least he owed them.

Mike eventually pulled back, rubbing at his eyes.

"I'm going to get some cake." He said with a hint of embarrassment.

"Good plan, mate."

Sherlock, perhaps sensing he was already in need of a breather came over with a slice of cake and cup of punch.

"Thanks."

"You look as though you could use it."

"I've been trying to catch Greg's eye but I think he's purposefully avoiding me. I mean I can't blame him."

"He'll come round. Corner him if you have to." He advised.

"That seems a bit mean."

"Not mean, just forceful. I like everyone in this room but my true allegiance is to you. Speaking with him and finding a resolution would make you feel better which is my primary concern. I'll drag him over here if need be."

"You know, you'd make a very interesting addiction counselor."

"I missed my calling." Sherlock said with a smile.

John was just about to reply when the front door swung open.

"So sorry we're late! Hopefully not too late!"

Everyone, John included turned their attention to the group that was entering.

In came Harry, loaded down with two, colorful canvas bags like Mary used to carry in those early days when the two of them and Rosie ventured out. Behind her was Clara with bags of her own on both shoulders as both her hands were full. A stroller was held awkwardly under one arm...and his daughter was in the other.

John looked to Sherlock who appeared just as surprised as he was.
"I thought-" John began.

"I was able to move some things around and get here anyway." Harry said answering the question John had only actually started to pose quietly to Sherlock. She quickly put the items she was carrying down and hurried over to him wrapping him in an embrace. "Johnny, it is so good to see you. You look amazing."

He embraced his sister in kind but was still lost in a daze.

He usually had to go through some preparation to see her. It was as close to meditation and centering as he got and in the past, it had involved a good deal of wine. He hadn't gotten that opportunity this time and he was suddenly and sorely missing it. But as surprising as her presence was his eyes were riveted to Rosie.

But as surprising as Harry's presence was his eyes were riveted to Rosie.

She'd grown, as children were wont to do whether they were with their parents or not. She was wearing the smallest jeans he'd ever seen and a little t-shirt with an elephant on the front. She was all fat legs and arms and round, pink cheeks. She looked healthy and happy.

When she was born her hair was wispy and blonde, as his had been as a little boy. As she got older it had grown a little chestnut in colour and he remembered laughing with Mary as they put silly bows in the silky, sparse tufts.

But now...now it was dark. Dark brown perhaps darker than that, edging toward black. His father had had dark hair, nearly black as well. And he was never sure what color Mary's hair really was. She'd liked blonde so much and he liked the look of it on her so she'd kept it. She looked like Mary, he could see her features written all over that tiny face.

She looked like Mary, he could see her features written all over that tiny face. The eyes, the little chin. He didn't see himself but that was alright.

She was 15 months old. 15 months old and she was lovely and he told Harry so.

"I know, right? Gorgeous little creature and smart as a whip. Come see her." She said tugging him forward.

He allowed her to pull him but a crowd had already formed. Janine and Mrs. Hudson were cooing and Greg and Mike were leaning in with interest. Only Sherlock stood back. Well, that was natural, of course, he didn't really care for children.

Rosie seemed cheerful, at first but after awhile she started to squirm in Clara's arms. John imagined she was getting over stimulated at all the focus and attention. She shifted her from one side to another but the toddler wouldn't be fooled. John watched as her face scrunched and she tried to rise higher, trying to use Clara's shoulder as leverage. Rosie started to whine and everyone grinned at the small tantrum. John wanted to hold her and wondered if she'd allow such a thing. Probably not.

"No...nononono!" She complained and they all, John included, laughed.

"Sorry, I think she's due for a nap." Clara said apologetically.

Rosie gave a shout and then held out her arms reaching for something.

"Easy, my love." Clara said. "I'll put you down. One second."
Then, just as clear as day John heard his daughter mournfully cry out; "Sherlock!"

John turned his head swiftly to his partner who didn't look at all surprised by the exclamation. He did, however, look a bit embarrassed.

"Well go on then, she's calling for you. Didn't know why you were standing in the back like a stranger." Harry encouraged.

At that John couldn't decide where to look, his sister, his daughter or his boyfriend.

Pressing his lips together, Sherlock advanced toward Rosie as the crowd parted.

She squealed as he approached and they both reached out to one another.

"Hello Honey Bee!" He said with a broad smile as he took her from Clara's hold. The little girl wrapped chubby arms around his neck, smushing her face against his. He chuckled and squeezed her in return patting her before rubbing small, gentle circles on her small back.

John was undone. He looked to everyone else and found their faces just as surprised as his.

"Close your mouth, John, you'll let in flies." Harry said loudly.

"She knows him." John said incredulously.

"Of course she knows him. She's seen him every week of her life. I don't think he's missed one Saturday. Even when he couldn't be there in person he Skyped her. John, I sent you the pictures."

"Pictures?" He asked but even as he was speaking he remembered. The letter she'd sent. The pictures she'd put in a separate envelope. The envelope he'd never opened.

And that line she'd written! The line he'd thought was odd even then.

"I'm not supposed to say anything but you've got really good friends."

Rosie was in the midst of babbling something incomprehensible to Sherlock to which he nodded too very seriously.

"Oh, she made you this." Harry said handing Sherlock a piece of paper that was scrawled with crayon. "She says it's a mystery map, at least that's what I think she was trying to say. She drew it right after you read her that story."

Rosie immediately began telling him a long and complicated tale about the "map" and John again watched as Sherlock paid rapt attention. When she was done he smiled at her. In fact, he hadn't really stopped smiling at her.

"Excellent, Rosie, this will be of immeasurable help! We'll crack this case yet!"

She beamed understanding if not his words then his tone.

"She absolutely adores him." Clara said coming over to them. John leaned in and gave her a hug and kiss on the cheek but his eyes remained on Sherlock who was now sitting cross-legged on the ground with Rosie on his lap.

"If everyone could stop staring at us right now that would be absolutely lovely." He said to the other party goers. His tone was sweet because of the little girl present but no one missed the irritation. "Either join in on Baa Baa Black Sheep or disperse."
"There are nights where she throws an absolute tantrum if she hasn't heard from him." Clara continued.

"And sometimes his violin is the only way we can get her down," Harry added. "She's quite spoiled."

"John, you look wonderful," Clara said softly as she touched his arm.

"Yes, um, thanks. Just taking it one day and time, you know" He answered trying not to be distracted.

"90 days is impressive. I didn't manage 90 days my first time." Harry said and Clara cleared her throat. "Oh, I didn't mean to imply you were going to have more than one go round. This time will likely stick."

"What?" he asked absentmindedly. He'd just heard Sherlock says "Yes, it's a very pretty dress which is why- Clara? Nappy, please?"

"Again? You're like a broken faucet little miss." She said to Rosie as she searched through one of her many bags. When she came up with one she started walking toward them both but Sherlock was already on his feet with Rosie in his arms.

"No, I can handle it. Please avail yourself of some refreshments." He took the diaper, wipes and a disposable bag from her hands and finally made eye contact with John.

"John, would you care to join us?"

"Um...yes, yes of course."

Sherlock nodded and took off in the direction of their bedroom with John close behind.

Once inside John shut the door.

Sherlock sat on the bed and sat Rosie down at his side. Insulted and unsatisfied with that she immediately climbed into his lap.

"Do you...need help?" John asked unsure of what exactly to say.

"Hmm? Oh no, she's fine. She doesn't need a change I just wanted a chance for us to talk. Are you cross with me?" He watched as Sherlock pressed his lips together tightly, a telltale sign that he was worried and under stress.


"No...I'm not cross with you. But why didn't you tell me?"

"I was going to. When Harry initially told me she wasn't going to show I figured I had more time to ease you into it. I didn't want it to blow up in your face like this."

"And you've been seeing her, every week? You've been going to my sisters every week and visiting her, playing with her, playing your violin?"

"I missed a few weeks here and there but I tried to stay consistent. Children need constancy."

John leaned back against the bedroom wall and took in the view before him. His boyfriend was
holding his daughter in his lap with the practiced care of a parent. She was busying herself with the button and buttonhole on the sleeve of his shirt. She looked drowsy, relaxed and content. She was obviously completely used to Sherlock, she trusted him, she knew he wouldn't hurt her or leave her.

"Sherlock, and I don't mean this as rude as it may come out, but I'm really struggling with phrasing right now. But why did you do this? To what end?"

"Can you open the third drawer in my cupboard?" Sherlock said in reply.

"What?"

"My cupboard. Third drawer. There's something in there I'd like you to get out for me."

"Ok." John scoffed before doing as he was asked. He opened the drawer and saw a small gift wrapped box. The paper was green with little cartoon tortoises on it and it was tied with a yellow bow.

"That's it. Can you bring it over and sit next to us on the bed, please."

Again John did as requested and noted that Rosie was watching him but mostly the package with interest.

"What is this?" John asked.

Sherlock, like a professional dad, placed both hands over Rosie's ears before speaking.

"Open it for her, slowly, she can't manage it herself. Then take out the toy inside. It's not accurate or to scale but I doubt she'll mind. But first show her the wrapping paper. We're trying to get her to know her animals."

John swallowed, suddenly nervous as Sherlock removed his hands from her ears and pitched Rosie forward a bit to watch.

"Hello Rosie," John began. "Here's a present for you. Do you know what this animal is?" He asked pointing to the cartoon creature on the box.

"Turtle." She said clearly.

"Excellent, Rosie." Sherlock said with a smile. "Though it is technically a tortoise. But we'll work on that."

"Yes, very good. That's a turtle." John said brightly. "Shall we open it and see what's inside?"

She nodded and he started to slowly tug apart the bow. Once it was free he lifted the lid off the box and looked inside as curiously as she did.

Sitting among the green tissue paper was a stuffed toy bee. It was fat and fluffy with a ridiculous smile on its face. He took it out of the box and she gasped as her face lit up.

"Look there's Daddy and what's he got for you? Why it's your own bumble bee." Sherlock said and while John internally started at the sudden use of the word "Daddy" neither of them reacted outwardly.

"Bumbly." She in reply.

"That's right, bumble bee or Bumbly, if you like." Sherlock agreed. Both men beamed as she hugged
"Do you like him?" Sherlock asked and she nodded in reply. "And who gave that to you? Who is that?" He said pointing at John who suddenly felt trapped and inadequate in the unexpected spotlight. "Who is that? Remember the pictures I've shown you? Who is that Rosie?"

She peered at him, in a way for the first time and he watched her eyes sweep over his features, thinking and thinking some more.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, that's right, that's Daddy!" Sherlock said giving her a big kiss. She laughed at the kiss and leaned back firmly against Sherlock.

John's breath caught in his throat to hear that. To hear his daughter express that word and to see her being held in the arms of the man he loved.

"And what do we say to Daddy for the nice present? Do we say; Thank you, Daddy?"

"Thank you, Daddy." She said softly and John swallowed hard in an effort not to burst into tears.

"Very well done, Honey Bee, very well done. Can Daddy hold you for awhile?" Sherlock asked softly but she made a negative sound and buried her face against his chest. Sherlock smiled apologetically at John who had his arms raised to take her but now let them fall at his sides. "It might take a bit of time. I'm sorry, John." He then kissed Rosie atop the crown of her head. "We'll work up to that, won't we, Rose of my world?" John heard him say in a whisper.

John just sat there, breathing in and out. It was the best he could do. Just breathe and try not to let himself get swept away by a wave of confusing emotions.

Rosie didn't seem to mind the silence as she was totally engrossed with talking and singing to Bumbly. They watched her, smiling as she gradually and inevitably fell asleep in Sherlock's arms.

"John?" He asked softly. "Are you alright?"

"I need..." he began but then restarted. "I wish...there was time to process this. I wish there weren't so many bloody people out there waiting for us to come back. I wish we could just freeze this moment and be in it for awhile, you know?"

"I know. But...this doesn't have to be a one time only thing. This is your daughter."

John shook his head. At the moment she felt like anything but and he felt lower than mud, not even worthy of touching her.

"To answer your question, that's why I did it. These lines that bind us together as humans... there a curious combination of fragile and tensile strength. But it needs to be fortified. You couldn't be there to maintain this tie. I wanted to be there in your stead. You shake your head but yes, she is. She is yours. And I have made certain that Harry and Clara will not put up a fight when you decide to be her father again. I made sure every visit that she saw your picture, heard your name, knew who you were and knew that she had a father who was coming for her."

"Sherlock enough." he rasped more harshly than he intended but he needed him to stop. "I am one day out of rehab. One. I can't care for a toddler. I'm a stranger. I bribed her with a toy bee that you were smart enough to buy. That's not Daddy. That's a friendly distant stranger she'd never even miss."
"Listen to me." Sherlock said his voice low and full of force. "This will take work. Hard work, ego-crushing and heart bruising work. But I have never known you to run away from something hard and there isn't a fiber of my being that tells me you will walk away from your daughter now. I am not proposing that we immediately move her into the flat. But I am proposing from this day, day one you start considering what's of value to you. I already know that I count as one of those things. It's time to start letting her know as well."

He wasn't used to Sherlock ordering him in this fashion, not as far as personal matters went, but he didn't balk. He might have been anger but it was anger born out of a confidence he had in him. A confidence John was certain he hadn't earned. But then again, it was day one and he didn't want to let his boyfriend or anyone else down.

"Ok, you're right. Ok."

"Good." Sherlock said and carefully shifting the baby in his lap he leaned forward to kiss John on the lips.

It was a good, centering, gentle kiss. It was just what he needed.

"Now she really does require a change." Sherlock said with a smile.

"So, do you need some help?" John asked as Sherlock stood, grabbed a towel and laid her on the bed.

"No, she usually sleeps right through." he replied and as though he did it every day went about the quick work of changing Rosie's nappy.

"I think...when we get back out there I just want to say it. I want to thank them for coming and say it."

"However you like, John. You have my support."

John grabbed for the bag with the dirty nappy while Sherlock held Rosie securely against his chest. Before John opened the door he slid his hand around Sherlock's waist pulling him in for another kiss.

"Thank you."

"I say this with all sincerity," he began as he looked down at the sleeping child in his arms. "It was my pleasure."

They exited the room and made a quick stop in the loo to toss the bag, they take it out with the party rubbish soon, and wash their hands. This required an exchange of Rosie and after John was done it was his turn to hold her. She was heavier than he remembered, of course, but she smelled the same. John pressed his nose against her crown and inhaled, closing his eyes. God, it was wonderful and he desperately hoped she'd sleep a little longer so he wouldn't have to let her go.

"We forgot Bumbly." Sherlock said suddenly as they exited the loo. He headed back to the bedroom while John rejoined their friends. There was a chorus of "Oh's!" and soft smiles at the sight of him holding Rosie and he couldn't help but smile in return.

"Thanks, everyone, thank you. Um, I-"

"You can talk louder, John. She sleeps like the dead. No need to tip-toe, trust me." Harry said at a normal volume and John supposed he should, indeed, trust her.
"Ok, well, um, I just wanted to say a few words. First of all, thank you for coming, all of you. After Mary died-

He paused again as Sherlock returned, stuffed bee in hand and came to stand next to him, right at his side. It renewed his confidence and he continued, his voice stronger.

"After Mary died, I was lost. And more importantly, I wanted to get even more lost and stay that way. I won't pretend that I didn't want to destroy things, things I'd built up for myself in this life. Things I'd accomplished." he glanced down at Rosie who was breathing stuffily through her nose as babies tended to do, still fast asleep. "Things I'd lovingly made. I wanted to bring it all crashing down and then I wanted to exit, stage left. I didn't want any more of this or any more of any of you. But none of you would give up. None of you would take no, or please leave or fuck off for an answer. You called and you visited and you helped and listened and you comforted and one of you even had me briefly committed."

Molly gave an embarrassed sort of laugh followed by a smile.

"You saw me at my lowest and my worst, my most arsehole and my absolute best self-destructive. And no matter what image of me I put before you, you always remembered the John Watson that I was, that I used to be, that I wanted to be and would like to be again. That was unexpected and undeserved on my part. I cannot ever thank you enough and I cannot ever hope to repay the kindness and the forgiveness you have all displayed for me. I am so sorry for the turmoil and the damage I inflicted, for the awful worry and hurt I placed right in the center of your lives with my alcoholism. Because, yes, I can say it now, my name is John and I am an alcoholic. I've spoken to some of you privately and I intend to have a conversation with you all because you deserve my heartfelt apology and my promise to make amends. I don't..."

He took a deep breath and held Rosie a little closer knowing there was no amount of steadying that would keep his voice from breaking.

"I don't deserve your kindness or forgiveness and whether you extended it for my benefit, for Mary's memory or because of Rosie I thank you, my friends, I thank you and I promise I will do my best to not let you down."

He sniffled and swallowed hard.

"Thank you for this party and thank you for still wanting to be a part of my life."

He nodded his head to signal the conclusion of that part and they broke into soft but enthusiastic applause. Rosie sighed against his chest but otherwise seemed completely unbothered.

"Oh and there is one more thing," he said turning his head to glance at his boyfriend. This was it, this was the moment. He met Sherlock's gaze just for a final confirmation before proceeding. Looking confident, at ease and even proud he nodded shortly to get John to continue.

"Finally, something else has come of this. Something a long time coming. Something wonderful and that I don't feel at all worthy of but something I'm going to treasure. Sherlock and I are...giving it a go. We're together." He reached for Sherlock's hand and linked their fingers. "Together-together. Some of you may be surprised, some of you may be thinking it's about time. But in any case, I think it's only right you should all know."

There was silence, complete silence but John only gripped Sherlock's hand harder.

Finally, it was Greg who got things going again.
"Anderson owes me 20 quid." He said with a grin. "So, how-

"No, we'll not be taking questions at this time," Sherlock said briskly. "But we thank you for your interest. Isn't it time for more cake?"

"Well count me amongst the 'it took long enough' crowd. Why do you think I suggested you two as flatmates in the first place?" Mike said cheerfully.

"Wait...what?" John asked turning his face toward him.

"Do you really think, in all of London, you two were the only ones I knew looking for a flatshare? 

Everyone was looking for a flatshare. I told five people I didn't know of anything but I'd keep an eye out just to get you two together. Last time I play matchmaker, I don't have this kind of patience."

John and Sherlock shared a surprised look but didn't say anything. Mike Stamford was the last person they expected to be running a long game like some sort of romantic genius.

"You're not also a secret criminal mastermind are you?" John asked with amusement.

"With the time it takes you both to come to a realization you'll never know." He quipped.

John spared a glance at Janine who didn't look as confused as one might expect. When she met John's eyes she gave him a wry smile and raised her glass in 'Cheers'.

He was less eager to look in Molly's direction but when he did was surprised to see her perfectly calm, at ease, at peace and perhaps even happy for them. He knew that Sherlock had purposefully set out to meet with her after all that had happened with Eurus. Before John had gotten bad, really bad, he remembered Sherlock telling him he'd be gone for a bit. When he returned hours later he would only say he'd been to see Molly and things were finally, once and for all sorted. He imagined they'd had a long, painful discussion but perhaps they were for once truthful with each other. He knew what it was to pine for Sherlock. He hoped, not at all glibly, that she could move on.

"Boy's closer together so I can get a picture." Mrs. Hudson demanded and John, without thinking and also without apology again slipped his arm around Sherlock's waist. Mrs. Hudson proceeded to take several pictures of John, Sherlock and baby Rosie of which likely only one turned out.

Conversations started to rise again and John went to sit down on the sofa signaling with his head for Greg to follow.

They finally had the talk John had meant them to have. He apologized for the ghastly things he'd said and the accusation he'd hurled at him regarding Mary's death.

"It wasn't your fault, Greg and I'm sorry for saying it was."

"It's forgotten, mate. Totally forgotten," he said and they embraced around Rosie.

He next had a heart to heart with Janine which was surprisingly not-awkward given the announcement he'd just made. With Rosie in his arms, he told her how he knew he was pawning his daughter off on her. How he hadn't had food poisoning at all that night, but rather had gotten embarrassingly drunk instead. Except he hadn't been embarrassed at the time. That and a thousand other transgressions She too forgave him and he felt awash with relief.

Sherlock came over after a while and brought him both Bumbly and another slice of cake as he'd never eaten the first.
"You alright?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah, things are going well I think."

"I'm glad." And to John's surprise he leaned in and kissed him, a gesture John happily returned. His boyfriend pulled back with a twinkle in his eye.

As Sherlock retreated Harry came and plopped down at John's side.

"I know what you're going to say..." He began but she held up her hands to stop him.

"What am I going to say? I'm not going to say anything."

"You're going to say that you knew it all along and it runs in the family and God knows what else."

"John, you're such a cynic. Maybe I was just going to say; well done you. Congratulations and I'm glad you're happy."

He looked at her, saw the sincerity and immediately felt bad.

"Hey, Harry, maybe we could talk, you and I."

"About Rosie, of course." She nodded putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, about Rosie but also about you and me. Maybe we could meet for lunch or something?"

"I'd like that, Johnny."

"Me too." And then after a minute added. "Look at her hair. Last time I saw her it was light brown, when did it get so dark."

"It's like Dad's isn't it? That's what I told Clara. I'm also constantly pointing out how much she looks like you. It's uncanny."

"Like me?"

"Yeah, like she does this thing with her mouth that you do and this tilt she gets to her head. It's so funny. I always point and say; She's doing Johnny. Don't look so surprised. She's yours, remember?"

Eventually, people began to thank them for having them over and make their exits.

Eventually, Rosie woke up and while she was a polite little toddler at finding out she was asleep in a stranger's arms she made it clear after awhile she wanted out.

Though she did happily take Bumbly.

He and Sherlock took the bags and stroller from Harry and Sarah and carried them downstairs. After hailing a cab and getting Rosie situated in a car seat both men kissed her goodbye. Sherlock pre-paid the driver and they went back upstairs.

Eventually, despite both Sherlock and John's protests Mrs. Hudson efficiently took to clean up and not long after the place was back as it had been.

She kissed them both goodbye before heading back down to her flat.

"So happy you two are finally back together."
They didn't bother to argue.

Sherlock went back to work answering a few email and tweets from earlier in the day. As expected there was a barrage questioning him about John.

"They want to know if you're back."

"What are you going to tell them?"

"That's up to you. I can completely ignore their queries, I've done it before. Or, we could tweet just your picture."

John thought for a moment.

"Let's go with a picture." He said leaning forward. Sherlock took out his phone and John raised his hand in a wave and smiled as he snapped.

"There, done." Sherlock said. "And posted. With that I'm shutting down otherwise the notifications will destroy my battery."

"Why am I so bloody tired?" John said as he stretched out in his chair. "Are you tired?"

"You've had a long day, John. It's nearly nine, we could call it a rare early night if you like."

"Actually I'd really like that."

They quickly dressed for bed and wound up beneath the cover, John resting his head on Sherlock's chest listening to his heartbeat.

"Sherlock, I'm truly not upset."

"I...I didn't say anything." He protested.

"Yes, but you were thinking and I could hear you. How could I be upset that you cared enough about my daughter and me to do what you did."

"It's what you do for those you love. Hardly a hardship." He was quiet for a few seconds before adding. "She looks like you."

"You think so?" John asked with interest. "Harry said the same thing. I don't really see it. I do see Mary."

"That's a natural prejudice in parents. They always see the face of their spouse in their children and rarely their own. It's usually rooted in latent self-esteem issues. But yes, as an impartial party I can say without a doubt she looks like you. Why the nose alone-"

"Oh God, I hope she doesn't have my nose."

"I like your nose." He shrugged.

"And I think it's nothing short of charming that you think you're impartial. Oh and where on earth did you learn to care for a baby?"

Sherlock huffed at what he apparently considered a silly question.

"Manually caring for a child isn't difficult, John. It's the actual raising and rearing when things get
dicey. But at this age, you feed them, rock them, comfort them, change them, stimulate their senses. They enjoy simple uncomplicated songs without complex melody. Short stories filled with anthropomorphic animals and spoons and teapots. And they want someone to check their closet for the Bogeyman."

"Is she frightened of the Bogeyman?" John asked with concern.

"No, not as of yet. Hopefully, she won't be."

A small smile crept over John's face.

"Were you afraid of the Bogeyman as a child."

"Don't be ridiculous." he said quickly.

"No, of course, you weren't."

"I was terrified of the Gooseberry Wife. I was actually mad for gooseberries as a boy and Mycroft told me that if I ate too many the Gooseberry Wife would come after me. I think he just wanted them for himself."

"I've never heard of her. Was she like an old witch or something?"

"No, she was a giant caterpillar."

At this John burst out laughing.

"Laugh if you like." The detective continued. "But it terrified me. To this day I can't look at a caterpillar or eat a gooseberry without feeling nervous." Sherlock said, barely able to control his laughter. The bed shook with their chuckles and John moved closer still, wanting to crawl inside this happy, peaceful moment.

"Honey Bee?" John asked with a smile after they settled a little.

"Perfectly valid nickname. She likes it."

"I'm sure she does and I like it too." He paused. "Just...no more secrets ok, baby?"

"I'll stipulate to that but I don't care very much for baby." Sherlock replied.

"No?" John teased as he changed positions to lie atop him. "I was just trying it out anyway. Well, what do you like?"

"I quite like you on top of me like this." He said cheekily.

"Yeah?" John asked before tilting his head to kiss him. He concluded the action by sucking on his bottom lip.

"Yeah." Sherlock replied.

They kissed exuberantly Sherlock's hands at some point moving down to John's arse before giving him a squeeze.

"Fuck..." John said, pulling away from his boyfriend's mouth to swear happily.

At that point, his mobile buzzed and after a moment's deliberation, he reached for it.
"Are you actually checking your phone whilst I'm groping your arse?" Sherlock demanded. "I've half a mind to buck you off."

"Yeah, but it's likely it's..." He looked at his phone. "Yep. It's Hanah. She texted."

"What's she say?" Sherlock asked.

"She says; Hi John, How was your first day? Did anything interesting happen?"

It took a few moments but eventually, both men burst out laughing.

"No more mobiles in the bedroom, new rule." Sherlock said as John quickly dashed off a reply with a promise of a more in-depth description tomorrow.

"Yeah, you'd break your own rule within an hour of us instituting that." He said putting his phone to the side before he resumed kissing Sherlock.

"I would not." He mumbled against his lips.

"You would too. Now turn off the light and put your hands back on my arse where they belong."

Sherlock reached over and switched off the light.

"I would not."

"Shut up and keep kissing me." He said affectionately. "And whatever you do, don't think about the Gooseberry Lady."

"Damn it, John. That's not funny." He said but he was already snickering as was the doctor. "And it's the Gooseberry Wife. Can't you keep anything important in your head?"

"I'm just saying, it's a good thing you deleted the solar system so you could save space for Gooseberry Wife lore."

"Shut up, John."

"I do so love you, Sherlock."

"I love you too."

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A/N After a week off it's back to work for me today. I liked the amount of writing I was able to get done these past few days but I'll be returning to my regular output for now.

I decided to make Rosie dark haired because everyone makes her blonde. We don't even know what Mary's real hair color is and Martin/John's beard seems to come in ginger though he was like Village of the Damned blonde as a kid. My point is, anything is possible. Anyway, I just liked the idea of Parentlock with a child with John's features but with a hair color similar to Sherlock's.

Ok, more to come, hopefully, later in the week...

Oh and as always, thank you all for your kind comments. You have no idea, really, no idea what it means to me to hear how interested you are in what I wrote or how you're enjoying it or that someone recommended it to you. Seriously, you have no idea. Sometimes seeing a review on this
story can brighten up a very dark day. Not a lot of things are going right for me at this point in my life. But hearing that you guys are enjoying this is definitely high on my list. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

You make my soul happy.
"You've returned to Baker Street, moved back in and have initiated a romantic and sexual relationship with my brother, Dr. Watson. Somewhere along the way you and I seem to have gotten our wires a bit crossed."

John was walking just getting out of a taxi, happy to be home post-meeting when the phone rang.

"And good morning to you as well, Mycroft. Nice day for it, eh?" John asked.

He'd had the option not to pick up, of course. Calls that showed up on his mobile caller ID with no name or number were Mycroft. They were always Mycroft. It all felt so needlessly cloak-and-dagger ad silly. Some mornings John felt as though he'd been in an old episode of *Get Smart!* Mycroft hadn't been by since John had come home and to the best of his knowledge, Sherlock hadn't had any contact. He didn't even want to know how he knew about the relationship.

He wasn't in the mood for this today but it was also something that needed to be addressed if not resolved. Sooner rather than later.

"This is not in line with the expected run of events."

"Meet me for lunch." John said suddenly.

"Beg pardon?"

"I said, meet me for lunch. In a proper restaurant as opposed to some abandoned underground car park. Speedy's? Angelo's?"

"I don't believe that's a good idea."

"Mycroft, I won't do this over the phone and I'm not just going to consent to you chloroforming me and conducting a friendly interrogation."

"I meant those locations won't do. Stay where you are and I'll send a car. No tricks, John. I assure you."

"I can't tell you how comforted I am."

After hanging up John quickly texted his partner. He liked that words, liked the way it felt to feel it, say it, think it; partner.

**Sherlock, going for a quick lunch with your brother. Don't panic.**

*What? Why?*

I asked him to meet me after he just called. He's already in high dudgeon and I'd like to nip it in the bud if at all possible.
No, Sherlock, stay put. I'll be fine and he and I have things to settle. I promise I'll be alright and be home as soon as possible.

I don't like it. But it seemed I have no choice. Do come straight home.

I will. I promise.

Another lunch with a Holmes. Another far flung location.

"You're looking well." Mycroft said and John couldn't tell if he was pleased, disappointed or neutral.

"Thank you. I feel...better."

"I would imagine so. So, how is life on the outside?" He said with a raise of his brows. Mycroft hadn't ordered, neither of them had and yet not ten minutes after they arrived there was food before him. A standing order, perhaps? John had no idea, but he knew châteaubriand when he saw it. His glass was filled with mineral water. He moved the sauteed vegetables around his plate before speaking.

"Good. Very good." John said before setting his fork down on the plate. It made an ungodly clatter in the strangely quiet restaurant. "I did want to say something before we get started on whatever this is going to be..."

Mycroft sat back in his seat and waited and John had to hold back a chuckle. He and Sherlock thought they were so different and in many ways this was true. But still there were mannerisms, tells they each had that mirrored the other. For instance when Sherlock was bracing for bad new or some sort of verbal dressing down he adjusted his jaw ever so slightly. This was inevitably followed by a tiny pursing of the lips. You never noticed it unless you knew him, unless you knew them.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Mycroft shutter blinked but quickly regained what small composure he'd lost.

"I beg pardon?"

"Thank you." John repeated, locking his eyes to Mycroft's. "Whatever differences we may have, whatever you brought me here to say, however we may clash 5 minutes from now or 5 months or 5 years into the future, you...saved my life. I know you didn't do it for me, you made that clear in hospital but you did it anyway and though it shocks me to even say it, I wouldn't be here were it not for you. You have my sincere gratitude, Mycroft."

The older man simply stared at him for a moment, stunned into silence.

"Yes, well..." He began and then stopped clearly flustered. "Yes, I...you're welcome."

John nodded and with that out of the way he began to eat.

"So, onto business," John said. "Am I to assume you're here to express your displeasure at me seeing
Sherlock? I realize it's likely a surprise but...well if you're expecting an apology for that, I've none to give."

A slow, cold smile crept across the other man's face and he took to rather grandly rearranging his napkin. He was back in control, just like that.

"You must think me quite dull if you believe I wasn't aware of Sherlock's attraction toward you...and yours to him."

John inhaled sharply but didn't move, trying his best not to betray anything.

"John you once sat before me at Speedy's just as you are now after the nasty business with Adler and proceeded to tell me with astounding surety that my brother "wasn't like that" and that "he didn't feel things that way". I let you because I often allow people to prattle on regarding things they know nothing about. I let you because you couldn't have been more desperately revealing, more nakedly open in your absolute distaste for The Woman, and your horror and pain that Sherlock might feel something for her. At worst, little bursts of speech like that are amusing and at best they reveal things about the speaker, like a book being opened, it's pages flipping. You thought my brother was a closed system when in fact he is an open wound, raw and red and gaping and like a child...like a little boy he'd bandaged himself with an elastoplast and proclaimed himself "All better". He is not."

"Well, you saw to that didn't you?"

"I once thought you might be a salve though now I'm almost fully convinced you're an infection all your own. Something for which he, sadly, had developed no immunity. Make no mistake, John, I am immune. And make no mistake, if you hurt him the way you hurt him all of last year, if you slip, if you falter, if he becomes your whipping boy or your punching bag, one morning you will go missing. You will go missing and you will never be found. On that day I will likely lose what little affection my brother had left for me. But I will have the satisfaction and the surety of knowing you will never cause him harm again."

John leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, watching the man before him carefully. Watching the twitch of his mouth, the slight shift of his posture, the way his finger was almost imperceptibly stroking the edge of his plate. To butcher a phrase, his cold stare was writing a cheque that his body couldn't cash.

"Well, it's just as I thought." John said finally.

"What is?"

"If you recall, before everything with Magnussen got going and you threatened to threaten me and I said I thought we'd both find that embarrassing. Well, we do. You're fidgeting, your skin is practically crawling at that ridiculous Bond villain soliloquy you forced yourself to say and I'm just sitting in this chair absolutely mortified that I had to hear it. See, both embarrassed."

Mycroft was incensed and John took a rather large bite of the incredibly well-prepared meat and smiled at him.

"Practiced it in the car before you go here, eh?" He asked him cheekily.

"Dr. Watson.-"

"Yeah, you did. I can tell. Look, it's not that I doubt that you couldn't do exactly what you just said. It's that I know you won't. It would have been much more efficient to kill me in the hospital, or kill me in the months that lead up to my...breakdown. I'm sure you could have pulled a few strings to
make my section permanent. Involuntary commitment. But you didn't. You had chance after chance and you didn't. I won't pretend that it's out of some deep admiration for me. It's because you love your brother and you can't bear to hurt him anymore than you already have. And on top of that you can't bear to lose him which you would."

"And you're willing to bet your life on that theory?"

"I have very recently bet my life on far more dubious and tenuous theories. So, yes, absolutely."

John leaned closer to the man and the elder Holmes whether realizing it or not did the same.

"Mycroft, if I feel myself slipping, if I start to fall, I won't grab onto him. You won't have a chance to get to me because I will make myself disappear. I will pack up and vanish from his life forever. I promise. Never again, hmm? Alright? Never again."

"Your word?"

"You have my word, for what that's worth these days."

They sat in silence for a few long minutes. After all, what did one say to Mycroft Holmes once the intimidations, puzzles, and threats were out of the way?

In the end, John did think of something.

"How was he...when I was bad?"

Mycroft took another sip of water and after dabbing at the corner of his mouth with his napkins steepled his fingers. A Holmes trait, apparently.

"Morose, depressed, unfocused, unreachable...untethered. His thinking became scattered, careless. He didn't want to admit it, of course, but I knew he noticed when he casually began mentioning his cases to me."

"He hates bringing cases to you."

"Indeed. But he hates being wrong even more. And he hates injustice far more than even that."

"So you proofread his work?"

"Quite."

John suddenly no longer felt like eating and he pushed his plate slightly away. He had an idea what he'd done to Sherlock, how it had affected him. He knew because of what he'd heard and the little he'd seen. But he'd never know fully, never truly understand.

"There was a light in Sherlock's eyes when he was a boy. He was brilliant, of course but he straddled the line that...that I never mastered. He had friends, he was liked, he was funny, silly. He spent nearly every waking moment with Victor Trevor and he was as much a fixture in our house as if he were a Holmes himself." Mycroft became wistful just for a moment, a look that somehow managed not to appear out of place on his features. "He was a nice little boy. When Eurus...murdered him that light left Sherlock's eyes. He folded in on himself, collapsed like a star."


"I did, in a way. I do. But it was still difficult to watch him become a completely different person. I didn't want this for him. Year after year parroting my ideas of people and situations and...affection
whether he knew it or not. You must understand, I never wanted this, John. My path is my own. I never needed him to follow."

The surge of sympathy John felt surprised him.

"The light returned when he met you. The mischievousness and some of the joy returned. When you left those lights were doused again. Now they've come back with your reappearance. What is indisputable is that you now tend those fires, John. It is your job to keep them lit."

John was both overwhelmed by the prospect and in total agreement. It is your job to keep the passion and fire and spark in Sherlock's life. You are responsible for his happiness, his joy, you are his reason. On one hand, if he were to see all that written on paper he wouldn't just be horrified he'd be scared witless. Who would willingly sign up for that burden?

But on the other hand, wasn't that exactly what he had agreed to? Wasn't that what he wanted for both of them? For them to look after one another, take care of one another, pull the other one back when they'd gone too far, be their port in a storm, their safe place to land? Wasn't that the point of a partner, a lover, a best friend, someone whose life was so entwined with his he wasn't sure where one ended and the other began? Is that exactly where he wanted to be and felt the safest? Tending to the home fires?

"Yeah," he answered Mycroft. "You're right. That's my job. And I intend to do it."

"Good. You know, John, when we first met in that car park I offered to pay you to look after my brother, spy on him, make certain he was alright. You turned the money down but took the position anyway."

"I suppose I did. What about it?"

"Nothing at all. I just find it funny." At that moment Mycroft's mobile buzzed and he took it out to glance at it. "I'm afraid I'll need to cut this shorter than I would like. Duty calls. The car outside will take you back. I've called another."

It was just as well, John was eager to return home anyway. He wiped his hands clean on his napkin before standing.

"Just one thing, John. My brother recently took you to Rustic, did he not?"

John sighed. Nothing was ever a secret.

"He did." he agreed.

"A bit out of the way, don't you think? Rather like this place in terms of location. Why do you believe that is?"

As it stood John had been trying to determine that all week. There wasn't a part of him that thought Sherlock was embarrassed with them being seen together. Still, it was strange.

"I don't know, Mycroft, why?" He asked, already fed up with the game.

"There are very strict rules regarding the paparazzi in London as you can well imagine given certain past events, one in particular. Still, though strict they are rarely enforced as strongly as they should be. Haven't you found it odd that there has been a decided lack of photographers around Baker Street clamoring for a picture of you?"
John frowned, the thought seemed completely absurd to him.

"No. That's ridiculous. You may have put me in a posh rehab but I'm not a celebrity. Nobody cares except for a few people on Twitter and maybe that club Anderson started."

"Your naïveté surprises me," he said with a little shake of his head. "Through my influence, I have maintained the bucolic peace on Baker Street for the past week but that is coming to an end quite soon. I'm afraid you will shortly be very much on your own. It was a favor to Sherlock but it could not last forever. That is why I brought you here and why Sherlock took you where he did. Far away from the maddening crowd. I would brace myself if I were you. Your 15 minutes are just about to start."

"Describe your day for me. You've been out a week, that's time enough to develop a tentative routine."

Skype session with Hanah were different but the same. She had the same demeanor, they had the same report they were just separated by hundreds of miles and sometimes, every now and then the sound went out. At the moment he was in their bedroom, laptop balanced on his thighs, door closed for privacy while Sherlock worked in the living room. His partner had interrogated him about the meeting with Mycroft but John had put him off well enough. And once he seemed convinced no harm had been done, no injury inflicted he'd embraced him. They spent a little time together in the quiet of the afternoon before John headed down the hall for his session.

"I get up, I pick a meeting, I come back to the flat, Sherlock and I have breakfast together, we go over a few cases the majority of which he's been able to solve without leaving home."

"Is that normal?"

"Somewhat...I do remember more legwork truth be told."

"So, do you ever venture out later as a couple or separately?"

"Uh no, honeymoon stage, I suppose." He said with a grin. "I just enjoy being here with him and he doesn't seem in any hurry to leave."

Hanah smiled but he knew it wasn't going to end there.

"I get that but I don't want you to become cloistered. I think there's a danger of sinking into that and before long you'll find it harder and harder to leave. What about food?"

"We've been eating takeaway. A lot of takeaway, actually. Mrs. Hudson, that's our friend and landlady she'll often pick things up for us without asking. I also placed an online order with Sainsbury's not too long ago."

"Next time you need something from a shop I want you to go out and get it. Understood?"

"Yeah, yes, absolutely." He said being both disappointed and confused by the hesitancy he heard in his own voice. Mycroft's words from earlier had come back to him.

"How do you feel about that? I saw something pass over your face." She said never one to miss a thing.
"Reluctant but I don't know why. I guess I feel safe here and I fear some kind of disruption." He didn't want to get into this new wrinkle. Not to mention the fact he'd been less than eager to leave even before the elder Holmes decided to play Oracle.

"Life is about disruption, John. No matter how perfect things are at Baker Street right now you can't hole up there forever. I don't want you to, I imagine neither does Sherlock and more importantly you don't want you to either. You didn't get sober to revert back to being an agoraphobe."

He opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off.

"And before you protest, yes, based on what you told me, about the days you spent in your house prior to your intended suicide attempt you were indeed agoraphobic."

Well, if that was the criteria, she had him there.

"You're right, you're right."

"How are the meetings going?"

He paused. He knew if he were to be honest it wasn't going to sound good but there was little choice.

"They're ok...I mean, it's difficult. You get used to one thing and..."

"What's going on, John?"

"I don't feel comfortable there."

"Well, have you reached out and spoken to anyone else who attends or the meeting leader? This isn't uncommon. Have you been making the meetings at least? Even if you're not speaking or if you're feeling out of place."

"Oh yes, 8 meetings in 8 days."

"Fantastic."

"8 different meetings in 8 days." He clarified.

She paused and blinked.

"You've gone to 8 different meetings at 8 different locations in the past 8 days?"

"Yep." He said self consciously.

"John, I think you know, without me telling you that's not the goal."

"I know, I do, I truly do."

"I'm concerned if you're approaching this as Cinderella situation, looking for the perfect fit that it's going to cause serious problems down the road. There is no glass slipper, making the odds of you finding a flawless fit pretty slim. But there are shoe horns. Now, I'm not asking you to stay anywhere you feel is truly unhelpful or unsafe or not conducive to your sobriety. But I do need you to be realistic and 90 differently located meetings in 90 days isn't why you're doing this."

"I feel...this is going to sound so fucking egotistic...I feel like they know who I am."
"You're right."

He blinked.

"Pardon?"

"It is egotistical and they may very well know who you are."

Leave it to Hanah to slice him down to size. He shifted uncomfortably and readjusted the laptop.

"Well, that's not ok, with me. It takes the anonymous out of AA."

"John, you are not the only one there with problems or the only one there who doesn't want to be seen. Do you think a cook in a restaurant wants it to get out that he's got a drinking problem, or a mum trying to get back on her feet and keep the job she just got? What about the cab driver, the university students, pilots, surgeons, truck drivers, actors, beauty queens, veterinarians and on and on and on. Everyone there is taking a risk. Everyone is exposing themselves and sharing themselves because it's what they have to do to get better and stay better."

"You think I'm a snob," he said scrubbing his face. When he heard his concerns repeated back to him it did sound extremely toffee-nosed.

"Yes, I do." She took a deep breath before continuing. "Your breakdown was quite public. People know and the ugly fact is they may stare or bring it up or even try and use it against you. The ugly truth is that not everyone is anonymous. People are people and every manner of person can fall into an addiction and into AA and that includes unrepentant gossips. You may run into them, they may be there. It's ugly and unfortunate but it's true. I'm afraid there's nothing you can do except get a thicker skin, protect yourself as best you can and find a place you trust. I know that must feel like a great deal to ask right now, you're vulnerable and The Location wound up being a sanctuary. But in the real world there are going to be some consequences you'll need to face."

"I'm embarrassed." He confessed. "I behaved like a hysterical, attention seeking teenager."

"You behaved like a man in deep, deep, multilayered pain who had never confronted or expressed it in a healthy way in all his life. There's nothing to be gained from beating yourself up about this. Go forward. Look forward."

"I'm trying."

"Make sure that you are. How are things with Sherlock?"

He was glad they'd moved on to a subject he felt he could better handle.

"Good, excellent. It's honestly going so well. A week in and I couldn't be happier. I was worried, you know...people have time to change their minds when they're left to themselves. To think and rethink and over think and un-think."

"But he didn't do that?"

"No, no he didn't."

"And you didn't either?"

That hadn't been a question he'd anticipated but even after a few moments of thought he realized it was valid. Yes, he did over think, rethink and sometimes change his mind. But not this time.
"No, I believe in this as much as I ever did. I believe it's a good thing. I believe in us. I believe in Sherlock Holmes. It's not just a hashtag these days. It never was."

"Alright then. I like what I'm hearing. So, because we're meeting less often and because I can't take stock of you in person, I'd like to end things with you talking a bit. First tell me your successes, then your struggles, then your goals. Go."

"Um...successes...uh...well for this past week, coming out to family and friends. Making amends in person that I didn't get a chance to send by letter. Holding my daughter for awhile. Making it to meetings, albeit unconventionally. Flawlessly making breakfast for my boyfriend. Having my first day home and sober. And 7 more sober days after that. As for struggles; the meetings as we already talked about, the um...impotence, getting depressed about the longview, you know what do I do next, how do I do it? Goals, um, stay sober, obviously, get out of the house, maybe go to the shop, make plans with my sister and shoe horn myself into a meeting."

"Very good, John. It was, as expected a busy week and I think you did swimmingly. I just want to caution you that not every week will be bursting with successes. There are going to difficult ones ahead. Weeks where you struggle to find anything you feel that you didn't fuck up. Weeks where the biggest success you can come up with is getting out of bed or hovering in the doorway of a pub or window shopping down a liquor aisle and not going in and not buying anything. But you're just going to have to dig harder and realize their merit. Find and claim those successes. And you're going to think they're small and paltry and meaningless. But one of the goals of sobriety and aftercare and rehab and 12 Steps and therapy is that there are no little successes. Got it?"

"I think so." He said dubiously, but the downbeat message was hard to embrace.

"No, you don't and that's ok. You also think it was an oddly out of place thing to bring up now and it took the wind out of your sails a little. I understand that. You don't have to get it now. You just have to remember it for later. Now, last questions; Who is John Watson right now? Who does he want to be?"

He went quiet as he tried to gather his thoughts before answering.

"He's a recovering alcoholic who hopes to stay that way, you know, the recovering bit. He's tentatively happy. He's scared. He's in love. And he wants to be a good man, a good dad, a good boyfriend, a good doctor and he wants to do it all without ever touching alcohol again. That's who John Watson is."
"Is this all we need, you think? Anything I might be forgetting?" John asked as he stared at the grocery list. He was out of practice because before, when they used to live together, he kept a running list in his head. It was always easy to know what they were out of as they tended to, somehow, be out of everything all at the same time.

"I'm sure it's fine, John," Sherlock said distractedly. He was completely engrossed in his phone as he had been all morning, before and after John's meeting as well as before and after breakfast. This was nothing new. Nor was his disinterest in the weekly shop. For Sherlock things he needed just appeared by wishes, or Brownies or his mum teleporting in and seeing to her dear boys' needs. In the past, it annoyed John and he imagined at some point in the future it likely would again. But for the time, being it was hardly a concern. He was more nervous about heading outside. And the fact that he was nervous about something as silly as this, when a year ago he wouldn't have thought twice, only made him cross with himself.

"Alright, if you think of anything, text me. I'm off."

"Take my card." Sherlock replied.

"I've got my own money, Sherlock." He replied. He didn't quite snap at him but he toed the line. "Not quite ready to be put in a workhouse just yet."

While this was true he did need to reach out to Mike. He hoped perhaps he had a job he could apply for or that at the very least he could put out some feelers. Things were getting a little tight.

There was, of course, the house, still sitting, unsold. That was causing more than a little drain on what he had left in the bank. In fact, the only reason he did still have anything was because of Mary's life insurance policy.

He didn't want to think about that now. Later. Later.

John grabbed his keys and put his hand to the knob.

"Oh, and remember you were going to set up an email for me. Still haven't done that yet."

If John didn't know better he would have sworn he saw Sherlock stiffen just for a second before getting himself under control.

"Of course, John." He replied quickly.

"I'll stop by and ask Mrs. Hudson if she needs anything too. See you later."

He headed out the door and bounded down the steps, rounding the corner to knock on Mrs. Hudsons.
"I'm off to the shop, just wanted to see if there was anything I could grab for you?" He asked when she opened her door.

"So considerate. I do have a small list if you don't mind."

"Not at all." he said with a smile.

She handed him the paper with her few items written upon it, patted his cheek and not long after he was on his way. Her needs were simple enough and he knew the layout of the store well enough so he figured this could just be a quick trip, in and out. Hanah had encouraged him to do this more than a few days ago and he'd meant to, he truly had. But when the moment came he typically arrived at some excuse or Mrs. Hudson was going out anyway and he could give her cash for a few things. Or, he'd mostly been making use of the delightful home grocery delivery service. Order online, flat delivery fee and they trekked up the flight of stairs and brought whatever they needed to the door. It was perfect. Maybe a bit on the expensive side but absolutely worth it. If Sherlock minded or had an opinion on it at all he hadn't said and that suited John down to his shoes. But now was the time to actually do this the old fashioned way, the way he'd been avoiding. But it would be fine. It would all be fine. He'd get his feet wet back in the real world, satisfy Hanah's requirement and knock out their shopping needs all in one fell swoop.

It wasn't until later, back at Mrs. Hudson's flat, his cheek resting on the cold porcelain of the toilet seat that he realized how naive he'd been.

As best he was able to figure out later, a store employee must have called the press.

Not the real press of course, not BBC or the Independent or anything like that. But the rags, the red tops, The Mail, The Sun, TMZ etc...

The saving grace was that he was actually a rather fast shopper. By the time they'd arrived he was one item away from checkout. He'd doubled back to grab a larger container of milk in exchange for the one he'd initially selected. As John made his choice he heard someone call his name.

"Hey John, welcome back!"

When it first happened he'd thought it might be a friend, an acquaintance, maybe someone he knew through or with Mary. There were always people from the wedding that he'd wanted to, imagined he'd get to know better.

But when he turned he saw the camera. A great beast of a thing balanced on a shoulder, fuzzy microphone jutting out.

"Hey, how was rehab? You're looking good man!"

The voice was fast, brittle and dripping with insincerity. Most of the times he'd handled the press he'd been with Sherlock and they were always more interested in the detective. He didn't like playing second fiddle but in those cases, he was fine with Sherlock assuming the limelight. It wasn't something he was after or needed.

Now, he wasn't sure what to do. He felt exposed, trapped, small and not to mention humiliated by the attention.

"Yeah, cheers." He muttered as he returned to his shopping trolley and placed the milk inside.
The camera and the man of course followed.

John hurried down the nearest aisle and chose the shortest line he could, winding up behind an elderly woman who did a double take when she saw the commotion he brought with him.

He turned his head to avoid her gaze and was just in time to see another camera crew enter. One of the men shouted, "There he is!" and rushed in his direction nearly mowing down a young woman with flowers in the process.

"John Watson! Can we talk to you for a second? Oi! Just a minute of your time!"

He didn't look at them. He refused to look at them though he felt the cameras and the lights and heard their embarrassing and provocative shouts alongside the rapid clicking of shutters.

"Did you really try and kill yourself?"

"You gonna do it again?"

"Is this guilt about your dead wife?"

"Did you have anything to do with your wife's death, mate?"

One after another after another. And while he knew what they were trying to do, knew they wanted, needed a reaction, it was taking everything he had not to turn around and knock one of them to the floor. It would feel so good. Fist connecting with jaw. Again and again and again until his knuckles were sticky with a stranger's blood.

*Splash that on your front page while I splatter you on the floor.*

"So, what was it like in rehab? You gonna drink anymore, mate?"

"The rumors always said you were having it off with Sherlock, is that true?"

"Lovers tiff drive you to the bottle?"

"You boys back at Baker Street?"

A third one was on his way in now, berating the man with him for apparently being too slow, as they entered. He gave the man a shove which threw him more off balance than either of them seem to anticipate.

And that was all it took. It was stupid really. He saw it happen. He saw the man knock into the coin operated candy machine. He saw him hit it hard causing the machine to wobble. It finally went completely off kilter and fell to the floor with a crash. There was the sound of glass shattering, the flat metallic noise of the machine casing hitting the lino, the rushing clink of the coins spilling out. There was absolutely no part of these noises, except perhaps save the metal though that was a stretch, that reminded him of anything in Afghanistan. And still, that panic set in. That thudding of his heart, that sweat, rising up from his pores, making everything cold and sickly feeling. Vision narrowing. Eyes darting. Fingers flexing into fists, opening, closing, opening, closing, opening. That nausea in the pit of his stomach, everything too loud, too close, too bright.

The girl ringing up his groceries seemed to be moving in slow motion. For all he knew she might have been enjoying this, a little bit of excitement to spice up her day. There were five of them now. Two behind him, shouting questions, one waiting for him like a final battle of a gauntlet at the end of the checkout. He was standing near a very stressed looking bag boy who seemed like he wanted this
to end almost as much as John did.

All of them were snapping pictures or rolling their cameras. All of them were trained on him waiting for a reaction, waiting for something.

The bills gripped in his hand had grown soft with sweat and he was crumpling them over and over again in his palm.

It wasn't just paparazzi now, everyone had their phone out, everyone was recording and taking pictures and posting it to Twitter and Facebook Live and Instagram and Youtube and he felt like if he had to stay there one more moment he was going to start screaming or swinging but something, something, something had to stop this.

He tossed the money, more money than was necessary, at the girl before he even got the total.

"Your change and receipt, eh? Don't ya want 'em?" She called after him but he was already on the move. Weighed down by bags he pushed past the photog at the end of the belt and hurried out the door. They followed, fast on his heels as he hailed a cab, nearly surrounding him.

"You going back to crime fighting?"

"Were it pills or a gun? How did you try to do it?"

"Is it true you were on meth? Or was it smack like Sherlock?"

A black cab pulled up and he tried to step to the curb but was purposefully blocked.

And he lost it. Shifting the grocery bags quickly from both hands to just his left he grabbed the man with his right. With a handful of t-shirt and likely a few of the man's chest hairs he made a grip and shoved him hard against the side of the cab.

"Now you're going to get out of my way or I'm going to make certain the next bus that comes along will wind up with you under it."

The man scoffed or tried to but they both found it unconvincing.

John was close, close enough to his face that he could feel his breath, close enough that he could see the panic rise to his eyes.

"Now, you were just sent out on assignment here. You've got no idea who I am really. What I'm capable of. What I've done. Would you like to find out? I can make sure, right now, that you wind up on the front page like you've always wanted. Though maybe not how you ever imagined."

He kept his voice low and even and heavy with all the genuine threat and danger he was feeling. At that moment, he meant it. In that moment, if provoked, if the needle moved just a bit more, he would make good on everything he'd just said. "To quote a movie you're likely too young to know or remember; I'll make you famous."

"To quote a movie you're likely too young to know or remember; I'll make you famous."

The man made a small frantic noise in his throat and it was the first bit of relief John had felt since this whole ordeal began. But not just relief, pleasure. He liked that he was afraid. He wanted to make him afraid.

It felt good. Almost as good as he imagined it would feel to break him in two.
Instead, he let him go.

The taxi driver poked his head out of his window.

"Oi! My car! Either get in or get stuffed!"

The paparazzi scuttled aside as cameras clicked and flashed. A crowd had gathered round but all John wanted now was to get into the cab and get home.

Once inside he closed the door behind him but not before they'd all made one last play to get a rise out of him.

He leaned his head back against the seat breathing heavily.

"221 Baker Street, please. And may I open the window?"

He was halfway home before the shaking set it. That was always how it was.

The tachycardia, the sweating and then a respite, this sort of cool vacuum of silence where everything went still, almost muffled. He knew this period, this was the time where his body decided to override his fear, his panic, his stress and just propel him where he needed to go so he could do what he needed to do. In this case, it was as simple as threatening a man with a camera and scarpering into a cab but his mind didn't know that. It didn't recognize the mundane, it didn't recognize much and wouldn't...until the shaking took over. He'd once heard someone in the Army describe it as "Pac-Manning out".

'Ok, so, meaning that when Pac-Man eats the glow-y ball things, all the ghosts start running from him. He can move faster, they move slower and it's like, being in the zone. You go all Agent Borne, you're like the mum who can lift a car off her trapped kid. You're all drive, all action, just pure...Id.'

It was the best non-medical description John had ever heard and for the first part of the cab ride, he was fully in it. He felt in control, he felt strong and capable, he felt like he wanted to tell the cabbie to turn the car around so he could go back beat that man...all those men into the pavement. God, was this blood lust? Because it felt like it.

But it didn't last. It never lasted and coming down was like a crash course in the DT's.

The cabbie kept glancing at him in the rear view mirror.

"Don't you heave in my car."

John waved his hand with a surety he didn't feel while offering an unconvincing smile.

"I'm fine."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Nobody. Case of mistaken identity."

Once the cabbie got him back home he thrust a few bills at him through the driver's side window and with unsteady legs headed to the door.

He was sure he looked a mess as with shaking hands he put his key in the lock. It took few tries but he eventually managed it.
Straightening his spine he headed first for Mrs. Hudson's flat.

His knock was answered quickly.

"Back already?" She asked opening the door with a smile that soon faded. "John, what happened. You look a fright!"

He held up his hand and plastered on another weak smile.

"I'm fine, really. I got everything on your list-"

"Come in here right now and sit down. I won't take no for an answer." She said putting her small hand on his elbow. He let her tug him deeper into the flat and he tried to fight against the heaviness of his limbs and the desire to literally drag his feet.

He knew what was happening, what had happened. He'd felt threatened. This had thrown his sympathetic nervous system into action prepping him for fight or flight. His adrenal medulla began secreting catecholamines, including norepinephrine and epinephrine. He'd been thrumming with serotonin, dopamine, estrogen, and testosterone. All of it coursing through him readying him for...anything. And now that the threat was over that ocean of hormones was receding, the chemical acetylcholine was taking over, trying to return him back to normal and in the meantime leaving him a shaky, sickly wreck.

"Let me get you a glass of water." She said and he didn't feel quite like arguing. He sat down at her kitchen table with a thump and she placed a tall glass filled with the cool liquid in front of him. His eyes drifted across her kitchen settling momentarily on the wine rack before he wrenched his focus away. He grabbed the glass of water and took two large, gulping mouthfuls.

It turned out to be a mistake.

He sat there for a minute, frozen, already aware of his stomach indignance at such a foolish move.

"Actually, Mrs. Hudson, I might have to use your-"

But he cut himself off and just avoided knocking her over as he rushed to her bathroom. He slammed the door behind him, flipped up the toilet lid, sank to his knees and proceeded to vomit up what felt like every meal he'd ever eaten. Waves and wave of nausea and gagging followed as he gripped the porcelain and even when he was certain he was empty he couldn't entirely stop.

With a pathetic cry he flushed the toilet and for a few moments closed his eyes, resting his face upon the seat. Finally, he forced himself to sit back and he went from rocking on his heels to thumping down on his backside. He looked around her bathroom, trying anything to ignore the roiling of his stomach and the clenched muscles in every limb. Her rug was frilly, thick and the same sort of olive green as the appliances in her kitchen.

Her rug was frilly, thick and the same sort of olive green as the appliances in her kitchen.

She must really like green. He thought.

"John, are you alright, dear?" Came her worried voice from just beyond the door.

He lay there for a minute just breathing. Finally, he stood and turned on her faucet, cupping his hand under the flow of water to rinse his mouth.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Hudson." He began as he gave himself one last glance in the mirror. Switching off
the water he turned to exit the loo. "Just please do me a favour and don't tell-" He opened the door and came face to face with his partner. "Sherlock." He finished with a sigh.

"Why shouldn't she tell me?" He asked with a frown.

"I didn't tell you." She protested.

"Not the point. Why shouldn't you tell me?"

"Because I don't want to cause a fuss." John said. "How did you know?"

Sherlock held up his phone.

"I started getting a sudden influx of alerts and messages on Twitter."

"Fantastic." John said leaning against the wall.

"Also, I heard you come in, then I heard you slam the door to the loo. Mrs. Hudson has never slammed a door in her life." Then quieter and leaning close he asked. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine I just got nervous for no reason."

"I wouldn't say no reason." He said looking at his mobile.

"Sherlock, maybe you'd best take him upstairs to bed. He could use a little attention." Mrs. Hudson said not unkindly.

Still, John flushed both embarrassed and frustrated.

"I'm fine. I don't need to be put to bed like a child or a woman who swooned from too much sunlight. I'm alright. Thank you, Mrs. Hudson, for the use of your...I'm sorry I got ill."

But she dismissed his apology.

"Just let Sherlock take care of you. He's actually quite good at it. I'll be up later to see if either of you need anything."

He bristled at that. He didn't need taking care of and tending to like a frightened poodle.

"I'm fine. Alright, both of you, I'm fine. Stop behaving as though I'm a stupid child who needs a minder, ok?" He snapped as he picked up the grocery bags he'd unceremoniously deposited on the floor.

John brushed past Sherlock and headed towards Mrs. Hudson's door. Before he put hand to knob he stopped, shoulders slumping.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hudson. You're only showing concern and I'm sorry. That was very rude of me."

"It's alright dear. I understand."

He glanced over his shoulder and once he saw Sherlock was coming behind him he headed out.

"It was rude to you as well. Sorry." He said quietly as they were climbing the stairs.

"You needn't apologize to me at every second, John."

At that, the doctor stopped on the stairs and turned to face him.
"No, no I believe I do. Not every second but… I let things slide, Sherlock. It's a bad habit and I don't want to sink into again, you know. I don't want to take you for granted. You can be cross at me if you like. You know, shout a bit. I won't break, I promise."

"Noted. If I feel the need to shout at you I won't hold back." Sherlock said with a small smile. But John could see the worry in his face, the tightness around his mouth, the shadow of a furrow about his brow, as though it were always threatening to come back.

"Hey, I'm fine." He said reaching out and briefly resting his hand on Sherlock's cheek. "But we need to talk."

Once they were back behind the closed door of their flat John began putting away the perishable groceries.

"You haven't been going out, Sherlock. You haven't been going out at all. Don't think I haven't noticed."

"What do you mean?" He asked standing very straight and very still by the sink. God, but he was a terrible liar sometimes. There were instances like these where John wondered how he had ever believed him.

"I mean, you've been hanging about the flat because you're worried about me. You haven't left, not really since I got home. It must be driving you crazy."

"I'd rather you didn't worry about me, John."

He placed the milk in the refrigerator, closed the door and locked eyes with him.

"Well, that's not going to happen. Of course, I'm going to worry. You need the things that sustain you. Didn't you once tell me your mind atrophies if it's not exercised and invigorated? How invigorating can it be sitting around here babysitting me? It's not fair to you."

"You spent a good deal of your time babysitting me, if memory serves. Far more than you should."

"That was different. I'm not you."

"Have I looked or acted unhappy. Also, I have been working cases, several as a matter of fact. I've been taking on the ones that I typically ignore, the easy ones, the ones I can solve from my chair."

"Sherlock, love..." He said walking up to him and settling a hand on his chest. "you don't belong in a chair. That's my point."

John pulled away and headed directly for their bathroom eager to brush his teeth. As expected Sherlock followed.

"It's only natural that what occurred today, that ambush," He said spitting out the next word. "Would be upsetting. I assume you'll want to stay nearer to home for the time being."

"You assume wrong." John said mid-brush. "That's been my point all along."

"I do?"

"Yeah, in fact I want you to find a case now. I want to be out on the streets with you doing something tomorrow. Maybe even as early as today."

Sherlock opened his mouth and then closed it before deciding to speak. John watched him in the
mirror, briefly recalling the last time they'd been in this position.

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I think it's a great idea. I can't live like this. Today was awful, no doubt. But it was exposure therapy, of a sort. I think Hanah would agree."

"Hanah said you were to take it easy."

"Yes, well it's different to give advice at The Location which is far afield from Baker Street. Maybe everything she and I planned...won't exactly work here."

He took a swish of the mouthwash, spit it out, repeated the action and then turned away from the sink to face his boyfriend.

"I'm afraid...that if I don't go back sooner rather than later I never will. I can't keep running, Sherlock. I can't."

Sherlock nodded shortly.

"Alright. I'll find us something. Something real. There were a few things, a few people I put off. I'll get in contact."

John leaned forward and kissed him.

"Thank you."

Sherlock smiled in return.

John continued.

"And I also want access to the website because there's something there you don't want me to see."

The smiled faded but before any protest could be raised John pulled his mobile from his pocket. "Now I haven't logged in out of respect. But you said you didn't change the password."

He walked out of the bathroom, Sherlock close behind as he entered the username and password.

473 messages.

His inbox had been bursting before but never like this.

And then he looked at the subject lines.

"John..." Sherlock began but seemed unable to continue.

So here was the answer.

He frowned and that frown only deepened as he scrolled down reading the subject line of message after message. This was why Sherlock had wanted to keep him away from their inbox. This is how he'd been protecting him. It all made sense.

Jesus.

"A lot of people think you should tell me kill myself." He read on, scanning down one page and another and another. "With this level of venom, you'd think they knew me personally." He joked but
it fell flat. "Oh, here are a few who are offering to take me out for a drink, isn't that nice? Has it been like this? Since December, I mean."

"More or less." Sherlock replied looking down.

"I see. Right." John kept scrolling and the messages kept coming. Most of them seemed to have arrived within the last hour or so.

**Come have a drink with me, John, I'm buying!**

**You should have offed yourself.**

**Why didn't you kill yourself?**

**Tell your mate to try again, Sherlock!**

**John you should kill yourself**

**Did you go to rehab for being a poof?**

**Do you guys alternate between who commits suicide every few years?**

"Ok, well at least that last one's clever." he said pointing to the screen and showing Sherlock.

"Don't perform for me, John," Sherlock replied, the disgust in his voice evident. "You know I detest it."

"I wasn't performing," John said a little surprised at Sherlock's response. Then again, he did have a habit of being glib, he supposed. Hanah had said it was both self-protective and performative. But of course, he already knew all of that.

"Are you ok?"

It shouldn't hurt. It really shouldn't. There were plenty of real wounds and scars and injuries and hurts that he had caused and felt over the past few years. The words of some idiot strangers shouldn't matter. But somehow they did. Maybe it was the volume of unsolicited replies. Maybe it was the glee. Maybe it was the fact that in the midst of his work Sherlock had to take time away to sort through all this bloody chaff just to get to the wheat.

Maybe he should say all of this aloud. Maybe he should admit how absolutely terrified he'd been for a moment in the shop. When the noise and the chatter and the stares and the lights had all come together to make him feel as jumpy and on edge as when he was crawling on his belly through poppy fields in Helmand with Taliban bullets whizzing overhead. Maybe he should to what he wanted which was to take a small refuge in his arms. To just, feel it all again, but in a safe way. Hanah called it "depositing yourself in the moment". Reliving trauma in a secure environment as a way of coping and overcoming it.

He should tell him. He should say; "Christ, Sherlock, that scared the hell out of me...and not long ago I'd run straight for a drink to stop my hand from shaking instead of shoving them in my pockets."

But he didn't say any of that. Not a word.

"I'm fine. But all the more reason to get me an account. That way the messages will get funneled to me and the real cases should get to you. I'm also going to come off private on Twitter. Might as well give them multiple targets for their vitriol."
"That's really not necessary-"

"No, maybe it is, hmm? I mean, best to just bring this all to a head. If they're waiting to take their shots then why not let them have at it. Maybe they'll grow tired."

He felt Sherlock raise his hand to rest it on the small of his back but John moved away. He wasn't sure why. There was something about the idea of being comforted right there in that moment that made him recoil. It wasn't sexism or homophobia, internalized or other he argued with himself. He argued vehemently. It was more about...weakness. Who was he if he was the person in the relationship always crying always needing support and help and assistance? The batty boyfriend? The PTSD freak who needs you to speak softly and not make any sudden movements. Jesus Christ, what kind of life was that? For him? For Sherlock? And what if this was life? What if every day was a fucking struggle or just trying to smother his emotions so he could be normal in public and not sneaking drinks from a flask. Yes, a hand on his back, a gesture of affection and concern it was nice, when he needed it. But what if he never stopped needing it?

For the first time in awhile, the ground felt unsteady like thick, wet sand.

His skin started to prickle and sting with heat.

**Red Forest.**

He instantly hated himself for it. He didn't want to put him off, push him away. It was an old defense mechanism but why did he feel the need to be defensive against his partner. Fuck, probably something he needed to talk to Hanah about. Add it to the goddamn, ever growing list.

He watched Sherlock's face as he walked away, looking for a sign of distress or upset but he remained impassive.

John wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad one.

God, but they were both so screwed up.

"Alright." Sherlock replied before making his way over to his laptop. He seated himself in his chair and began working at the keys. After a moment John got an email alert. "There's your new address and password."

"Good, thank you."

The feeling of anger from earlier started to return. Anger at having his space threatened, his privacy, his dignity. Anger at having people so bloody invested in what was now his public life. Anger at how he brought so much of this on himself. Anger at-

"You could-" Sherlock began before restarting. "We could discuss this. I'm rubbish at feelings, I realize, and perhaps not at all your ideal sounding boarding but we could talk."

John forced a smile. Sherlock had been through enough. He'd cried on his shoulder and whinged at him for far, far too long. He'd handle this on his own, by himself. The very least he owed him was to be a pleasant and undemanding partner.

"Nothing to talk about, really." He said trying to ease any sharpness that might edge its way into his tone. "Really, I am fine. This sort of stuff...I mean, look I've been roughed up a bit online before. What we do is public and it's part of the job. I'm good. No worries."

Sherlock looked skeptical but didn't add any more.
With a few keystrokes of his own John unlocked his Twitter account. Moments later he had 25,000 followers, all the people who queued up to be approved suddenly there.

First tweet. It seemed as though now was as good a time as any. But what to say? In the end he decided to keep it simple.

**John Watson @CaptainJohnWatson221B** Good afternoon.

That seemed good. But before pressing send he decided to revise it.

**John Watson @CaptainJohnWatson221B** Good afternoon! So, first account, first tweet. Is this alright? Thanks for the well-wishes. So, what have I missed? Anything interesting?

It was cheeky but maybe this situation, all of this called for cheeky.

He'd managed to come two characters under the limit and it seemed good enough to send so he pressed the button.

The response was so immediate and so sustained for a moment he thought the notices on his phone were broken. Ding after ding after ding after ding that he gathered was alerting him to a reply.

"Yes, they tend to do that." Sherlock said dryly.

"I truly don't understand this." John said shaking his head. "Why? Why me? I'm not important. I'm just some guy. I'm an angry, middle-aged drunk. I'm short, I'm average looking I'm passably clever. You're the smart one, the beautiful one, the interesting one. Why me? Oh God, I'm trending. That's what it's called, right? When your name is on the little side part?"

When John glanced up Sherlock was looking at him curiously.

"Were this anyone else I'd say they were fishing for compliments, a tactic that I loathe but...you actually believe this."

John only shook his head and looked at his phone and the constant dinging with distrust. He sensed his boyfriend wanted to add more, possibly placate him with reassurances but he didn't want to hear it, couldn't hear it. Instead, he delved into the responses as he learned to navigate Twitter.

To his surprise, a cursory glance yielded almost nothing but positive messages. Mostly women, young, middle aged, some who may have been teenagers which he found more than a bit disturbing. For the most part, their messages were kind, concerned, enthusiastically supportive. The polar opposite of Sherlock's inbox.

"I didn't expect them to be so..."

"Nice? Yes, at times they're a little too eager, overly involved, silly, even strangely obsessive and you will get the odd nude picture every now and then but they are loyal nearly to a fault and at times inordinately kind."

"You like them." John said with a smile.

"Answer a few of them. They'll like that." He said not replying to John's assertion.

So he did. And between the downtime of each conversation, he noticed his follower count increase. They sat in silence for awhile. John occasionally sighing as he consistently went over the 140
character count and had to edit himself. Sherlock drumming his fingers as he went through potential case after case, all of them displeassing him.

John knew he'd found something when the drumming abruptly stopped. The sound of Sherlock's fingers working rapidly over his keyboard filled the room briefly.

"Can we meet with a potential client tomorrow at two? Are you free?" He asked.

It was like music to John's ears.

"You're damn right I can." He replied. "What is it?"

Sherlock cleared his throat.

"Dear Mr. Holmes, I'm hoping maybe you can help me. Perhaps either set my fears to rest or be the first person in my life to ever tell me the truth. Either way, something must give. I don't think my family is who they say they are. Or, perhaps considering I'd be the odd person out, I'm not who they say I am. I've gotten a lot of mixed information regarding when and where I was born and when I press for more my parents go quiet. When I start asking questions, they put me off. When I ask for important forms I need, birth certificates, records and whatnot, they always tell me, "We can't find it now, but we'll look for it later. The next day, miraculously it appears, looking quite brand new as if they were printing them in the basement. Everything checks out, every form and signature, nothing has ever caused a raised eyebrow out in the world, but still...

And it's not just that. There are photos of me, of our whole family when I was a child. And right next to me, there's always a smudge or a blur, sort of white and wispy. When I was younger I read these paranormal stories and I figured it was a ghost. But now...well...I wonder if they had someone erased.

There's more. Much more. And if you don't think I'm completely mad perhaps you could write back to me and we could meet."

John nodded his head approvingly.

"I hope you'll consider taking on my case."

John nodded his head approvingly.

"That sounds like exactly what we need." He said.

"I'm in agreement."

John sighed with relief, the tension easing from his limbs and neck. This felt good. It was a plan and he always felt better when he had a plan.

The nerves had settled. He was breathing again. He could feel the chair beneath him and the floor beneath that. He could feel the worn and frayed pattern of the material beneath his fingers as he stroked the arm. He was grounded in a place he would know blindfolded. Everything was ok.

"I'm famished." He said finally with a lazy stretch.

"You were just ill not that long ago."

"The heart wants what it wants, or in this case, the stomach."

"I wouldn't be opposed to eating. Shall I order in?"

"Nope, on your feet. We're going to make dinner for ourselves." John stood and stretched having
finally returned to the pleasant mood he'd been in before he left.

"We are?" Sherlock replied skeptically.

"Yeah, we are. I didn't go through that harrowing experience at the shop to order more Chinese food. Come on, up, quick as you please, now."

Sherlock uncrossed his long legs and stood to his feet.

"Aye, Captain." He replied cheekily. "And what's on the menu for today?"

"Yes, Captain, will do. We're not on a ship. Or just a very short 'Captain!' followed by an acknowledging head nod. I'd accept that as well."

"A stickler for rules and regs, I see." Sherlock said moving closer. Once he was directly in front of John he angled his head for a kiss.

"I could put you through your paces." John replied.

"Oh, I don't doubt it."

They kissed and John put his hand to Sherlock's cheek before moving it back a bit farther, his thumb stroking the lobe and shell of his ear.

"Hey, um," He began as he pulled back, but only barely. "Hanah says it's always a good idea to check in with yourself and your partner occasionally to make sure everything is ok. So, is everything ok? We've been sharing a room and a bed now for awhile. No, um...no regrets?"

"Not a one." Sherlock said emphatically.

John nodded his eyes meeting those of his boyfriend.

"And, um... I mean, you've slept alone your whole life, essentially. You have enough room in bed?"

"Why do you ask?"

John hesitated to go on.

"I just noticed you've been getting up every now and then during the night. I don't mean to be some sort of bladder watcher, I mean you can use the loo as often as you like but if you were like sneaking away to get a break from me. If I snore or elbow you in your sleep or kick like a racehorse or something please tell me. Mary always said I was as still as a corpse when I slept...unless I was having a nightmare. But, you know, things change."

He hadn't meant this to come out so frantic and plaintive and could only hope it just sounded that way to his ears. But he'd been meaning to get this out for awhile. More than once he'd awakened to watch Sherlock's lean figure ease out of bed and leave the room. This was followed by the gentle click as the bathroom latch caught.

No one wants to admit that knowing someone, loving them includes, well, knowing when and how much they piss but it was true. You got into habits when you shared a life with someone and you knew their patterns even when you didn't know you knew. Sherlock getting up more than once didn't fit the mold of what John knew. Being a doctor, of course, only made things worse as he found himself silently cataloging everyone's behaviors and matching them up against a running chart of his head. Any deviations immediately started him cross referencing symptoms and
illnesses. Sherlock, especially set off alarms because he was the one person who was guaranteed not to mention it if he were sick.

But Sherlock gave a little dismissive head shake.

"I'm fine, John. I suppose I've just been drinking a bit more water and tea."

That sounded plausible. It was unspoken between them but he'd noted they'd both been making an effort to eat a bit better, stay a bit more hydrated, perhaps not take such crap care of themselves. It sounded as reasonable as anything else. Plus, what did he know of Sherlock's nighttime habits, really? He only had those nights in rehab and less than a month here to go on. He was still just guessing. There was still so much to learn.

"Ok, that's a good enough answer for me. Now, on to more important things. Can you cook at all?"

"I wouldn't say cook. I can avoid setting things on fire and likely not give anyone botulism."

"And with that ringing endorsement you're on salad duty." he said with a laugh. Grabbing Sherlock's hand he linked their fingers and pulled him toward the kitchen.

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A/N: Please don't get too excited. I don't write case fic and I couldn't write a mystery if I had the ghost of Dame Agatha Christie whispering in one ear and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the other. This was just to put a little interesting tale out there for Sherlock and John to get into. :)
Chapter 59

Twenty Eight Days In

114 Days Clean

April 27th, 2016

Normal was impersonating a police officer while not explicitly saying he was a police officer.

Normal was switching cabs three times because Sherlock was almost certain they were being followed.

Normal was scaling a very wet, very slippery fire escape at three in the morning.

Normal he could handle and God knows he'd missed it.

The paparazzi problem was still there, still a hassle, still frightening, but John felt better prepared now. If this was a reality then he would have to do his best to manage it.

The past week had seen him go to bed exhausted. Not the emotional exhaustion from before but the physical kind, the good kind. The tight, sore-muscled and utterly spent. The case was a good one, all encompassing, thrilling and a little dangerous.

It wasn't that he thought Sherlock had been lying about how unbothered he was with them being case-less. More like, stretching...concealing the truth. It was obvious now as his skills and brain were being taxed and exercised that he was as happy as he was relaxed. He needed this. John needed it as well but not quite like his partner. No one needed this as much as him. He still felt guilt for how long he inadvertently kept him from it.

When they finally crawled into bed it was with happy, tired smiles and brief kisses before sleep claimed them.

Sherlock had his arm slung around his waist and was breathing softly against his shoulder. This was one of the many favorite positions they'd slip into.

Sometimes it was John spooning Sherlock, body pressed softly but firmly against his. He never slept better than when his nose was filled with his partner's scent, the pheromones just at his hairline, his shampoo, his sweat, his soap. Many a night he just buried his against the nape of his neck and drifted off. Sherlock's body molded to his, one hand resting over the man's heart, sometimes above his shirt, sometimes beneath but always needing to feel the pulse beneath his hand. Covers slung low, Sherlock's arse, and what an arse it was as John had come to know first hand, pressed firmly against John's groin, legs entwined, breathing in rhythm.

Tonight it was the opposite, Sherlock was the big spoon, the strong, protective arm, the hand splayed across his chest. It was like a narcotic, the peaceful, easy way this man could cajole him into slumber. It was all the relaxation he'd ever wanted from the bottle and never found.

The only reason he was teetering on wakefulness was because of a nagging pain in his tooth. This meant he was aware when Sherlock slowly pulled away and slipped out of bed.
John kept his eyes shut until he left the room and didn't open them until the creak of Sherlock's footsteps vanished behind the shutting of the bathroom door.

Perhaps he shouldn't have followed him. But by the time this thought caught up to John he had crept to the bathroom door and was listening quietly.

This felt wrong and invasive and yet no part of him was turning and heading back. He stood there in his bare feet absolutely stock still, making sure to keep away from the door frame. If he stood directly in front of it he'd surely disrupt the shaft of light and Sherlock would know and-

John pressed his ear to the door and held his breath.

And then he heard it. Muffled at first, distant, but there.

"Oh...God...John...yes, please."

He drew back from the closed door in surprise. But also, not surprise. Not exactly. Well, there was no mistaking that.

Well, there was no mistaking what was going on.

John swallowed as his heart rate quickened. Licking his lips he leaned forward again to listen.

"John, please, just like that...yes...yes..." He whispered.

It wasn't all words. There were soft little catches to Sherlock's heavy breathing, hitches that served as a sort of punctuation. John wanted to hear more but it also gave him permission to fill in the blank spaces of dialogue with fantasy.

What was his position? Was he sitting with the lid down on the loo? Legs spread wide, cock in hand, head lolled back? Or was he standing before the sink, occasionally sneaking glances at his reflection as he stroked himself? Where was his other hand? His balls? His chest pinching a nipple? What was he imagining? John bent forward before him, grasping the sink for balance and dear life? Or perhaps John perched on the edge of the tub, Sherlock riding him with mad enthusiasm?

Out of habit John dropped his hand to his crotch and gave himself a squeeze but there was no reaction, at least not there. But God was he turned on. He gently rested his fingertips on the door wishing he could go in there, touch him, hold him, please him.

As Sherlock's voice started to climb higher John knew he was nearing his release and more than anything he wanted to see it, wrap his mouth around him and-

"John...coming..." He said hoarsely which was followed by distinct, soft rhythmic groans.

John quickly and quietly crept back to bed and dove under the covers.

At first, he was angry. Why the secret? Why the lie? Why not tell him that he'd gotten his erection back? At least one of them would be fixed.

But the anger quickly faded as John started to wonder was he being somehow unreceptive? Had he made Sherlock feel he didn't want to know? Had he implied if one of them was busted then the other should be as well?

Shit. He needed to resolve this and fast.

Sherlock returned to bed on quiet feet and resumed his place behind John.
Doing his best to feign sleepiness, John groaned happily and reaching behind him grabbed
Sherlock's arm and pulled it tight across his body.

"Love you." He mumbled.

"I love you too." Sherlock replied.

There were the cases that moved at breakneck speed and the cases that crawled as you waited for
someone or something to emerge from under a rock. Then there were the cases like this one, with
more starts and stops than John could keep up with. But he wasn't complaining. He loved it.

Today was one of the stop days. They had what seemed like a dozen irons in the fire, a dozen people
they were needing to get back to them. But it meant that in spite of all that needed doing, there was
nothing much to do today. So when his sister called, at Sherlock's prompting, they agreed to meet for
lunch.

They'd been Skyping with Rosie every night. It had become a ritual somewhere around 6 or 7 pm to
coincide with her bedtime. She was getting more accustomed to John but Sherlock was the star of the
show. He was the one she smiled for, laughed for and went to bed for. John, well, he was just
someone she tolerated.

"Did you ever want kids? Did you ever picture yourself being a father?" John asked him as they
readied themselves for his sister's arrival.

At the moment Sherlock was in the process of putting his more dangerous experiments away where
small hands couldn't possibly reach them.

"No." he answered as he held up a test tube and scrutinized it in the kitchen light.

"Succinct," John replied with a nod. It wasn't as though he had anticipated a different answer.

"Procreation is just an expression of narcissism and a futile revolt against the inevitability of death. In
that way, humans aren't very far from the lowest creatures in the animal kingdom. Rutting toward
immortality. This practice, of course, doesn't exactly produce the best progeny." He paused before
continuing. "Honey Bee, is of course different." He said and John chuckled to himself at hearing the
endearment come out in such a serious tone.

"She is?"

"Of course. It's obvious she possesses a superior intelligence. She's quite advanced for her age. She's
generous, inquisitive, kind. Clearly, she'll excel at anything she chooses. But I'd expect nothing less
considering her parentage."

John opened his mouth to say something, a few things actually but the two main ones being; 'Thank
you for the compliment' and "You sounds like a proud dad.'.

But as both thoughts rattled about his head he decided they each sounded a little too dangerous to say
aloud.

"Well, she certainly fancies you. So we know she has good taste."

Sherlock didn't reply immediately but John knew the smile was there without looking.
"Watsons are all the same." He said finally.

"Alright, lunch is on order, everything looks presentable. I bought some coloring books and crayons, hopefully, she'll like those."

"I'm sure she will, John. She's not very hard to impress."

"Says you."

John hadn't wanted to push things too far or too fast but everyone had agreed that getting Rosie accustomed to, at the very least, his face was a good idea for starters.

"John?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why have you and your sister never gotten on?"

There it was. The first of many questions John anticipated but still had no idea how to answer without cracking open a can of worms.

The alcoholism was, of course, the easy answer in the beginning but it didn't fly so much anymore. Not to mention the fact that he wasn't certain what Harry had already told him. Best to ask.

"What's Harry's take on it?"

Sherlock washed his hands silently before coming into the living room to sit in his chair. John took his seat opposite him.

"She was the soul of discretion, actually."

John snorted.

"My sister was discreet? Go on, pull the other one."

"She was. I asked her something similar and she stated that while your issues were complex she hoped after you returned from rehab you might be able to put things to bed."

"Hmph." John said noncommittally. It wasn't that he didn't want the same thing. He did. It was just...the idea of her taking the lead rubbed him the wrong way. She was the one who needed to realize certain things, accept them, come to grips with them. Not him. It was never him.

"While I never believe that false overtures are a good idea. Perhaps it might be wise to try and patch things for Rosie's sake. If they are...patchable." Sherlock ventured.

John's first impulse was to get angry, snap something short in reply, perhaps something about Mycroft. But when he glanced across at Sherlock's face he saw no judgment. He didn't like that his temper was still so close to the surface, still so in need of being reined in. But he was working on it.

"Yeah..." he said with a sigh. "Yeah, I mean, I'd like to. It's something we can work on, I suppose."

"Good."

The bell buzzed announcing either the arrival of Mr. Chatterjee with their lunch or Harry and Rosie. As it turned out it was both.
Clara had to work so it was just the four of them sitting down for a meal where John had no idea what to expect.

"She makes some people nervous." He'd told Hanah one day during a session.

"And why is that?" She'd asked.

"Because she just says things. Seemingly without thinking them through first."

"And what are the consequences of this?"

"Well, it used to really upset our father. It would make him meaner, angrier."

"But your father is dead, John. So who is it upsetting now?"

"Sherlock, look at you." Harry said affectionately and then, to John's surprise but apparently not Sherlock's, she reached out and touched his cheek. "You're practically glowing. I knew you'd get your color back once he returned. You look about ten years younger. But then John did say in his blog post that you looked like a 12 year old."

Sherlock blinked rapidly, so caught off guard he had nothing to say. As John helped her off with her bag he wondered how their interactions had gone when he'd been in rehab. Try as he might he just couldn't quite imagine Sherlock and his sister having a nice fireside chat. He honestly wasn't sure how anyone got on with Harry.

She was holding Rosie in her arms and the little girl mimicked the gesture, putting a small hand on Sherlock's cheek. In a superb act of breaking any tension he pretended to bite at her fingers and she squealed in delight.

Sherlock took the child from her arms and kissed her forehead, talking to her softly.

"So, John, come on with it." Harry said opening her arms to him. He went into them doing his best not to be stiff and embraced her. "You look good too, by the way. I'm so happy to see you looking good." She said against his cheek.

"You don't look half bad yourself." He said with a genuine smile as they pulled away. "So, shall we sit? I can get lunch on a plate."

"No, don't be silly. You sit, visit with your daughter. I'll be mother. I can work my way around a kitchen." Harry replied cheerfully as she headed in that direction.

Sherlock had cleared the table and the room overall was still clinging valiantly to the neat state it had been in when he'd arrived back home.

John put a hand on the small of Sherlock's back as they both made their way to the kitchen and took a seat. The gesture was more for him than his partner though, as he seemed just fine. But it helped John, it grounded him.

"Well at least let me put the kettle on." He protested.

"John, I said I've got it." She replied with a grin. Harry went to work grabbing plates and mugs, filling the kettle with water and then unwrapping the sandwiches. Turkey, chicken salad, roast beef and one peanut butter and jelly for Rosie.

John watched Sherlock talk to his daughter and found his amazement at the scene hadn't worn off.
He couldn't say it was like he was watching a different man. That would be doing his boyfriend a massive disservice. This was the Sherlock he knew, more open, more kind, more considerate, more himself. Rosie was delighted, chattering away to him, eager for his responses.

"You are amazing with her." John said softly.

"Isn't he though?" Harry replied. "Natural born, I'd say. Like he's been doing it his whole life. Do you have any younger siblings, Sherlock?"

He saw the shift in his body posture, the way his lips became a straight, flat line. Rosie noticed too as she brought both hands to his cheeks pulling them upward.

"Smile." She said and at her request, he did and then kissed both of her hands.

"Yes, I have a younger sister." He replied simply.

"That must be it then. John, you could learn a thing or two from him, you know."

Now it was John's turn to press his lips together in a hard line.

"Yes, thank you." John said at the same time Sherlock said. "Here, hold her and once you've got her reach behind you and grab the bag with the colouring books and crayons."

Holding Rosie while she was sleeping was one thing but very much awake was another. As Sherlock stood to pass her over the little girl flashed him a dubious look that was so like Mary it surprised him for a moment. John extended his arms and took her, pulling her small body into his lap. She looked up at him seeming unsure but perhaps willing to wait it out.

"It should look like it comes from you because it is from you. Just grab it and set it on the table."

John did as Sherlock instructed and the bright colors immediately attracted Rosie's interest.

"These are from...from Daddy." He said, trying out the word. Rosie glanced up at him shrewdly.

"What do we say, Rosemund?" Harry asked as the tea kettle began to whistle.

"Thank you."

"Good girl." Harry said removing it from the eye.

"You're welcome, dear." John replied. He opened the colouring book and the crayons for her and she didn't need much more direction than that.

"Sherlock, I know how you take your tea. John, has anything changed since we were kids?"

"Um...I like a bit of honey now."

"Alright then. I guess I'm the only one for sugar." She made a reach for the sugar bowl on the table but Sherlock moved it away.

"Not that one." He said quickly.

"It's empty?" She asked.

"Not exactly. There's just no sugar inside."
"Well what is-?" Harry began.

"Best not to ask." John interrupted. She shrugged and started combing the cabinets for sugar. When he back was turned John mouthed.

"What's in there?"

"Fingers." Came the silent reply.

"What?" John squinted, not sure he’d read his lips right.

"FING-ERS." Sherlock mouthed back wiggling his own while suppressing a laugh.

John did do as well and laughed outright while shaking his head. Rosie looked up at him with interest, orange crayon poised above the paper...and gave him a smile.

"Alright, lunch is served." Harry said setting down a plate in front of each of them along with a mug of tea.

"Thank you." They both said in unison.

"So, is this where you two normally eat?"

"Um, no, we're sometimes out at a restaurant, well, we were before I went away. Normally we eat in our chairs on the sofa."

"That’s men for you." She said with a shake of her head before adding. “You know, I always knew you were gay, John." Harry said and he choked slightly on his tea.

"Wha-"

"I did. Since Duck but also before."

"Not gay, actually. Bi, if you don't mind."

Harry sighed.

"You know, I slept with men."

"Harry, for Christ's sake." John said gesturing to the admittedly oblivious child in his lap.

"She has no idea what we're saying and she doesn't care. Now, as I was saying, I've slept with men. It doesn't make me bisexual."

"Well did you like it?" John pressed.

"No. Not in particular. Actually, not at all."

"Then you're right, it doesn't make you bisexual. I enjoyed sleeping with women. Therein lies the difference."

"How's your sex life now?" She asked as she took a bite of her sandwich.

John scrubbed his face with his free hand, happy when he heard Sherlock jump into the conversation.

"Our sex life is fine, thank you." He assured her politely.
John had to admit he did seem to handle her well. He wasn’t thrown off in the slightest.

"Well, good, I didn't know if he'd keep you waiting like he did with Duck."

"For the last time Duck and I weren't a couple!"

"Well then, what were you?"

John saw Sherlock perk up almost imperceptibly. Of course, of course he probably wanted to know more about Duck.

"He and I...we were..."

Sherlock, though he tried not to make it obvious, leaned forward eager to hear.

"Did you love him?" She asked.

"I..." He started and then paused for a moment to stroke Rosie's hair. "Yes, I loved him. He was my best mate."

"Were you in love with him?"

"We lived together, we worked together-"

"Yeah, as fucking hoods." She said with a derisive snort.

"I'm sorry?" Sherlock said.

"He was a thug for hire. He never told you that?" Harry asked taking another bite.

John could feel Sherlock's eyes on him, the deductions the re-deductions. Wondering perhaps how he'd never quite seen that in John's background.

"Um...no, he didn't." Sherlock said.

Feeling the need to defend himself John hurriedly began to speak.

"It's not as simple as she made it sound. I was also a writer during the day. But yeah, at night, my primary income was just running errands and occasionally working as a heavy."

Rosie squirmed in his lap and he wasn't surprised. He was probably putting off a negative vibe, his body having gone stiff.

"Can you take her, please." He said to his sister, holding his daughter up and not giving her much of a chance to refuse.

"Of course." She took Rosie easily and when the little girl began to whine for her coloring book he passed it over as well.

Sherlock's gaze was almost painful, and a part of him wanted to crawl away from him, to push away from the table. This, this was why he avoided his sister like the plague.

"Ok," He began, squaring off and trying to ready himself to face whatever came of this. "I hurt people. For money. I was an enforcer and I made money off of people's pain and suffering. Alright?" He concluded pointedly.
"Alright, John." Sherlock said quietly.

But everything felt different. All of it. He couldn’t be certain but there was something about Sherlock that felt as though it had pulled away, drawn back at this sudden and unexpected news.

"So if this changes anything...I...fuck." He swallowed hard and sniffed before going silent. Jesus, could this be the way it ended? Not with violence or a fight. Not with nasty, spiteful words but with the simple and silent movement of a skeleton being forced out of a closet. He sniffed again and avoided his partner’s gaze, instead focusing his eyes on his sister. He would have glared but Rosie had stopped colouring and watching him earnestly as though she were as invested in the conversation as anyone else.

"Have I given you the impression that I would blame you for your past?" Sherlock asked him.

"Well, you didn't know my past." He said quickly.

"Johnny, I swear I didn't mean anything by what I said." Harry said softly and while he couldn’t hear it, perhaps regretfully.

"Didn't you?" He asked harshly. "Because, you know what I think? I think you like to stir up trouble. I think this is your new pastime since you stopped drinking, setting off bombs in other people’s lives, namely mine. Is this the price I pay for you taking Rosie?"

At the mention of her name the little girl looked from her Aunt to Sherlock.

"Because...well, if it is, then it's worth it." He concluded. "I can never repay you for all that you did and all that you continue to do for her. I can't. But I...I don't have to sit here and pretend I like this. Like any of this is ok."

He started to stand but she reached out and grabbed for his wrist.

"John, please, I'm sorry. I swear, this isn't what you think. I stick my foot in my mouth sometimes. Ok, a lot of the time but I just...I just want to get to know my brother. We've been estranged since we were teenagers. I don't know anything about you, not really and I admit, that’s my fault. But I'm trying to make it better. I promise you, I am."

He looked at her with narrowed eyes, really looked at her and couldn't deny that she seemed sincere. Slowly he sat back down.

"Ok." He replied against his better judgment.

"Thank you. I just want to know about Duck. From my point of view he came in one day, whisked you away and I never saw you again. I lost my brother."

"Harry, you know that's not entirely true. You and I had already drifted apart by then. You had moved out, you had your own friends, your own troubles. And I couldn't stay with Dad anymore, I couldn't. I met Duck and my life changed. I felt like for the first time ever someone could hear me and see me. He liked me and wanted me for just who I was. All those years and I never felt close to anyone, I never allowed myself to get close. I'd never felt anything close to what I felt with him for a woman. I would have followed him straight into hell."

"You were in love with him?" She asked.

"Yeah, as I understand it and can accept it now, yes, I was." He turned to Sherlock and was surprised to see unmasked jealousy there. He wouldn't have thought it possible. But then he recalled
something Mary had said on their honeymoon.

"Sherlock was positively green tonight! I mean at the reception, before everything else happened. Before his speech."

He'd started of course, not sure where she was going with this. Unwilling to imagine what the next words out of her mouth might be.

"What about?"

"Sholto! He kept peppering me with questions about him and how you knew him. How close you were. He was incensed at the idea that you thought someone was more unsociable than him. It was rather adorable."

He looked rather incensed now.

John addressed his next words to his boyfriend.

"There was nothing about him that would make me think he was gay or bi or anything but straight. But it was still the first time I'd ever felt that way about someone. I chased that feeling until I caught it again with you."

Sherlock's features immediately softened and he offered the smallest of smiles in return.

"Did you ever talk to him about it? Duck, I mean." Sherlock asked.

"God no. Never and I never will. I invited him to the wedding because he was an old friend that I still care a great deal for. I came as close as I could, I suppose. I visited him in hospital before we left for our honeymoon. I told him how much his friendship meant to me. How important he had been and was. I told him we should see each other more, talk and write. And I gave him the number of my therapist. We've been in contact ever since and he's gotten better. Some of that...sadness and guilt has dropped away. It'll take time but...I have a lot of hope for him. Last I heard he was even talking about a woman who was interested in him that he was absolutely, positively not going to ask out under any circumstances. Which of course means he will quite soon. I'm happy for him. I owe him quite a lot."

"Thank you, John." Harry said quietly. "I feel, well, things make a bit more sense now, don't they?"

"I hope so." For a moment, perhaps for the first time in a very long time he was able to turn it around and if only for a moment see it from her point of view. It had been the two of them, brother and sister against their father, against the world for so long. And then nothing. They split. They fractured and were never able to put their ill-fitting pieces back together again.

"I'm sorry if I...if I left you. That I left you. Look, I know you don't want to talk about Dad and I get that. I get that we have very different memories about what happened in that house. I'm...I'm content to leave you with yours and not disturb you. But no matter how you see it I think we can at least agree we both had a hard and lonely and angry upbringing and it drove a wedge between us."

"I lied." Harry said at the same time Rosie let out a little shriek. She'd been waving the colouring book in the air demanding attention and praise for her artwork that didn't seem to be forthcoming.

They all turned to her, as if the atmosphere hadn't just been thick with emotion, and rather, well, like parents each began commenting on her colorful scribbles. The sudden influx of focus seemed to be just what the doctor ordered and she beamed at each of them.
"Lovely, Honey Bee." Sherlock said reaching out and gently patting her cheek. She giggled and said his name. "May I put it on the refrigerator? So everyone who comes over can see it?" He asked.

Standing, he walked over to the appliance and patted an empty space.

"I think it would right here? What do you think?"

They all nodded and Rosie gave an excited "Yes!"

Sherlock carefully tore the page from the book and grabbing a sellotape dispenser placed it on the door.

Rosie clapped excitedly and still smiling at her, Sherlock, without missing a beat said: "Go on, Harry."

Harry swallowed before forging ahead.

"Clara and I had this enormous row after I left your house, you know, when I took Rosie for the first time. Not over her but something I said."

John leaned back in his chair not sure of where this was going.

"I was...running you down a bit, I admit. And then I got on to the point about you and Dad. Us and Dad. I started saying how you were spouting off all this bullshit again about how he was with us and Clara said, "Well, he's right." I had no idea what she meant. But um...she went on to say that I said all the things you did and more...when I was drunk. That she'd tried to get me to talk about it, him, the...abuse when I was sober but I always shut her down. I denied it, I shouted back at her, which I'm not proud of. It didn't really end until she brought out these notebooks. I knew they existed, I kept them in a box in our cupboard but I never looked at them when I was sober. I only pulled them out when I was drunk. They were journals that I'd kept from when we were younger, though some of them had entries from as recent as 2 or 3 years ago."

Balancing the child on her lap, Harry leaned down to grab something from her bag. Sherlock, who'd seemed rooted to his spot by the refrigerator suddenly stepped forward.

"I'll take her." He said softly and lifted Rosie from her arms. The little girl clung to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

This wasn't at all where John had imagined this conversation going and as she set a battered notebook on the table he felt nothing but trepidation. He was glad, surprised, but glad she was finally acknowledging what had happened to her, to them. He never imagined this would ever happen. But he wasn't sure if he wanted to hear it. Didn't know if he could.

"Ok, this seems to be dated March of 1985. You were 13 so I was 10."

*John told me to get into the cupboard so I did. I hid and tried to keep quiet and even though he always tells me not to peek out I did. I couldn't see very much. I heard Daddy yelling and John yelled back. Then stuff started falling over. I heard glass breaking and chairs falling. Then these flat sounds. Smack. Smack. Smack. Daddy said bad words, mean words and then John said bad words too and there was more of those smacking sounds and then the door slammed. I waited and tried not to cry. When John came over he scared me. He pushed the cupboard door closed and said Don't come out. It's not safe yet. He might come back. I tried not to cry but it was dark and I was scared so after awhile I came out. John was in the kitchen. His lip was bleeding and his eye was swollen. He told me not to come in because he was sweeping glass and I'd cut my foot. I ran upstairs and got into bed. John brought me milk and biscuits and read me a story. He fell asleep in my bed which*
was nice. There's a little blood on my pillow from his lip.

She'd started crying about halfway through the recitation and Rosie, clearly distressed had joined her.

"I think she's tired." Sherlock said quietly as he headed with her toward the bedroom. "I'll just put her down."

John only just barely caught a glimpse of his face but he clearly saw his partner looked pale and shaken. This wasn't how he'd wanted him to find out. He hadn't really been sure he'd needed to tell him at all. The brief mention back at The Location should have been enough. Or at least he'd hoped so.

Getting up from his seat he gathered his sister in his arms. How long had it been since they'd held each other? Touched without some barrier, some deep seated anger they'd agreed to suppress just for the moment. Maybe going back as far as the journal entry she'd read. Or at least it sometimes felt like that.

"Come here, Harry. It's alright. It's ok. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

She sobbed against him, her body heavy in his arms.

I'm sorry you had to go through that." Do you remember it?" She asked.

"Of course I remember." He said softly against her hair.

But that was a lie.

The strange thing was her description could have been from any number of times. Nothing about it stood out as anything especially noteworthy to him. It was all part of a cycle that by that point he was very accustomed. Trying to separate one beating from another was a fruitless action.

"I'm sorry you had to remember alone."

"It's ok." He said kissing the top of her head as he stroked her back. She felt small in his arms, fragile and small and he felt a surge of guilt at the idea of how much of this world she'd had to navigate alone.

"But it isn't ok. I'm sorry I made you feel like you were crazy, like it was all in your head. I guess I just didn't want to..." She trailed off.

"I understand. I really do. And...Harry, this means so much to me."

He hadn't teared up during her reading. He'd managed somehow to stem that tide. He'd been pushing those emotions and memories back for decades. So much of it felt like scar tissue. Healed, yes, but also dead. Nerve endings frayed, sizzled and burned away, nothing left now but the appearance of skin; thick, toughened. But holding her tore new wounds in him. His eyes and nose started to burn as he took a breath and cleared his throat.

"I missed you." She said. "I missed you so much."

He hadn't allowed himself to miss her. Not for ages. They'd traveled such different roads, so far away from one another. But maybe those roads could converge again. Maybe they could both try.

"Let's try and fix that, eh? You and me, we'll give this another shot."

"Yes, please." She said and nodded against him.
They stayed like that in surprisingly comfortable silence for awhile. He remembered the little girl he'd loved and protected and cared for. He remembered the little boy he used to be.

"I love you, Johnny."

"I love you too."

Sherlock returned some 10 minutes later telling them quietly that Rosie was now sleeping quite soundly on the bed, buffeted by many blankets and pillows.

The sandwiches had turned hard and unappetizing and they ended up placing another takeout order. They ate and talked quietly about nothing in particular comparatively speaking. Rosie awakened, John retrieved her and sitting on the floor they all played until it was time for Harry to leave.

John called a cab and walked her down and helped to situate Rosie in her car seat. He gave her a kiss to the forehead before standing and embracing Harry again.

"You know, we want to integrate her back into your life. You should take her for a day, a night, a weekend." His sister prompted.

"We'll talk about it. Promise."

"Ok, take care, Johnny."

He waved as the cab drove away before going back up to the flat.

Sherlock was silent, oddly silent when he entered. He was cleaning up, putting the dishes in the sink and the trash in the bins.

"So...are we going to talk about this?" John asked as he met up with his boyfriend in the kitchen. The silence had been ongoing and didn’t seem as though it would end anytime soon, that is, if he didn’t end it.

Sherlock stopped his movements and John watched as his hands gripped the edge on the countertop, his shoulders hunching in the process.

The creeping dread that John had tried to push away came rushing back now as he recalled what he’d revealed about his younger days. It was vile and disgusting and some of the absolute worst that he was capable of. And beyond that it was terribly tangled with his feelings of affection for Duck and the relief at being free of his father and sister. To deny who he was back then would be to deny a confusing mix of joy and pain and ugliness and beauty. But that was how he saw it. Likely not how Sherlock did.

Perhaps he was revolted. Perhaps knowing his best friend, now partner was was a thug-for-hire had left a foul taste in his mouth. Maybe a taste that wouldn't come clean.

"I understand this was all probably hard to hear-"

"Yes. Yes, it was very hard to hear, John."

John swallowed hard and came to stand next to him by the counter.

"Ok, so...you've had minimal time to think about it. What's your...where do you...I mean can you
reconcile-

He was cut off suddenly as Sherlock positioned himself in front of him, raised his chin and kissed him.

It was a very pleasant way to be silenced and it did stop his train of thought for a moment.

Sherlock pulled away but only so far enough to rest his forehead against John's, his eyes shut.

"I realize that was probably a terribly improper response considering the situation." He said finally.

John cleared his throat and closed his eyes too. It only seemed right.

"Well, in most cases I will happily accept that response. But I do need to know what you mean by "the situation". Are you...rethinking us?"

"What?" Sherlock said. And due to their proximity John could feel him frown.

"After what I told you, about how me and Duck-"

"John, don't be absurd. I don't care about that." He said drawing back slightly. "I would imagine you've done your penance. And then some. I'm talking about your father and... I'm an idiot. All the signs were there. Short temper, addictive and compulsive behavior, pathological need for excitement, violence and general self destructive tendencies, hyper-sexuality and promiscuity, a desire for and yet somehow a revulsion toward authority, a need to be both in charge and to have a leader."

"Stop talking." John said quietly.

"But it was all there and I missed it."

"Not really sorry that you missed it, love. I don't like to talk about it or share it. It's in the past. The distant past."

Sherlock studied him thoughtfully.

"I don't know if it's that simple." He said cupping his cheek. "I hate him for hurting you."

"He's dead Sherlock. Dead and buried. He couldn't hurt me anymore if he tried."

John noted it didn't seem that his partner believed him. But neither of them said anything about it.

"Thank you for dealing with all this. We um...keep unearthing skeletons of mine, don't we."

"A little grave digging never frightened me, John." He replied with a smile and John kissed him again.

"I'll finish cleaning up. You go check our inboxes even though I realize you've been surreptitiously doing it all night. Then maybe bed?"

"It has been a wearying day." Sherlock agreed. "Bed sounds nice."

"And this was supposed to be our day off." John chuckled as he picked up cleaning where Sherlock had left off. He felt, in a word, relieved. The entire day had dredged up memories he wasn't even remotely comfortable with and he anticipated unpleasant dreams to follow. But to know that he hadn't scared Sherlock off, or turned his stomach wasn't something he was just going to sweep under the rug. Hanah had told him to appreciate not just each success but each event that worked out better
than you'd thought it would. Combine that with the reality that he had maybe had a breakthrough with his sister and...well...could this mess of a 24 hours actually be considered a good day?

Not at all intentionally John was still awake long after midnight. The room was silent and dark and Sherlock was pressed warmly and securely against his back.

Apparently, his brain had decided the best way to avoid nightmares was to stay awake.

Of course, that wasn't the only thing keeping him up.

Sherlock's grip on him was tight. So tight that when it loosened John knew immediately. There was the tell tale shift in the placement of his body as he prepared to get up, the creak of the bed, the slowed movement meant not to rouse him.

John grabbed his wrist.

Sherlock froze.

"John...did I wake you?" He whispered.

John turned on his side to look at him and he met his worried face in the darkness.

"No, I couldn't sleep. Are you ok?"

"Yes, yes I'm fine, I just..."

"You just what?" John asked before reaching behind him. He blindly turned on the bedside lamp and also retrieved a jar he'd placed just beside it. The jar had been in the bedroom for awhile but instinct had taught him it might be best to have it in arm’s reach tonight.

Sherlock blinked at the sudden light in his eyes and once he'd adjusted he gazed at him curiously.

"John?"

"Yes, love?" He replied innocently.

"Why are you holding a jar of honey? Are we having a treat?"

"You could say that." He replied.

"I last saw this jar in the cupboard."

"Yeah, that was kitchen honey. This is bedroom honey."

Sherlock shutter blinked.

"B-bedroom honey?"

"Mmmhmm. Lie down."

"Alright."

John lay down next to him and engaged him in a deep kiss, slipping his tongue in his mouth. Sherlock whimpered in response and John pulled back just as his partner grew hungrier.
"Why didn't you tell me you were getting hard?" He whispered to him and watched the surprise bloom on his face. "Why are you sneaking off to the loo in the middle of the night to take care of yourself when your partner is right here?"

He said this all calmly and with no traces of anger. He wasn't angry anymore. Just confused and maybe a little bit sad.

Sherlock blinked, opened his mouth and shut it again.

"Hanah said we're not to leap straight into sex." He said finally.

"True but I don't think we're supposed to live like monks either. I mean..." He sighed. "I'm still not 100% but I can touch you and please you and that gives me pleasure too, you know? You shouldn't have to tiptoe off to the bathroom to have a wank like you were a sex criminal in your own home. Sherlock, I love you. And I'm happy to show you that by dashing with you through the streets of London, and pulling your arse out of the fire when need be and making you amazing cups of tea and tending to you when you're sick. But let me do it this way too, ok? Please?"

He watched him try and come up with a way to refute his statement. Try and fail.

"Ok."

"Ok, great. And do you know the best part about what's about to happen? Every time someone mentions honey you're going to blush furiously."

"John." He admonished softly. "I don't blush."

"Oh, love, you blush all the time. So, I have this fantasy, shall I tell you? I've actually had it in one way or another since the day we met. I undress you slowly...actually, this typically begins with me unbuttoning one of those impossibly tight shirts of yours."

"My shirts are not tight." He harrumphed. "They're tailored."

"I can tell. You purchase them, take them to a tailor and no doubt say 'I want them so snug that the buttons look like they're screaming as they try and hold on'. I want them so tight that people fear if one pops they'll lose an eye."

It was so obvious his boyfriend was trying to suppress a shy smile and John grinned enough for both of them.

"I like clothes that allow for the most movement. I never know what I might be doing in a day. I can't have something that hangs or drapes getting in the way." He said affecting his most offended tone. But it was all artifice. Wonderful, lovely, Sherlock artifice.

"You also like being pretty." He said and the smile again threatened to return. He beat it back and instead stated;

"I hardly give a whit what people think about me."

"You love having eyes on you. That long, lean, slim body. So agile, so primed, so strong, so ready for action." He dropped his hand to Sherlock's waist resting it there warmly. "So untouchable. And don't even get me started on your trousers and how you enjoy how nice your arse looks in them."

Sherlock gasped his eyes going wide with surprise. "John, you're being ridiculous." He said but he was also leaning closer, wide eyes focused on his mate's lips.
"It's alright, I enjoy it too. As I was saying. It usually started with unbuttoning that shirt and taking it off. Removing whatever undershirt you had beneath it and finally getting to see that pale, muscular chest. Do you know I've never really have seen you shirtless much less naked?"

Sherlock raised up from the bed and tugged off his t-shirt before quietly lying back down.

The bullet wound.

**Red Forest.**

Just to the right of the midline, around 2 centimeters and below his nipple.

He hadn't forgotten, exactly.

He knew it was there, of course, but seeing it jogged him out of his playful nature.

His face must have immediately fallen because Sherlock noticed.

"John, please, don't let it distress you." Sherlock whispered. "I'm fine and I'm enjoying this. Please, please continue." He concluded softly.

It was small. So small and yet it had done so much damage. Mary and the bullet. It had nearly killed him. He'd seen the chart. Tissue disruption, liver damage, exsanguination, asystole, hypovolaemia, cardiac arrest.

Sherlock was calling his name but he was falling into his memories, nearly unable to hear him.

Nearly.

"John? John, listen to me." Sherlock said as he suddenly grabbed his hand. "This is a part of me and it's what we're both going to have to deal with. Please don't let it derail something that was going along so well. I was shot. I got better. It sounds silly and strange and glib to sum it up like that but it's true. I got better and I am here, before you, alive. Make that what matters, John. I'm alive. Sherlock lives."

John reached out and placed his hand on the wound. It was smooth now, well healed, with that familiar shine of scarred flesh, damage fading into memory.

Sherlock took his hand and brought it up higher.

"Now feel the heart beating underneath."

And he did, steady, strong, even, healthy.

He had to let it go. He knew he did.

He had to at least try.

"Ok, Sherlock, I'm sorry...I'm sorry, ok."

"Kiss me."

John obliged. It was less passionate but after a bit bridged into the sensual as they both tried valiantly to regain the mood.

"H-how did you know?" Sherlock asked between kisses.
"Hmm...oh...after I thought about it I had a hunch. I followed you the other night. Listened to you outside the bathroom door." He said nipping at his bottom lip. "It sounded so hot."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yes." John said before propping up and reclaiming the jar of honey. He unscrewed the top and dipped a finger inside.

"Wasn't that expensive?" Sherlock asked.

"No matter. You're priceless." John replied. "Taste." He said holding his finger to Sherlock's lips. His boyfriend darted his tongue out, capturing the honey before closing his eyes and humming softly.

Watching Sherlock enjoy things was somehow even better than enjoying them himself.

"So, my fantasy would always begin with your neck." He said before smearing a shiny, sticky streak across Sherlock's throat, just to the side of his Adam's apple. He licked his lips and leaning in ran his tongue over the substance. It burned the way honey does but it was sweet and rich and he moaned as Sherlock moaned.

Another smear across his jawline and he again went to work, tongue emerging to taste him, teeth grazing before biting gently at the flesh.

"Ahh! Ahh!"

"Mmmm, you like?" John asked.

"Yes, yes, please."

"Then I'd move on to your clavicle." He said painting the bone with his thumb. He was starting to feel voracious now, everything was floral and flesh and Sherlock. He sucked at the skin on his collarbone, alternating between soft enough to tease and hard enough to nearly bruise. Sherlock responded by squirming on the mattress and grasping at whatever part of John he could reach.

"Sternum" He said smearing another stripe before letting his mouth descend.

"Nipples. First one."


"Then the other."


"Then just a glorious stripe up your ribcage. Here and here."

By now Sherlock was keening, just on the verge of what John could only describe as an erotic sort of sobbing. His flesh was warm and the honey ran and John wished to God he could be hard right now. Damn waiting. Damn celibacy. Damn everything. And damn his stupid broken cock and his stupid broken psyche.

His arm was draped across Sherlock's body, just below where his trousers sat at his hips and it was about that time John felt something hard press against him.

"Well, hello there." he said with a grin. Sherlock's joggers were tented, deliciously tented and John
felt himself salivate at the sight.

"That's what I wanted to tell you, the day we left The Location. In your room before that rude young man came in. I'm...I'm sorry."

"I'm very glad to see it. So you're feeling better then?"

"Yes, it um...came back after we agreed to be a couple."

"Just like that?"

"Yes, just like that. Well, it was off and on for awhile. Rather unpredictable but there's a great deal more stability to it at this point. So I'd say, spigot found. Are you...?"

John glanced down and gave his head a small shake.

"No, it's um...I'm still...I think it'll probably come back soon. For now can you show me how you touch yourself, Sherlock? Show me how you like to be touched."

His boyfriend glanced at the bedside lamp.

"Want me to turn it off? Would that make you feel more comfortable?" John asked.

"If it wouldn't be a bother. I'm just...well, I've never done this in front of anyone before. Not that you're anyone-"

"It's absolutely fine. It's not a bother, not at all." John shifted to switch off the lamp. The room darkened but the moonlight still gave him plenty to work with. That being said, he felt and saw Sherlock's body relax. He quickly screwed the jar back on the honey and set it aside.

"Can you still see me?" Sherlock asked.

"I can see enough." John said as he breathed into his ear, his words and lips just breezing over Sherlock's earlobe. "Now, show me how you like it."

Sherlock was mostly silhouette, dark and beautiful as he shifted slightly beneath the covers. The outline of a hand disappeared and he watched him raise up slightly to slip his trousers down just enough.

His erection stood out quite clearly, straight and hard before it was eclipsed by his closed fist.

Sherlock gave a muffled groan from behind tightly pressed lips and John snapped himself out of being just plain mesmerized to kiss him.

"I want to hear you, Sherlock. Don't get quiet on me now. Stroke your cock for me and let me hear you." he said as he kissed his jaw line.

"Oh God...John." Sherlock said breathlessly.

John watched out of the corner of his eye as Sherlock's hand worked with skill over his erection, the corkscrew turn up the shaft the swipe of the thumb over the head, the way his fingers trailed the underside as he moved his hand down again.

John was a quick study and while the only cock he'd ever mastered, ever thought he'd need to master was his own, he was eager and willing to please Sherlock.
Sherlock was whimpering now, brows knitting together in concentration as John peppered kisses across his neck.

"That night at Angelo's...what did you want to do? What were you planning? Even if you were never going to have the nerve to work up to it."

"Ask me." Sherlock replied and somehow John knew exactly what he meant.

Leaning close to his ear he breathed the words.

"You have a girlfriend, then?"

"Girlfriend? No, not really my area." Sherlock said, his voice rumbling up from his chest.

"Do you have a boyfriend? Which is fine, by the way." John said chuckling softly against his lover's warm skin. These words. These old words that no longer held any danger or sting.

"Mmmm, I know it's fine." Sherlock purred not using anything remotely close to the same interp he'd used that night.

"So you've got a boyfriend then?"

"No. But I'm taking applications if you're interested, you sexy bastard."

John laughed softly and Sherlock smiled.

"That would have been brilliant." He said before dragging his tongue along Sherlock's earlobe. "But don't stop touching yourself. Then what?"

"Then..." He gasped before continuing. "Then after we got back to the flat. The empty flat. No police. No Lestrade. No drugs bust. After Angelo returned your cane. I wanted to flirt with you more. Never would have had the nerve but I wanted to. I wanted to convince you to take the flat. I wanted to go back upstairs and I wanted you to make a move."

"Why couldn't you make a move?"

"I was afraid. But you said such kind things...in the cab...at the crime scene...I thought maybe you liked me."

"I did, love, I did. What did you want me to do to you at the flat?"

"Kiss me. Strip me down. Take me to bed. Take over. I...I trusted that you'd be kind."

"Am I kind in your fantasy?"

"Yesss...like now. Like you are. You kiss me, you take off your clothes. I feel your body on mine, on top, and then you're inside me and it feels so good."

Oh God but this was perfect. It was everything John had ever wanted to hear ad more. So much more. In fact, he was quite convinced that he could listen to Sherlock talk about his fantasy life for hours.

"What point in the fantasy makes you come, love? What happens? What do I do?" John asked needing to know more, needing to share Sherlock's vision and play it out in his mind as well.

"We're face to face, you're on top, you're kissing me, I'm close, so close. You're moving inside of
me, slow, steady. You tell me...'Come, darling. Come for me."

John brought their lips together while sliding his hands over his chest leaving gentle scratches on his pecs and belly. He wondered what Sherlock's cock looked like, what it tasted like, what it would feel like to be between his warm thighs and finally inside of him.

That was a delicious thought.

*Inside* him.

But that was for the future. At present Sherlock's voice was escaping his lips in stuttering little moans, his hand working just a little faster.

"That's beautiful, love. Just beautiful. But can I touch you, Sherlock? Want me to take over?"

"Yes, please." He said releasing his grip.

"Do you have any lube or lotion?" John asked. "My hand may be a bit rough and-"

"Give me your rough hand, John." He demanded his voice, lower than normal, if possible. It sent a delightful shiver through the other man and he slid his hand down Sherlock's body finally putting his hand around his erection.

It was hard and hot, firm and sensitive in his hand and on the first stroke it twitched noticeably.

The sounds coming from Sherlock were both loud and incredibly erotic and John couldn't get enough. Damn the noise. Damn if anybody heard because what he was seeing and experiencing was a man who hadn't been touched or caressed or loved ever, never in the way he should or deserved. A man who was unlocking something he'd given up on even finding. A man finally giving his body over to someone else he loved and truly enjoying it.

"Faster or slower, Sherlock?" John asked him already setting a pace.

"Faster...I'm almost...I'm about to...but kiss me...kiss me, please, sweetheart."

I'm going to get to watch him come. He thought excitedly as he kissed him again.

He sped up as requested and Sherlock's hips came off the bed practically thrusting into his grasp.

Sherlock gave a loud cry John felt his boyfriends cock pulse in his hand and then he was coming, breathless and soft and calling John's name as semen initially spurted onto Sherlock's belly in three distinctive arcs and then ran copiously down his closed tight fist.

"That's it, come, darling." he whispered in his ear. "Come for me."

And he did, he kept coming wave after wave of shudders wracked his body, muscles pulled taut until finally, finally they ebbed and John slowed the movements of his hand. Sherlock's palm moved to his wrist, holding him in place and John recalling what he himself liked gave him a gentle squeeze. Sherlock grunted as a few more droplets of ejaculate beaded on the head of his cock before his body finally relaxed heavily on the bed. John kissed him and gave him a few more firm squeezes all of which made Sherlock groan into his mouth.

Finally, he pulled away and smiled at him. Glancing down he saw his belly rising and falling in the darkened room and the glistening trail of come that dotted his flesh. Impulsively, John shifted, bent forward and licked away the trail. It was sharp and clean on his tongue, a little bleachy, a little citrus-
y. Not unpleasant but unusual and new and mingling perfectly with the aftertaste of honey.

Sherlock called his name, low and lusty and the next thing he knew his boyfriend's hand was in his hair. Ah, then he'd liked it. John continued kissing and licking his abdomen feeling Sherlock's muscles tighten underneath his tongue. His hand was a sticky mess but he didn't want this to stop, didn't want it to end so again he wrapped it around Sherlock's flagging erection.

In the darkness, with just enough light coming through the window he could see the head of Sherlock's cock, dusky, sticky, leaking. He inched forward and Sherlock's hand slid weakly out of his hair. Again letting impulse lead the way puckered his lips slightly and kissed the tip, his tongue swiping gently at the slit. It was hot and silky slick against his lips. The texture, the pressure, felt good against his mouth and he moved his lips back and forth slowly, enjoying the sensation.

"John!" The desperate shout might have made him jump if he hadn't wholly been expecting it. Instead he just smiled. He was a little surprised by how easily this was all coming to him. How much his want for this man was just beneath the surface. How unbothered he was by this new masculine terrain, this new body. He gave him a gentle suck this time, just the head, just the tip and immediately felt more ejaculate coat his tongue. It was good. So good. And he wanted more. Only Sherlock's pleading made him stop.

"Please, John...please...I can't..."

"Too sensitive?" he asked, the words muffled by warm, damp skin as he returned to kissing his belly.

"Yes, for your tongue, yes. But your hand...your hand...don't stop."

A few quick pumps and Sherlock was hard again, not long after that the breathing patterns John now knew meant he was close had returned.

Dipping his tongue in the well of Sherlock's belly button along with the quick strokes of his hand finally pushed him over the edge and he came again, his voice too raw to reach previous heights. John was sure he felt a splash hit the back of his head but he didn't stop, licking and nipping at Sherlock's belly, stroking his cock until he gently pleaded with him to stop.

After a few more kisses John raised his head and grinned at his lover.

"Can I kiss you? On the lips?" He questioned.

"Why are you asking me?" Sherlock queried. "You've never asked before."

"Some people don't want to be kissed after oral sex. They don't fancy their own taste. I mean, this wasn't exactly oral but-"

"Kiss me." Sherlock demanded and John obliged.

The former broke away only for a moment to say. "I like my own taste just fine, apparently."

They snogged for a few moments longer and after a bit John brought his non-sticky hand up to his hair.

"Tell me things, ok? What I can do for you. What you want. What you need. I'm your partner and your lover and long before that I was your best friend. I'm still your best friend." He whispered in the darkness.

"Ok." Sherlock replied. "Don't stop kissing me."
And he didn’t, not for awhile, not for minutes on end. Not until he started chuckling gently against
Sherlock's lips as he recalled something and then rushed to soothe him before his boyfriend got the
wrong impression.

"Fuck, you come like a teenager." He said admiringly. "I bloody love it but I just remembered, I
think you got some in my hair, love."

Sherlock looked predictably horrified.

"John, I'm so sorry-"

"Don't be silly, it's not the end of the world and I had an absolutely amazing time. Did you?"

"It was the time of my life." Sherlock replied with painful earnestness. "Better than I'd even dreamed.
But you didn't have an...you didn't come."

John smiled and kissed him again.

"It's ok. This is going to take me some time, remember?"

"Did I do nothing for you?" he replied and John could see the slight downturn of his mouth.

"Hey, hey of course you did. I...I didn't realize a person could be so turned on without actually
having an erection. I mean, that was stupid of me, orgasm happens in the brain not the genitals not
really. Sherlock, you turn me on. After all, I'm the one who went in for seconds, nearly thirds. I
needed to have my lips on that belly of yours and I needed to taste your come on my tongue and I
needed to lick your cock. I had an absolutely amazing time and don't you dare try and talk yourself
out of it ok?"

The downturn disappeared and Sherlock smiled. John knew he'd taken the right path by appealing to
science rather than intellect.

"Ok."

"Ok, good. Now, I'm going to take a shower and get this out of my hair because it turns to glue if
you don't. Want to join me? It's up to you, no pressure."

"No, I...I think I'll stay here if that's ok?"

"That is perfectly ok." John got up from the bed, headed to the bathroom. Grabbing a towel he ran it
under the tap and added a bit of soap. He walked back to the bed and leaning over to kiss him
handed it to Sherlock. "Just to clean yourself up a bit. We'll put wet wipes on the weekly shopping
list."

Sherlock smiled at him gratefully and gave him a lingering kiss.

"Hurry back, alright?" He said and John agreed that he absolutely would.

"You'll hardly know I'm gone. Next time, I want to drizzle honey all over that cock of yours before I
put it in my mouth. Then again, I imagine it's just as delicious unadorned." He tossed back easily
over his shoulder smiling at the gasp he heard behind him before shutting the door.

A quick shampoo, shower and brushing of his teeth and he was back in bed. Sherlock immediately
pressed his body against him like a koala. He was no doubt flush with oxytocin, the wonderful post-
orgasm bonding hormone that made you want to latch onto the person you loved and never let go.
He felt it too and held Sherlock in return just as fiercely.

Freed of worries about who they and what they mean to each other Sherlock always became either heavy blanket or clinging octopus after intimacy. He either choose to lie completely atop John, heavy and warm and glorious, or suction to him, pinning him in every way he's ever wanted to be pinned. Sherlock was so wonderfully inescapable in bed and John realized it was what he'd always wanted; to be completely possessed by Sherlock Holmes. To physically be at his mercy.

"Hey, you." John said.

"Hello, John." Came the groggy reply. "I see now."

"You see what?"

"Why people are so silly."

John chuckled. He always liked when Sherlock began things this way.

"Continue."

"I feel...an overwhelming amount of affection toward you right now. A torrent of emotion. It's similar to things tweaked and prodded when I'm high. Do you know what I mean?"

"Sort of...but the alcohol didn't do that for me. You know how they say it's a depressant but they mean in terms of the central nervous system? For some people, it's also an emotional depressant. It puts them in this really negative headspace. I was never a happy drunk or a relaxed drunk. Honestly, it always made me feel worse. But I kept chasing it. Daft, really. So, that's not how you felt?"

"On the contrary, it was blissful, this rush of endorphins and soothing happiness until everything just grew fuzzy and muted. That's what this is like, being with you except there's no fuzz and mute, everything gets louder, clearer, brighter.

John kissed the crown of his head affectionately as he spoke. Sherlock so young right now, it seemed. Just figuring out the things other people learned as teenagers. It was sweet. It was youthful and lovely and sweet.

"I think maybe I should be offended to your comparing me to an opiate but I'm not."

"I'm sorry. I lack the language and experience to couch this in nicer terms. I can only compare you to the fleeting feeling I've been chasing all my life. But you're not fleeting and I don't have to chase. It occurs to me now you mentioned earlier you'd spent your time chasing the way you felt with Duck. The both of us...always were running."

John wondered if his partner would be able to say all this with the bedroom lights on. He'd noticed Sherlock was freer more unguarded when he felt protected by the darkness. That was alright with John for now at least.

"No, Sherlock, you don't have to chase me." He soothed him. "And I like hearing you talk about everything being new like this."

A pause.

"But it isn't new." Sherlock said.

"What do you mean?"
"Well, obviously the orgasm is new, touching you is new. But I've felt this way ever since you first moved in. I always have. I hope I do the same for you." Sherlock said quietly. "This was the nicest evening I have ever had. Not just the touching and orgasm. This. This right here and now. Like what we had at The Location. Your body against my body. In one another’s arms. Simple. Complete. This."

"It's only our beginning. We have the rest of our lives to top tonight. And this, Sherlock, we'll always have this." He tightened his arms around him.

“I didn’t dare hope for more. I was ready to subsist my whole life on just this, John.” Sherlock said sleepily.

The lump in John's throat was so large he had a difficult time speaking around it. His lover had echoed his own thoughts perfectly.

"So was I, Sherlock. And I would have been happy to do so."

A few hours later as morning crept through the window, he awoke to feel Sherlock lightly kissing and biting at the ball of his shoulder.

He grinned broadly and stretched.

"Mmm, well good morning." He said, his voice still gravelly from sleep.

"Good morning, John." Sherlock said in his ear. John felt his hand slip under his t shirt, moving up to touch his chest, fingers tweaking nipples. They immediately hardened at the contact and John sighed happily at being so possessively and confidently caressed.

However, when Sherlock's hand began moving lower and then lower still, destination becoming obvious, he gently but firmly moved it away. Instead he brought his fingers up to his lips and began sucking them, slowly, deliberately one by one.

Sherlock's breathing instantly quickened and John smiled at the cause and effect.

"You woke up gasping for it didn't you, Sherlock?" John asked.

"Yes...I had the most erotic dreams." He admitted.

John turned in his arms and gave him a deep, good morning kiss.

They were both stubbly and their faces rubbed against one another with the most pleasant sounding friction. Morning light was creeping in, spilling across the blankets where they lay warm underneath.

"Can I suck your cock, Sherlock." He murmured against his lips.

"YesJohnyesyesyes." He replied so quickly that John had to chuckle.

"Ok." He grinned and let his hand slide down Sherlock's body, not stopping until he reached his groin. "Mmmm already so hard for me."

There was no hiding now as Sherlock's room actually got a decent amount of sunlight. John wanted to take advantage of the view but also didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable.
"Can I pull back the blankets and have you take off your pyjama bottoms?"

Sherlock looked unsure for only a moment before he nodded in reply. Elated, John pulled the blankets mostly away, stopping just at Sherlock's knees so that when he raised them his lower half was still a bit in shadow. Sherlock planted his feet against the mattress, raising up and using the leverage to remove the trousers. His cock sprang free, bobbing hard, delicious and John could just make out that it was darkened near the head with arousal.

It took all he had not to do a mad scramble toward the V of Sherlock's legs.

Sherlock gave himself a few tugs and a squeeze and John couldn't wait any longer. He moved away from his boyfriend's lips and started to kiss his way down his body, pausing to speak between each one.

"Now, I want you to tell me if there's something you don't like. Something I'm doing wrong. If you wanted it harder or softer or slower or faster. If it's a bit too much teeth. I've never done this before either so, please, tell me what you want."

"Ok." Sherlock agreed readily.

"And, now that we're in daylight may I make a deduction that I have long, long suspected?"

"If you like." Sherlock breathed.

"Well, considering how many delightful freckles you have...here and here...and here."  

"Mmmm...yes...?"

"And considering the fact that the hair on your head is actually a swirl of several different colours not all of them as dark as people think. And given the fact that your beard comes in kind of auburn..."

Sherlock groaned softly.

"And the fact that your chest hair comes in almost blond."

"God...John..." Sherlock said as he flicked his tongue over his nipples.

He kissed down his midsection, further and further until he reached his destination.

"Bloody hell, I was right. You are bafflingly a redhead...just not on your actual head for some reason. Why is that so fucking hot, you delicious ginge?"

"I'm not a ginger," He protested. "It's not that bright. It's more russet, to be honest, and...you...you think it's hot?"

"Oh yesss." John said kissing his inner thigh.

"I was always rather embarrassed by it."

"Well you were wrong...God, you and this glorious nest of dark, copper hair...I just want to bury my face in it."

"You're far more visceral than I ever thought you'd be."

It was visceral, his need for him for the entire experience, the feel of his pubic hair against his cheek as he'd kissed all around that glorious cock. The smell of his soap but underneath that the scent that
was him, the scent that was just Sherlock, all healthy and virile and musky pheromones.

Sherlock opened his legs wider and John settled himself between them, lying on his stomach, Sherlock's erection before him. As he did last night he pressed puckered lips to the head and sucked. Sherlock's eyes had been locked on him but now he shut them tight as he inhaled sharply through his nose.

"Do you want the honey?" Sherlock asked when he could finally speak.

"Not this time, you taste sweet enough. And one more thing. Don't warn me when you're about to come. Just do it. I want to taste you and swallow you. I'm not going to pull away. Ok?"

"Ok, ok." He agreed hastily.

"Good. Now are you settled comfortably?" He teased with unbridled affection. "Then let's begin."

The more he touched and held and tasted Sherlock the more memories of buried fantasies came back to him. He never would have acknowledged it at the time. Not ever. But his mind always moved faster than he could censor it. He was always racing to catch up and bury that imagery back in his subconscious. But every now and then over their years together it had leaked out. Usually before bed or in some half remembered dream, but sometimes during a case, during dinner, watching Sherlock's little frown of concentration as he worked. And John's brain would hit the ground running. Yes, he had thought more than once about sucking his cock. Lips and tongue to hard, hot flesh. It was always brief, just a flash, barely a whole image before he made it stop, but it was there.

And now he was here, where he'd denied himself that he wanted to be. And he didn't want to wait or hesitate anymore. Without further pause he took him into his mouth and Sherlock, who kept things relatively clean, swore like a longshoremen. An appreciative and complimentary longshoreman at that.

The glans, rounded and salty with precum felt good against his lips and tongue. He moved his head down further letting his boyfriend's cock glide against the smooth, wet, surface of his mouth. He tightened his suction as he pulled back before diving forward again.

This was easier than he'd imagined it being and Sherlock certainly, already sounded as though he were enjoying himself.

"Fuck...John...oh please, yes, John more of that, yes."

His partner's legs fell open wider, wanting to give John all the access he needed. With each pass John took him as deep as he could until finally he was just skirting the point-of-no-return gag reflex.

Sherlock was just slightly above average in terms of length and John was relieved to find he didn't have any trouble accommodating him.

"Please look at me while you do it. I want to see you. I want to watch myself sliding in and out of your mouth. I want..."

John groaned at being so commanded. Chatty Sherlock. Sexy Sherlock. Confident Sherlock, able to express his needs and wants, yes, absolutely fucking yes to all of that.

He obliged him, glancing up and slow blinking as he bobbed his head slowly on his cock. Sherlock's hand went to his cheek, just resting there softly and encouragingly. His other hand was mercilessly gripping the bedsheets in a tight fist.
He was close, every fibre in Sherlock's body was telegraphing it and despite the slight twinge in his jaw John was reluctant to have it all end.

Still though, the prospect of seeing Sherlock come again was worth it.

He redoubled his efforts and Sherlock's hips raised off the bed seeking more of his mouth. More contact, more pressure, more focus, more of everything, begging pleading with his body and that beautiful mouth with those cupid's bow lips, keening and crying out and whimpering and begging and begging and begging until he came in John's mouth, thick and hot.

Just once, just to see if he was able, he took him in as far as he could while Sherlock was in the midst of orgasm but the effort made his eyes water as he toyed with the previously avoided gagging danger zone. Still, the reaction from Sherlock, the sustained and groaned "Ahh-ahhh!" made him decide it might not be a bad idea to work on the skill.

He was reluctant to pull away but as Sherlock softened in his mouth he also began calling for him.

"Sweetheart, please. Come here, John."

"Sweetheart" was the last thing he'd ever thought Sherlock would settle on.

He couldn't possibly like it more.

John crawled up his body bringing the blankets with him, covering them both from the chilled air. Sherlock kissed him, a kiss full of need and passion and John gave into it, his body relaxing. He felt wonderful and surprisingly didn't exactly miss not having a sort of release himself. Pleasing Sherlock brought it's own heady pleasure.

"I love you, John."

"I love you too." He said tugging the younger man against his body. "We'll have to get up soon but I imagine we can spare 20 minutes, maybe even half an hour to just lie in a bit like this and doze. What do you say?"

But Sherlock was already nearly asleep again and simply replied with a soft "Hmm?"

John chuckled and quickly set the alarm on his phone for 30 minutes before he closed his eyes as well.

The rest of the day was almost guaranteed to have a manic pace but for now, as Sherlock showered John leisurely started on breakfast. Mrs. Hudson had come round for a visit and as he beat a few eggs in a bowl they chatted about their upcoming day.

He sensed a change in the mood of the room when after a moment she glanced toward the closed bathroom door and suddenly went quiet.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"John, I want to apologize for something." Mrs. Hudson said, a look of chagrin on her face.

"What's that?" John asked, utterly confused as to what it might be.

"All the times I assumed you were gay and that you and Sherlock were together."

He smiled, surprised.
"Well, that's hardly something you need to apologize for as that's not insulting."

"Oh no, I agree, I'm not apologizing for that. As though it were an accusation. I'm apologizing for not believing you or hearing you when you said it."

"Hardly a great problem, Mrs. Hudson, but if it means so much to you then apology accepted. Tea?" He asked her after putting his arm around her and giving her an affection hug.

"Please, dear."

He filled her mug and she seated herself at the table as he got to work on breakfast.

"If you don't mind my asking, what caused the sudden change of heart."

"Well, I realized... after last night and this morning. If you and he had been together and if that's as loud as Sherlock gets in the bedroom I certainly would have heard it in all these years."

A/N: I tell ya, you guys who knew that it was sad wanking going on when Sherlock disappeared to the bathroom are good! I can’t slip anything past you!
Chapter 60

Forty-Six Days In

127 Days Clean

May 10th, 2016

Once the latest Page 3 girl got caught saying that awful, racist thing about the housemate on Big Brother with the haircut and the three-legged dog, John Watson became relative old news for the paparazzi. And he was eternally grateful. He'd never been that interesting to begin with and he was glad that they finally realized it.

Business had picked back up again too. There had only been a few days gone by where someone hadn't pressed heavily, nervously on the buzzer for Baker Street.

They were busy and busy was occupying 90% of his thoughts during the day and the other 10% was Sherlock. Once the workday was done, whenever that happened to be, everything switched and it was all Sherlock. There was no time to think about the nagging, scratching, craving in the back of his mind that demanded a drink. It was still there. It was relentless and like a badly behaved child in church, it would often choose to scream at the worst possible moments. But so far, his voice was firmer, louder. But...though he didn't like to admit it, it was less in control. To continue the analogy, he was not the calm and cool collected parent, quieting the noisy child. He was stressed, strained and gradually losing his patience.

But for now, he still had a grip on it, a grip he hoped to maintain.

As for Sherlock, he was currently in a hickey stage. He certainly didn't mind receiving them but he was probably most eager to give them. As a result John's body was peppered with love bites most of which were easily concealed by clothes. There was occasionally one or two on his neck that required he borrow one of his partner's many scarves. And hough he pretended to be irritated, he actually found it funny.

When John had first told him that Mrs. Hudson could hear them and hear them very well he'd blanched. It had taken quite a lot of coaxing and soothing, gentle teasing to get the normal colour to come back to his face.

"Look, if it bothers you so much we can go up to my bedroom, sorry, my old bedroom for awhile. You know, when we're in the mood. It doesn't put me out in the least."

Sherlock had appeared to consider it for a few seconds before shaking his head.

"No. That's impractical in the long run. We shouldn't have to hole ourselves away to have sex. We can be vocal but respectful, I suppose. It's a subtle balancing act that will take time but I believe we can manage it."

"Me too." John said. They'd been standing in the kitchen at the time and John had his hands on his boyfriend arse. Enjoying the firm, roundness beneath his palms he gave Sherlock an appreciative squeeze which the younger man was just on the edge of getting accustomed to.

"Speaking of the bedroom," He'd began.

"Yes?" John had asked with a smile.
"You know...I mean, it would be so much more convenient for you to move your clothes and such into our bedroom. You have to dash up the stairs every day for clothes and underwear and socks."

"Oh." John had said and nodded before continuing on. "That's not where I thought you were going with this but, yeah, of course. I guess I'm just being lazy, you know? I'll get to it."

He was still getting accustomed to this Sherlock. All this time, all these years he'd carelessly laboured under the idea that his best friend's emotional depths were shallow at worst and un plumbed at best. Sherlock was reserved, not cold, but...distant. But now he looked on their past together with different, more discerning eyes. One event that stood out in particular for so many different reasons was the incident in the train car. Sherlock, tear streaked, claiming to be unable to defuse the bomb, begging for forgiveness, receiving it, confessing he'd stopped the timer long ago and then laughing heartily.

Oh, your face! Your face! I totally had you. Oh, those things you said – such sweet things! I-I never knew you cared!

Teasing. Mocking. Sherlock the overgrown child. Sherlock the emotional cripple. Sherlock the manipulator.

Of course, he'd said he'd forgiven him. He loved the prick, even if he was, well...a prick. But, as they'd discussed in therapy, he'd still harbored bitterness from that day and many of the days before it.

But now John realized he'd been so wrong. What he thought was Sherlock delighting in playing him for a fool was really a poor performance on his best mate's part. Trying desperately and simultaneously to both shield and reveal his true feelings.

Oh.

Your face.

Your face.

I totally had you.

Oh. Those things you said.

Such sweet things.

I...I never knew you cared.

Sherlock revealing himself in the only way he knew how; by hiding.

Sherlock asking for forgiveness and the subsequent look of surprise on his face when it was bestowed, clearly telegraphing he didn't expect it.

John had known him so well.

John hadn't known him at all.

They weren't demonstrative in public. They rarely touched unless it was to yank the other one out of danger or hold them back from something. This was not a conscious thing. It was simply the way they worked. They way they always worked. John had been afraid that becoming partners would, in essence, set fire to the friendship. As if friendship was a level below and lovers was a promotion as
he'd teased him about the first night they'd been back home. But the friendship remained, strong, steady, solid. John Watson and Sherlock Holmes were best friends. John Watson and Sherlock Holmes were also romantic partners. These were two facts that didn't conflict or override one another.

And while they were friends in the flat as much as they were outside, once the door was closed and the clients sent away and Mrs. Hudson was blissing out on her herbals soothers unlikely to visit them again they rarely spent a moment without touching. Sherlock brushing past John in the kitchen, touching his arm, his lower back, his cheek, his arse. John coming behind Sherlock's chair to peer over him at his phone or laptop, squeezing his shoulder, pressing their cheeks close for a better view, resting his hand on his chest.

They were undeniably a touch clingy with one another even though they'd never admit it and never call the other one on it. John still felt rather sensitive of his feelings being so raw and obvious, at least on certain days. And he knew Sherlock did as well. That didn't stop them from lovingly shadowing the other like puppies. For instance, John liked the solitude of a hot, solitary shower, he always had, but lately, he'd found himself missing Sherlock's company even for that short time.

One day he'd invited him to come along.

"No, thank you, John."

"You don't have to get in." John insisted. Sherlock was still, for reasons John wasn't going to nag or harp on, body shy. He'd seen enough parts of him naked to put together what was likely an impressive full picture. But he'd never seen all of those parts together. Not yet. John, on the other hand, had no qualms about being nude in front of his partner.

"Just...come talk to me. Put the lid down on the loo, have a seat and just talk to me."

Sherlock had smiled at the idea and John was surprised and pleased that he was game.

And that was how that tradition started. Sherlock reclining, back against the wall, legs sometimes propped up against the sink. John, standing in the iron bathtub, talking a bit louder over the rush of the shower spray, eyes shut against the assault of shampoo.

Sherlock caught him up on the latest trash telly he'd been viewing. John mentioned a book or two he'd been interested in getting from Amazon, a few thrillers, and mysteries.

"I could get two copies. We could read it together if you like. Our own little book club."

It was so domestic John almost cringed as he waited for a reply.

"No." One copy will do. I prefer when you read to me."

What a lovely no it turned out to be. John would get out of the shower, unabashedly naked and smile as he felt Sherlock's eyes run over him. He'd often delay getting a towel just to give him a better look. It wasn't a tease just to tease as he was just as likely to put the towel on the floor, sink down upon it on his knees, unzip his lover's trousers and suck him until he was pleading for release in the echo-y bathroom.

It didn't happen all the time. There wasn't an expectation or demand. And that was nice.

That said, he had become quite enamored of Sherlock's cock. Any initial shyness was gone and he found himself eager to indulge and indulge him whenever the mood struck. The most recent
time was just two night prior. John had been sitting in his chair and his boyfriend was in his own
talking animatedly to his brother on the phone. He was clearly stressed, agitated, irritated and John
gave him a lazy smile. After removing his shoes he raised up in the chair to tug it slightly forward.
Sherlock watched with interest and only paused his argument with his brother to mouth "What are
you doing?"

But John simply continued smiling as he sat back down and extended his leg. Slowly he began to
part Sherlock's knees with his foot, a move the other man allowed still not quite sure where this was
going. Though he did appear to be getting the idea.

John had then placed his foot firmly but gently against Sherlock's crotch and stifled a laugh as his
eyes had gone wide.
"John!" He mouthed but John's only response was to establish a rhythm, stroking, grinding, pressure.
It didn't take longer than a few moments for him to feel Sherlock stiffen under the ball of his foot.

"Wha-what was that, Mycroft? Yes, of course, I'm listening. It's a baa-bad connection. No. No.
Sheep? Yes, funny. I...I...what?"

He was breathing harder now and John was keeping unrepentant eye contact as Sherlock stumbled
through his phone conversation all the while starting to push back against the foot.
"Mycroft...Mycroft, I have to go, Something's come up. I'll ring you later...maybe. Good evening."
Sherlock hung up the phone and let out an especially filthy groan.

"You know I wanted to do this on my stag night. Nearly did. You just sitting there all beautiful and
willing. I saw you open your legs for me. You felt me put my hand on your knee."

"You remember that?" Sherlock asked gripping the armrests of his chair.

"Mnmhmhm I also remember putting my feet on your chair but not daring to be as forward as I'm
being now."

"John...John this feels so good." Sherlock wrapped a palm around his boyfriend's foot, guiding it
where he wanted it to go all while rutting against it."

Just as he was getting too accustomed and too close John pulled his foot away.

"Unbutton and unzip your trousers for me and take your cock out. Stroke yourself, right there."

"Here?" He asked with a touch of dismay that John found both endearing and highly erotic.

"Right here, posh boy. Right in the open. I want you to sit in your £1300 Le Corbusier chair and
take your hard cock out of your Calvin Klein pants, out of your £200 Spencer Hart Savile Row
trousers and stroke it for me. And I want you to worry that I'm going to make you come so hard you
spurt all over your £500 Dolce & Gabbana shirt. I want you scandalized."

For just a moment Sherlock paused.

"John, I am impressed. You managed to come within £50 of being absolutely correct. Tell me-"

"Did my guessing the price of your clothes turn you on? Because if not, I think we're losing the
narrative thread here."

"Deductions, brains, clarity, observation always turns me on. Plus, as you said, I like to be pretty."
Sherlock replied quirking his lips.

John laughed and shook his head.

By God he loved this man.

"Be a good boy and do as I said. I can appraise your wardrobe later if that's what gets you going."

Sherlock obliged and John was pleased to watch him make a bit of a show out of unzipping his trousers and slipping his hand inside.

After a moment he was groaning softly as he stroked his erection.

"Now take it out for me. Let me see it."

"You should...why don't you try to do it as well?" He asked as he removed his cock from his trousers.

"No, sweetheart, this is just for you." John replied. "Plus, I just enjoy watching you. You have the most expressive face, Sherlock. You're so gorgeous and open and beautiful. No, don't stop now. Keep going, darling."

Sherlock slumped farther down in the chair, opening his legs wider. John watched as he loosened his grip, clearly wanting to take his time. There were no more clandestine trip to the loo for sad wanks. When he masturbated he did it without apology and sometimes he requested John's voice in his ear as he did so. He had an equal affinity for both the naughty and the nice. He loved when John talked dirty to him, when he extolled the virtues of his hard cock, when he spoke blatantly about how he wanted to fuck him and be fucked by him. But he was just as excited when his boyfriend spoke tenderly, sweetly, gently about how beautiful he was, how beautiful they were together and how he'd always, always wanted this, even when he didn't know how to express it. He also enjoyed a combination of both, the commands, the demands but always concluded with the sweetest of 'Sweetheart's'.

He liked learning what Sherlock liked and he liked watching excitement bloom in his eyes as he had what could only be termed a sexual awakening. It was lovely and brilliant and John felt lucky to be the sole witness.

"Cup your balls, Sherlock. Give them some attention." He commanded and his boyfriend immediately did as he was told. Slipping his other hand into his pants to massage his bollocks.

The groans coming from his lover's mouth were loud and deliciously sinful. But how could he not be sinful with that resonant voice, those beautiful lips, that pale, gorgeous body, that slim frame, those articulated fingers working with an even grace John had thought was reserved only for his violin.

"John..." He whispered and though it wasn't a question John decided to tease him a little.

"Yes, Sherlock? Do you need something, darling? Is there something I can do for you?"

"Please, please..."

"Please what? Please suck you?"

Sherlock flashed bright eyes at him as his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

"Yes." he said drawing out the 's'.
Taking his time John rose from his seat and walked over to his partner enjoying the wide-eyed, desperate look he was greeted with.

Bending over he kissed Sherlock, lustily, putting a hand to the back of his head and giving his curls a gentle tug. He'd learned that Sherlock liked the tug. Nothing rougher than that or the odd teasing spank to his firm arse as he passed him in the kitchen. But it was just enough to thrill them both.

Pulling away before either was satisfied John sank to his knees. He opened Sherlock's legs wider and without preamble took him in his mouth.

His boyfriend let out a broken cry and slapped the arm of the chair for emphasis.

"Fuck!" Came the shout as John felt Sherlock's arse rise off of his seat. In an effort to calm him John settled his palms on his boyfriend's hips to keep him in place. This prompted the other man to whimper with obvious frustration which only made John grin around the cock currently in his mouth. He bobbed his head slowly up and down on Sherlock, loving the way he twitched and pulsed against his tongue and lips. A hand found its way to the back of his hair providing gentle pressure unable to help pushing his head just a touch lower.

Raising up slightly John made eye contact as he ran his tongue messily, wetly over Sherlock's tip, lavishing the slit before taking the glans in his mouth again and curling his tongue around the corona. Knowing how sensitive the frenulum was he backed off. Sherlock whined but quieted as John began to place soft kisses on the elastic band of tissue. It only needed the lightest of touches to produce results. A fact that proved itself to be true in theory as well as practice as on the third kiss Sherlock came with a gasping whimper. Ejaculate leaked from the tip of his cock cascading down to cover John's lips. He groaned before rising up and taking Sherlock in his mouth once again coaxing him through his spasms. When he went still, breathing heavily and having sunk so deeply in the chair he might as well have been part of it John pulled away with a smile. He'd licked him clean and with care he tucked Sherlock back in his pants and trousers and zipped him up.

"I really like the taste of you, Sherlock. And you look absolutely wrecked." He said admiringly.

"You wrecked me." He said and then lowered his voice as if the next words he said were a secret. "I've never come alone the way I come with you."

John allowed Sherlock to pull him up and then forward until he was straddling him on the chair, knees on either side of Sherlock's thighs.

Christ, but he hoped soon the day was coming when he'd get to ride him in this chair, just like this. Bouncing on that hard cock of his until-

"Is there anything I can do to help you, John?" He asked before the latter tugged him in for a kiss. John didn't want to discuss his deficiencies, what he couldn't do at the moment or what he wanted to do in the future. He hated that every moment had to be tainted with what looked like his inability to participate. He wasn't cross with Sherlock, not at all. But still, he felt he was participating. He was happy and he really wanted his partner to worry a great deal less.

"You're doing everything perfectly, Sherlock. I'll get there. But for now, why don't we get up from here. You shower. And when you come to bed I'll read from our book until you fall asleep. Ok?"

"Ok." Came the reply, happy, content and sated.

Speaking of books...Not willing to just coast on instinct, though it had served him well so far, he'd been logging onto Amazon to begin researching guides to gay sex. There were a few, some campy
lifestyle guides that didn't interest, some more serious like marriage and raising children together. The latter scared him. It seemed like too much, too soon, too easy of a way to be disappointed. He clicked off those quickly, but not before adding them to his cart to "Save For Later". But outnumbering any other subsection of this theme were the self-help books. It seemed he couldn't look up something as innocent as 'how to please your male lover' without coming across texts dealing with addiction. "Love and Addiction". "The Gay Man's Guide To Sexual Health and Recovery". "Chasing The Next High". "Addiction And The Gay Man". "Drug Abuse and The Drug Of Love". Queer Sexuality And The Cycle Of Abuse.

Without intending to he got lost down the rabbit hole of these books. Some of them sounded like nonsense but some...some hit a little too close to home. Perhaps he should have found it comforting but he didn't. These, after all, weren't books written by fire and brimstone types. These were written by advocates, health professionals, people with real knowledge and experience, people in the community. It should have made him feel better. But it didn't.

Why were there so many? Why were these two things so intertwined? He was willing to wager that if he looked up sex instructional for heterosexuals it wouldn't yield quite so many sad sack results. He hated the idea that his addiction might be wrapped up in his sexuality. Something about it all made it sound like the reason you're gay, or in his case bi, is because there's something wrong with you. And the reason there's something wrong with you is because you're gay. It was a snap judgment and a snap summary and though a part of him knew it was wrong he couldn't shake the implication. Correlation did not imply causation. There was nothing tainted about the way he felt for Sherlock or the way he'd felt for Duck before him. The alcohol, the abuse, the anger, these were all separate and he was going to work on them separately. These were lines he didn't want muddied and wires he didn't want crossed.

He went in search of books on anger management next...but not before adding a few of the ones that rubbed him the wrong way to his cart as well.

There was also the pile of books Hanah had given him when he'd left rehab. A pile he hadn't touched though he didn't know why. He hadn't told her that and she hadn't asked. But there wasn't even a part of him that doubted she knew.

"How have you been sleeping?" Hanah asked. She was somewhere new now and he could just make out rolling green hills behind her. It looked peaceful.

"Well enough." He nodded with a smile.

But when he thought about it, this wasn't entirely true. That easy way he'd had in the beginning of slipping into bed, into Sherlock's arms and subsequently into dreams wasn't so easy anymore. He was still getting some hours in but not as many as before.

"You look a little tired, John. And that's just what I can see through the camera. Are you eating properly?"

"I really am going to make more of an effort when it comes to that." He said honestly. It was true. The shopping list had been full of actual food. Fruits and vegetables and he'd discovered a clean kitchen made him slightly more inclined to cook. But it wasn't consistent. He wasn't consistent. For the moment they were sidestepping old habits, leaping over them when need be. He didn't like to think about what would happen when they'd be too big to vault over.

"What about dreams, nightmares?"

"All good on that front. I sleep better next to him and we've got a good routine down."
"Good, at this stage routine is good. And how are the two of you getting along in general?"

"Very well. It's like we picked back up where we left off. And, I don't even mean before Mary died. I mean before he ever left..."

"Ok, and what about intimacy?"

"Well..." he started and then paused. It was easier to talk about what they weren't doing than what they had done so far. "I'm still having issues in that area but we're working through it."

"Working through it?"

"Yeah...um...alright, so we've had oral and sort of...progressed from there."

"Would you be more comfortable discussing this is Sherlock was here too? I'm not opposed to having him come to some of our sessions."

"No, no I'm just not ever going to be comfortable talking about copping off with my boyfriend."

"Embarrassment aside, it's going to be vital to discuss these things at some point. But we don't have to tackle it today. Tell me how you're coping with alcohol."

"I'm staying away from it. I mean...God, this is going to sound so cliche but I don't think I realized how it's just bloody everywhere. Everyone's flat, every restaurant, every other place I pass is a pub or an off license, every shop has a huge, expansive, glittering booze aisle."

John let out a ragged breath. He hadn't quite realized how much he'd avoided talking about this until he started talking about it.

"How do you feel about it?"

"I want it. I want to go to Tesco, sit myself down in the middle of an aisle and dive into a bottle, any bottle. I want to taste it again, I want it on my tongue, I want..." He stopped feeling disturbed at what he was saying. "Jesus, I sound so...pathetic."

"That's absolutely normal. That should be the impression you get when you speak in the AA meetings."

He didn't so much answer as give a slight shrug.

"How are the meetings going?"

He'd been zigzagging all over town, always at a new one, it seemed. Even when it was a location he'd visited before he chose a different day or time. Always trying to settle in and feeling absurdly out of place. He didn't know why. He couldn't put his finger on why. Maybe it was because as much as he feared truly getting into the meat of their issues, his issue, he was frustrated that nothing real ever seemed to happen. Some of them appeared to be more for socializing, some seemed to be just for free coffee and biscuits, some were so closed off, so suspicious of newcomers he sat like a statue in his seat waiting for it to end. And some of them, well some were very understanding, very kind, very sympathetic, very, very willing to listen. And perhaps upon leaving he felt just a tad better, but it didn't last. It was ephemeral. They weren't seeking or asking for solutions. They were just there. And inevitably on the ride home, he would realize while there was succor to be gained from hugs and pats on the back and unaccusing cow eyed stares, it wasn't what he wanted. He didn't want to just be there. He wanted a solution, guidance, support, help.
He didn't know exactly how to put that into words for Hanah. And he was starting to think that what he did want he wasn't going to be able to find. In light of that, the truth was he'd half heartedly given up. He still attended meetings in person every now and then, but for the time being, he believed he'd found a better solution.

"Alright, John, as you haven't answered, I'm going to play a hunch here, go with me."

"Ok."

"Sherlock made you a very diverse list of available AA meetings, correct?"

"Yeah."

"And you've been to likely every meeting on that list, except one."

Damn.

"Yes, that's true." He said with a sigh.

"And that remaining meeting is the LGBT one, correct."

"Yes." He said shifting his position.

"Are you still going to the other ones?"

"Yes, and no."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I found some online and a few by phone."

"John, those are meant to be supplementary. You are not ill, you are not bedridden, you are not agoraphobic...yet, you are chronically socially anxious. You're not on a business trip, far from home in a city without meetings you can attend. You should be meetings with others in person."

"It's different from the Location." He replied careful, not to sound like he was whinging. Even though he knew he was whinging at least a bit.

"Yes, it's going to be." She insisted.

"No, you don't understand I feel...discomfort. No, that's not the word. I feel unwelcome. The last two I went to felt downright hostile. The others...they just don't feel like they're for me."

Hanah took a deep breath and released it.

"Ok, I hear you, I'm listening and I want you to feel comfortable. I need you to feel comfortable. But I also need you to know that this is normal. People can attend dozens of AA groups until they hit what they feel is their right one. The one for them, the one that helps them want to stick with it. If you had been successful right out of the box I would have called you the luckiest man alive. As it is, you're just average, like everybody else. So, why not try the one meeting you haven't?"

He didn't know why except he just didn't want to. He'd scanned over it, taken cabs past it, decided to go and then at the last minute changed his mind. In the interim, it had now become this looming thing, this mountain that seemed far larger to attempt to climb now than it had at the start.

"For God sakes I just accepted the identity of being an alcoholic do I have to-..." He trailed off, not at
all liking where he was going with this.

"Accept the identity of being someone who's not straight? Accept the identity of someone who is bisexual? Yes, you do. Yes to all of it. I know, this is a crash course. And it's unfair. But this holding pattern you've been existing in, in so many different ways has been negatively affecting your life for decades."

He drew the laptop closer and made both the volume of his computer and his own voice lower.

"Yes, I guess so, yes."

"John, there are a lot of different factors that make up who you are and your identity. This is one of them. Believe it or not, it wasn't just about coming out or even starting a relationship with Sherlock. I'm not saying that when you go shopping you have to have it in your mind, "I am a bisexual man shopping for eggs and butter." Of course not. However, you also cannot compartmentalize this down so small that it only exists in the space between you and your partner."

"How does it have anything to do with anyone or anything else besides Sherlock and I, and our families of course?"

"For a private individual, it might not. But you're in the public eye and likely to remain there. Correct me if I'm wrong but, in a perfect world, you're prepared to settle down with Sherlock."

"Yeah, absolutely." He said without hesitation.

"Legal marriage?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I mean, I don't know if- ...I don't think Sherlock is the marrying kind."

"You also didn't think Sherlock was the romantic type or the relationship type, you've been wrong before. But you're right, we are getting ahead of ourselves especially given the fact that you're still wearing your wedding ring. But we'll get to that later."

He looked down at his hand and ran his thumb over the underside of the ring.

"But, continuing on, in a perfect world you'll be raising a child together."

"There's a lot of "if's" that have to be tackled before something like that."

"I said in a perfect world, John."

"Ok, yes, in a perfect world, yes, that's true."

"You'll also be continuing your consulting detective work, you may seek out other employment. All of these situations are going to entail interacting with people who will possibly be familiar with your sexuality. Like it or not, your life and the way you've chosen to lead it will be a political statement."

"I don't like it. I don't like it at all. I'm not a joiner or a flag-waver. I just want to live my life with my boyfriend, peacefully, quietly. I don't want to be anyone's spokesman or symbol or token."

"Openly, unapologetically loving a man is still, even in 2016, a bold and radical statement. And making inroads into a community of which you are now a part might be a good way to help you prepare."

"I'm not a homophobe." He insisted and it sounded knee-jerk and defensive even to him. He closed
his eyes and rubbed at his temples.

"I never said you were."

'I don't expect to walk in there and have everyone behaving like bloody John bloody Inman. I'm not expecting a Panto for Christ's sake. I know people are people, I know that, I do. I just..."

"You think they all have their feet firmly established in a world you don't. You think you'll stand out like a sore thumb the way you think you've stood out in every other meeting. You're worried this might be your last chance because if you've gone to so many and still don't feel like you've found one that's right, what if you never do? You feel in some ways that you're still in the closet and they'll smell it on you. You're worried you'll say something offensive. You're worried that you're not straight enough for the straights and not queer enough for the queers. You're not even remotely comfortable with the term queer. You're worried that upon closer inspection maybe you are homophobic. Perhaps, like your father was. It's got you to thinking that maybe all these years you did have a problem, even a slight one with your sister because she's a lesbian. You're worried that your mind has drawn an uncomfortable delineation between what you do and how you feel about Sherlock and what others do with their partners. You're worried you've set up an us vs. them before you've even begun. I'm not trying to put ideas into your head, John. But, since were physically apart, since we don't see each other every day as we used to I need to make sure that we still trust one another and that when I look you in the eye and say I believe you, I hear you and I understand that you believe me in return. So, am I right? Is there anything I've gotten wrong, anything you need to correct."

"You couldn't be more spot on than if you were in my head." He said with a helpless gesture. She still knew how to slice and dice him, open him up, peer inside and get started on clearing out all the muck. It hurt, it was frightening and embarrassing but he needed it and he needed her. Because, oh, how the bullshit did back up, clogging him like a stopped up drain when he let it.

"Anything I missed?"

"What if they don't like me? None of the people in the other groups have. Fuck, I sound like a kid in primary school."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to be liked. That's one of the many things society has gotten wrong. There's only something wrong about twisting yourself into knots trying to be someone you're not. John, AA, like anything else can be extremely clique-y and closed off and hostile to outsiders. It's just the way it is. It's unfair, I know, but it is unfortunately unavoidable human nature. So, if that's what you think you were feeling when you went there you were more than likely right. Ok, how are you and Sherlock?"

John gave an imperceptible sigh of relief. Glad to be done with the previous topic.

"Good, actually. We're great. We're...affectionate, we're in sync. He's so...he's willing to talk to me."

"And you?"

"I mean, I feel wonderful about us."

"No, I mean are you willing to talk. Are you talking to him?"

"Well, yes, we're talking." He said with a frown. "I think I mentioned it to you before, my sister came round for lunch, with Rosie and she brought up our dad. I was rather wary at first but she admitted, basically, that I wasn't making up our childhood. I know you said that it was best to leave
her with her own version of the truth. I was really content to do that. It's her life, her journey, I get that. But she brought it up and she even brought out some old journals and she read from them and we...we had a moment. You know? It was good. It mattered. I think, with some time, we might be able to, if not repair our old relationship, then start a new one."

"That's wonderful, John and I'm very happy for you. Please don't think what I'm about to say next at means that I don't believe that was an important and relevant step."

He stiffened as he waited for what she was going to say.

"But you didn't answer my question. Instead, you gave me an example of your sister talking. That was Harry communicating with you, with Sherlock. How have you been opening up to your partner? What have you divulged to him that goes beyond what he knew in rehab."

And like that he was frozen as he realized he didn't have an answer.

The silence stretched on for a bit before she ended it.

"Here's where I circle back round to the AA meetings and I know by the little relieved loosening of your posture earlier you thought we were done and you were glad to be done. But we're not. I realize that being open is difficult for you, especially when you don't trust people. I also realize that it takes time to build trust. While I encourage you to find a group where you feel safe I need you to know, no group will feel perfect. I also want to put it out there that there's a possibility that what's chafing at you is a reluctance to share; your story, your rock bottom, your recovery process. No one wants to be included in that more than Sherlock. I didn't have many occasions to speak with him one-on-one but when I did he expressed nothing but supportive enthusiasm. He wants to be there for you. He wants to listen."

"I used to be this private person. There are days when I truly miss it." He said with a derisive little laugh. "Ok, I'll...talk to him. I will."

"Fantastic. You celebrated 4 months clean not too long ago. We had a session that day and I waited for you to mention it but you didn't."

Shit. He'd had no idea.

"I...I'm inclined to lie but I don't think it would be productive and I think you'd see through me anyway. Yeah, I forgot."

"That's what I thought. John, I want you to start journaling again."

"You think that might be of help?" He asked earnestly.

"I do. When I first asked you to start you were very resistant to the idea but as time went on you were mentioning it more and more. I think it helps keep your thoughts organized and it's a good way to keep track of your progression."

"Or lack thereof." He supplied.

"You take to writing. I'm not sure if you're aware. That why I gave you that book. You know, one amid the stack of books I gave you as you left The Location. The stack you haven't touched." She said with a smile.

"I'm sorry, you're right."
"It's alright. I'd rather have you see it out when you need it then blunder upon it when you don't and ultimately dismiss it. I think books come to us in our own time." Are you blogging again?"

"Yes, yes, and glad to be doing it. I relaunched my page and I've been keeping track of every case we've had so far. Sherlock says I'm just as sacchrine and prone to exaggeration as ever so I know I'm on the right track."

"I'm glad to hear it. I'd like to talk a little more about that in the future. Once you're more settled. Anything else you wanted to ask or discuss?"

"I've got lunch scheduled with a mate of mine named Mike. He's a doctor, I may have mentioned him before. He's going to try and get me some work."

"That's what you want?"

"Want doesn't really factor into it. I need to contribute things are getting rather lean."

"Have you made a move to put the house up for sale?"

"Umm...no, not yet. There are other things to consider."

Placated for the moment or at least appearing to be Hanah let it drop.

"Alright, anything else you want to discuss?"

"Just one thing, I guess. This meeting, I'm worried I'll have no idea what to say."

"You'll say, Hi, I'm John. I'm an alcoholic and I'm glad to be here today."

"You make it sound so easy."

"That's because that particular part of it is."

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Authors Note: Miss me? Sorry for the unusual delay. I had one of those really annoying rah-rah-team-building-isn't-this-fun?!?!? company retreats last week which sucked all the energy, creativity and joy right out of me. But, I'm back, I've got a few plans and I'm starting on the next chapter right now. :) In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this one.
"You sure you don't want something more substantial? My treat?" Mike asked with a grin.

John shook his head and winced.

It was his own fault. This had been going on since last year and he'd done absolutely nothing about it. There were days where his toothache was a manageable twinge, a pain that made itself known every now and then especially when prodded by something hard or cold. But mostly, undisturbed, it kept to itself. But other days, days like today, it was hysterical. Screaming at every little thing, every inconvenience. The best he could manage today at lunch with Mike was soup and his mouth was even treating that like he'd opted for a bowl of gravel and glass.

"I can pay my own way and no, I'm fine, Mike, truly. I've just got a thing going on here." He said gesturing vaguely to his mouth. They were finally having the lunch that John had been putting off for reasons he couldn't pinpoint. Now that he was here though he was actually having a nice time when he wasn't forced to chew. He'd always liked Mike and his gregarious company. He didn't like that he'd forgotten that or rather allowed himself to forget it. In any case, they'd been talking easily now in the restaurant for a good half hour and John was nothing but relaxed and comfortable.

"Ok, fair enough. So, I think I have something for you. It's through a friend of a friend. Locum work but it may become permanent."

"Sounds absolutely great." He said but a part of him cringed. When he first accepted locum work, long ago, he was only a few months into knowing Sherlock. He'd thought he could handle both; the real world and Sherlock's world. But it really hadn't turned out that way. Sarah was flexible, and not just in that one way he'd enjoyed. She'd gotten, as best she could, what he did with Sherlock, and what he expected, plus she was keen on him so she truly gave him a ridiculous amount of leeway. He wasn't daft enough to expect that again.

"They're four doctors looking for a GP to join a multidisciplinary practice. Beautiful surgery, quite modern, looking to serve the underserved of the city, young, multicultural, diverse. Great set-up, great blokes, there's even a sign on bonus. I put in a good word for you so with your CV and a great interview I think you're in."

Good old Mike, always coming through especially when he was most undeserving.

"I don't know how to thank you. I don't think anyone would even look at me on my own."

"I'm happy to help, John." He said with a wave of his hand before turning serious. "There is one thing."

"Yeah?"

"Well, obviously, you've made a bit of press. Now, it shouldn't matter. It might not matter at all but I
was thinking it wouldn't be such a bad idea to get a full screening, physical, maybe even mental and certainly a panel workup. Look, they won't ask, they're legally not allowed to ask but if they seem hesitant you can hit them with reams of paper detailing your clean bill of health."

"Emphasis on clean." John said glumly. He knew this could and likely would be a factor but it didn't make it any less shameful. "I think you're right. It would be good to have in my arsenal. So, when would my interview be?"

"I can set it up as soon as you're ready. You have a doctor? I'd check you out myself if you like but they'd probably rather it was a stranger."

John laughed.

"I love you, Mike, but I'd rather it was a stranger as well. Never much gone in for a touch that personal coming from a friend."

"I feel the same, honestly. Alright, well, I'll write down a few names and numbers, you get an appointment and get back to me."

"I'm on it the second I leave here."

"Excellent. So...how have you been?"

It seemed like ages ago but he and Mike used to meet, almost exclusively, at any number of local pubs. They spend time getting just this side of absolutely shit-faced and cab themselves home. Come to think of it that was how they'd spent a good deal of their early relationship as well. Things were different now. Jesus, did they know each other outside of getting wasted?

John was so happy suddenly that he and Sherlock had never made a habit of getting trashed.

"Fine, really good actually." He said glancing up from his untouched soup. "Mike, what is your life?"

Mike blinked and then grinned at him.

"What are you on about?"

"Your life? Like day-to-day. Tell me about you. I feel like maybe I don't know and I think that's wrong. I want to be a decent friend. So, tell me."

And with a pleased look, Mike launched into a story. He was teaching still. He loved teaching. Loved the students and their questions, their ideas. "We're in good hands, John." He said. "Those coming up behind us, nipping at our heels, they have the right ideas."

Mike had a steady girlfriend but he was not so keen on marriage. Lucky for him, neither was his girl. Mike had a house that he was close to paying off. Mike had never wanted kids and didn't plan on having any. Mike had a brother whose cancer was in remission. Mike had a mother who had trouble getting around sometimes. Mike had lost 1 1/2 stone.

All of this sounded familiar but in a foggy, hazy sort of way. He'd heard it but he hadn't been paying attention, not like he should have done.

In all these years he wasn't sure if he'd ever asked Mike just how he knew Sherlock. This was the perfect time to clear that up.
"You both seem like an unlikely pair, how on earth did you meet?"

"He and half of the Yard came barging into my lecture one day to arrest one of my students. This creepy bastard had been slowly poisoning his mum. I dismissed class and was about to leave myself but he, Sherlock, asked me to stay during the initial interrogation to confirm some things. I thought it would be about the bloke's whereabouts but it was about the pen he'd used to take notes and the pencil he'd used for a recent test I'd given. Somehow, that sealed his guilt and they carted him away. Sherlock thanked me and I said I didn't do anything. That crowd that bustled in with him left just as quickly leaving he and I alone. I looked at him and he just reminded me of someone. He'd come in so confident and now he didn't seem nearly so tall or sure of himself. I'll tell you, I'm the first one to admit the kids have made me soft. Everyone is a little lost lamb who needs to be brought in from the bloody cold. So, I don't know why, other than that, but I asked him if he wanted a drink. I said something like, anyone would need a bit of booze to fortify their nerves after all that."

"What did he say? I can't imagine he agreed right off the jump."

"He looked shocked. He mouth opened and closed like a carp before he finally offered a polite, Thank you. I took him to the Criterion Bar and we had the oddest chat. He read me from head to toe and I found it to be the most disconcerting, impudent, hilarious thing that I burst out laughing. Told him he had me dead to rights and that it must take a great deal of skill to discover all that by the fraying of the right pocket on my trousers. Again he didn't seem to know what to do, he seemed rather lost. I got the impression that his skill didn't go over so well with most people. But I liked him and I told him so. He mostly just looked confused. He told me about his consulting work, where he lived, how he lived and I found it all fascinating. But I was in the mood to make friends and he looked like he needed a friend. I proposed we meet the following week for lunch and he agreed before he could think better of it. We've been mates ever since."

"And I thought I had the most unique story for becoming friends with Sherlock. I think you've got me beat. So, who did he remind you of?" John asked as he took a sip from his soup that he instantly regretted.

Mike smiled again, that smile that John used to just think was affable and kind. Now he was starting to view it as also amused and remarkably clever.

"You, John. He reminded me of you."

"Me?" John asked incredulously.

"Yes! The way you looked on the first day of med school. This thin veneer of I'm-so-sure-of-myself covering up the reality that you were terrified. I liked you straight away. Just like I liked him. I even mentioned you once to him, ages and ages before you came back from Afghanistan but he likely doesn't remember. Told him, I had a friend that put me in mind of him. He replied "I doubt that very much." So of course when I was fortunate enough to bump into you I decided to put you two up together."

It was strange hearing a retelling of a story he only barely knew, especially when he suddenly and unexpectedly appeared as a character, even if only as a briefly mentioned cameo.

"Were you joking, at my party, when you said there was a reason, after all, why you suggested us as flatmates?"

"No, not joking. I thought you'd get on well. I figure you'd have complementary personalities. I also figured you'd make a good couple."
John scoffed but not unkindly, more in terms of disbelief.

"A couple..." He said with a shake of his head. "Well, it turns out you were right."

"I usually am. You could have invited him along, you know. How are things between you two?"

John had actually invited Sherlock to have lunch with the two of them but he his boyfriend declined.

"Mmm, just text me when you're done. We'll meet at the police station."

"Absolutely." John breathed as he threaded his fingers through his hair. "You're going to leave another hickey." He'd added with a chuckle.

"Sort of the plan, yeah."

John raised his hand, touched the tender but thankfully not obvious spot on his neck that Sherlock had indeed left and smiled.

"I'm not that guy, the one who gushes and goes overboard about how happy he is and how everything is rainbows and roses and how he wakes up every morning in delighted, grateful, disbelief at his fortune. I'm not going to be the guy who regales you with details about how sometimes he feels like pinching himself everyday he walks by just to know this is real. So, as I am absolutely not that guy I'm just going to sit back, steeple my fingers and say; Cool. Things are cool."

Mike laughed heartily.

"Well, good thing you're not that guy."

"Yeah, for both of us."

Mike turned serious again for a moment, glancing away as he spoke, unable to meet John's eyes.

"I was worried about you, John. Worried and useless. This past year I...I didn't know what to do."

"No one did. I didn't either. It's ok. Nothing to be forgiven for, just like I said at my party. I'm trying to set a new course now, you know? New life."

"I'm glad and I will help any way I can."

"Thank you. Can I...can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"The reason you couldn't make the wedding...it wasn't because you didn't approve was it?"

"There have been three relationships of yours, judging by the way you chatted to me about them over the years, that I thought might pan out. Sarah, Mary-"

"And Sherlock." John supplied.

"And Sherlock." Mike agreed. "I liked Mary. I liked how she took to you and took care of you after you lost Sherlock. She made you happy, what more is there to say? No, I couldn't come to the wedding because of my mum."

"Right, yeah, of course, sorry."
"I was happy you tied the knot with someone who had a knack for putting up with your bullshit."

"She did indeed," John said with a fond smile.

"There is no part of me that wanted things to come together how they did. But...I'm glad that they did. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, yeah it does," John said idyll stirring his soup. "When I'm not feeling terribly guilty, I feel the same way."

He texted Sherlock as promised after lunch ended but plans had changed as they always did and he no longer needed to meet him at the station. In fact, his partner assured him that they'd soon have the culprit in custody due to a remarkable turn of events that he was eager to tell him about once it was all over.

That left John with an unexpected gap in his schedule. He gave the taxi the Baker Street address and then changed his mind.

He hadn't been there since December.

He recalled the last time he'd walked in but not the last time he'd left. The door, which Sherlock had needed to bust through to get to him had been repaired. He tried his key, found it still worked and stepped inside. He hadn't known what he'd expected to find. Disarray, maybe. Dried vomit and urine on the carpet, the remnants of the EMT's attempts to resuscitate him, broken glass, empty beer and wine bottles, a refrigerator stinking with spoiled food.

Instead, it was all pristine, showroom new, in fact. Empty and furnished and waiting for his return. He stepped inside and seated himself on the couch.

"I thought you'd gone." he said quietly after ten or so minutes.

"Mary" turned to look at him.

"Just decided to lie low for awhile."

"After the uh...confession in Hanah's office."

She nodded.

"Are you angry?" He asked.

"Do you want me to be angry? Do you need that conflict?"

"What are you talking about?" He said with a weary sigh as he tongued the inflamed area surrounding his tooth. It was a stupid habit to have developed but he couldn't stay away from it now. Sometimes jabbing at it to encourage those flares of eye watering pain.

"You like an outside force and outside idea to rage against, to fight against. One of the reasons you're having so many problems right now is because everything is internal. You've never battled that well, John." She said looking at him earnestly. "That's why you pick fights."

He couldn't deny that.

"Sell this house, John. Let it go and sell it and move on."
"You're not trapped here, are you?" He asked knowing it sounded silly but unable to shake off the idea.

"No, darling, I'm not trapped here. I just wanted to talk to you some place private, quiet."

"This doesn't seem healthy." he said letting his head loll back against the sofa as he scrubbed his face with the heel of his hands.

"Avoiding the topic at hand. Would it matter if I were real or a figment of your imagination or if I were a broom that you danced with so long as I doled out good advice."

"Yes, it would matter a little bit if I were chatting with an old broom!" he said turning his head to look at her incredulously.

"I didn't say an *old* broom." She replied with a twinkle in her eyes.

After a moment they both burst out laughing.

"I miss you, Mary." he said with a fond sigh.

"I know. I miss you too. But you've got him."

"Yeah, I do. I really do."

"And you've got Rosie. You two go on pretty well. Take her for a weekend."

"A weekend? Just Sherlock and I bumbling about with a baby?"

"Sherlock doesn't bumble. You bumble. You should take a lesson from him." "Mary" went silent for a bit and he glanced over at her. Her face was contemplative but he could tell she was holding back emotion. He was used to that face. He'd seen it a lot early on when they were dating. She had been trying so hard to hold back. More than likely trying to come up with a good reason to pull away. Run away. Never see him again because things were getting far more real than she had ever intended. Considering everything he knew now he understood. But she had failed miserably at trying to talk herself out of getting involved. He was glad she'd failed.

"We made something beautiful and perfect and more pure than either of us could ever be when we made her." She said fighting hard to keep the tremor from her voice.

"Yeah, yeah we really did," he said extending an arm about her shoulders and drawing her in.

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

"Can we sit here for a little while like this, you and I?"

"Of course we can." She said snuggling against his side.

He didn't question why it seemed like he could almost feel her, why he could almost smell the Claire de la Lune, why he drew such comfort from this, but he did.

The house was dead silent, just the sound of his breathing, steady and even. It was strange when you really became aware of all the background noise, the humming of lights and appliances and dripping faucets and running toilets, all the stuff that was accepted as part of living in a space. And when all that was cut off and cut away it was shocking how quiet it was.
He couldn't stand it for very long.

"You should get home. He misses you." "Mary" said finally. It was growing darker outside but he could still see her in the gloaming.

"You always knew." he said not long after she spoke.

"You told me every day."

"That makes me sound like a monster."

"Not really. You never said you didn't love me while you were saying you did love him. I could more than live with that."

"You know what tomorrow is, right?"

"Mmmhmhm."

He kissed her temple as he positioned himself to stand up from the sofa.

"Rosie does this thing with her nose, this little scrunching up of it when she's happy, it puts these little wrinkles on the bridge, right here." He said pointing to the spot on his own nose before moving his finger to hers. "It's just like you used to do. Happy Anniversary, Mary."

With that, he stood up and left the house locking the door behind him and headed home to Baker Street and warmth and light.

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Hours later he and Sherlock were just finishing up Monty Python's The Meaning of Life and John was looking at him curiously. It had been a lazy, quiet evening. They'd wound up playing cards with Mrs. Hudson before eating a light dinner in front of the telly with John choosing the movie.

"You liked it didn't you?" John asked him.

"I underestimated this group of men. I assumed, wrongly, they mostly dealt in undergraduate humour, vulgar jokes and cross dressing. I didn't realize their wit was so incisive."

"They do love taking the piss out of storied institutions. And they love referencing class."

"I found it very funny and some of the scenes quite familiar, especially the one that took place in the classroom. My God, how much time I spent moving my clothes up and down to and from the lower pegs. Though thankfully none of my instructors ever engaged in full on sex with their wives on their desk. I liked the movie a great deal." He concluded with a smile. "Thank you, John."

"You're welcome, love. Still hungry? I picked up some biscuits on the way home."

"I could do with a few." He said with a smile, as he stretched out lazily on the sofa.

John stood and headed to the kitchen, put several biscuits on a plate and grabbed a glass of milk.

"John, can I ask you to clear your schedule for June 15th, 16th, and 17th."

He sat down next to Sherlock with an amused smile, leaning his body against his boyfriends. Sherlock slung an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer. John grabbed a

John grabbed a biscuit, extended his hand and waited for Sherlock to take a bite.
"That's quite a ways off." He said as his partner sampled the treat.

"I understand. But it's Father's Day on the 17th and my parents would like to have us back at the house for the weekend."

"Oh. Oh? Really...both of us?"

"Yes, you and I. I'm hoping Mycroft declines."

"Have you told your parents about us?"

"Not as of yet as I'd rather do it in person. I don't speak to them often as you know. And I admit if I see they're calling I let it go to voicemail."

"Do they know you're gay?"

"Of course. They've known since I was young. Are you sure you don't want a biscuit? They're very good."

John shook his head, no, but remained contemplatively silent.

"Do you not want me to tell them?" Sherlock asked.

"No, it's not that. It's...do they know that Mary... Do they know she's the one who shot you?"

"No. And they never will. I gave them the same story as the press and general public. If you're worried they'll reject you because of that let me put that fear to rest. It won't happen."

That had been one of the things he'd been concerned about. So many incidents that had occurred they'd tried to keep within their tight knit group but it wasn't always easy. He was happy this one had stayed mum.

He liked Sherlock's parents. They were warm and funny and kind. So perfect, in fact, that they seemed practically scripted as if they'd been sent directly from central casting.

He liked them...now. Or rather, he liked what they had showed him and how they had treated he and Mary during that terrible rough patch.

But he couldn't help but harbor anger toward them. Sherlock and Mycroft (and Eurus) had suffered under their care. After Victor Trevor's murder, Sherlock had essentially, gone into a fugue state which they'd encouraged, or at the very least done nothing to prevent. Allowing their youngest son to suppress his memories and turn his dead best friend into a beloved, euthanized dog. Teenage Mycroft was apparently left to care for Sherlock while seeing to the institutionalization of their mad sister. And what had that amounted to in the end? An austere man who eschewed friends and any meaningful connection. A shadowy government figure not averse to manipulation and murder so long as his own hands didn't get dirty. A man who gladly spent the majority of his non-working life in self-imposed solitary confinement. And then, his brother, a relapsing heroin addict, bullied and mistreated as a child who eventually turned in on himself for protection. A man capable of such loyalty, care and love who'd worked his hardest to suppress it all for fear of being hurt and brutalized all over again. And a sister...well, he had a difficult time working up any sympathy at all for her. But the point still stood. The Holmes children had been spectacularly neglected and all of them, even the debased, devoi'd genius seemed to be willing to give Mummy and Daddy Holmes a pass.

His own father was a piece of shit. A violent, drunken, monster who terrorized and beat his children.
But there were other forms of abuse and they didn't involve fists.

However, it wasn't his place to say, certainly not now, maybe never.

John smiled as he sipped his milk. That, at least, didn't cause him any pain.

"I'm meeting your parents like in an official capacity. That's serious."

"I've never been anything but serious when it came to you."

John shifted in Sherlock's loose hold so he could turn and look at him fully.

"You've got a crumb just right here." he said pointing to the corner of his mouth before placing a kiss there.

"I would love to meet your parents in the official capacity of your boyfriend on Father's Day weekend. Yes, I would be happy to go."

Sherlock broke into a wide grin.

"Good, that's quite good."

"I think so too."

"Now that that's settled, how was lunch with Mike?"

"It was nice to catch up. He's got a lead on a job for me. He thought it might be a good idea if I can present a doctor's report saying I'm healthy and clean so I'm going to set up an appointment."

"You know," Sherlock began carefully, though as it turned out not carefully enough. "You don't need a job, John. As I told you I can take care of you and Rosie as well."

"I'm no one's housewife." He said stiffening. "I have always taken care of myself and I don't intend to stop now. Not to mention your detective work has never quite been enough to support the both of us."

"There's no need to get angry," Sherlock said and John could hear the frown in his voice.

John sat up abruptly from the couch and grabbed the plate and the glass of milk. "Finished?"

Sherlock nodded and John headed back to the kitchen. Once there he began again.

"I just think some sort of dynamic shift at this point in our relationship, in our lives, could be dangerous."

"You're the only one of us who thinks money affords one some sort of special footing or can cause a shift in dynamics. I don't see it as being that important."

"Of course you don't Sherlock, you've always had it. People who have money never think it's that important. For god sakes, you had an ancestral seat." He said letting the plate clatter in the sink.

"Don't think I missed that little fact about Musgrave Hall. You do realize that not everyone in the world has an ancestral seat. You come from landed gentry and I likely come from people who would have emptied your families piss pots."

"I haven't the slightest idea where this is going." Sherlock said rising stiffly from the couch and moving to his chair. "I'm also not sure I care to follow. I have stated clearly, on more than one
occasion that what is mine is yours."

"Don't turn paternalistic on me, Sherlock, that's all I fucking ask."

"Why does this issue always arise between us?" He asked with a shake of his head.

It was a reasonable question. Money had always been a point of contention between the two of them. Sherlock turning down cheques for services rendered, Sherlock pricing them both too low, prioritizing the excitement he felt about solving the mystery over them having working utilities and running water.

"It arises because you were literally behind on everything when I moved into the flat. They were about to shut off the lights, do you remember that? That was remedied by me bringing a bit of order to the chaos."

"Well there's no danger of that now is there?"

"I don't know, honestly, I haven't checked." He snapped.

"I have been able to muddle through without you, you know." He said knitting his brows. "Somehow, poor idiot that I am, I've managed."

"Look, we need this. I need this. Not just for the money but for us. For some sort of future where I don't think of myself as this useless lump."

"Money is how you determine your self-worth? Seems healthy. Is this some sort of bizarre strutting about because you feel emasculated; by finances, by sex, by having to wave farewell to heterosexuality? Because if it is John, it's boring. It bores me. Take whatever job you like doing whatever you want. I've never stopped you before and I have no intention of doing so now. But don't drag me into this as though it were a choice for the greater good."

"Emasculated? Don't do that. Don't psychoanalyze me. Not everything is that fucking deep, Sherlock."

"And I'll thank you not to blame me for your pathological feelings of inadequacy." Was all his boyfriend said in reply before engrossing himself in the contents of his laptop.

Much to his frustration John didn't have a reply to that. He'd started to wash the dishes and he continued for awhile longer, the only sound in the flat the rattling of silverware and cups and the running of water.

"Does medicine make you happy, John?" Sherlock, low-voiced, asked from the adjoining room.

John turned to look at him and he towel dried his hands. Sherlock was still wholly focused on his computer, sitting perfectly still.

"What?"

"I said, as you no doubt clearly heard, does medicine make you happy? I can't recall a time where you ever expressed any joy in your profession. You take joy in our work, that I've seen and could draw a picture of if asked. But I've never seen you refer to your work with anything exceeding a blank expression. So, I say again, do you enjoy being a doctor?"

Rather than answering he only stood there for a moment not so much staring Sherlock down as glaring at his lowered forehead.
After a minute or so longer John left the kitchen to take a shower.

Sherlock did not join him.

_Hanah encouraged me to take up my journal again, so, here we are. I don't know if it can help but I suppose it won't actually hurt._

_Do you ever have one of those fights and you've no idea what it was really about once it was over?_ 

_Tonight was like that. We were having a perfectly normal evening, rather nice, actually and I just blew up at him. And then he gave it right back as good as he got it._

_I meant what I said to him. I don't want to be some housewife he tends to. I know I'll never match him in intelligence, I know no one can. But I have to have some equal ground with him for this to work, now more than ever. I don't know that he gets that but maybe it's not important that he does. I don't know._

_I don't want to delve too deeply into his question; does medicine make me happy._

_I never chose it because I felt some deep calling or because I thought it would make me happy. I chose it because I thought I could do it and do it well. I never thought my heart had to be in it, I thought all I ever had to do was no harm. After the slow pace of med school I liked the speed of the Army. It's not that I enjoyed seeing fellow officers injured but I liked the...anonymity of it all. I liked being detached. That was why I leaned more toward emergency medicine. I wanted to be in trauma._

_Hanah would likely have a field day with that last sentence._

_I can be a GP. I'm good at being a GP. I have helped people, I have prevented disease and sickness as a GP. I have saved lives as a GP._

_Christ, I hate being a GP._

_OK...I guess I get the journaling thing now. It kind of forces you to write the truth, doesn't it?_ 

_I'm still taking the job if they offer it though._

_Tomorrow is May 18th. Tomorrow is my two year wedding anniversary._

_I spent part of today conversing with a self-created apparition of my dead wife in our empty house._

_I'm writing this at 2 in the morning because I can't sleep, again. That's really nothing new these days._

_Sherlock and I went to bed with only a terse "Goodnight" between the two of us._

_I don't like that. But because I'm an arse I didn't say anything else._

"Mary" _said I pick fights._

_Goddamn it._

_I'll apologize to him tomorrow._

_My tooth is killing me. I was looking up home remedies and one of the recommendations was a cotton ball soaked in whiskey._
Authors Note: I see I got recced on a Johnlock FB group that I secretly lurk in. Thank you for that, Brenna! It was quite an exciting surprise to see #CaptureTheLoveliness in real life. I admit as I was scrolling I did a double take when I saw it. From the comments, I see that people seem to think I might be a therapist which is quite high praise. No, I'm afraid I don't do anything nearly that interesting. I always just thought that John's session with Ella was a fascinating way to start off the BBC series. I liked to hear that he returned for "top-up's" and I liked that Sherlock went to see her in Series 4. But I always thought the inconsistency on John's part was part of his problem. I believe he's got a lot of problems. A lot. And I like being able to take my time and hash them out in his sessions. Also, I just identify with more than a few of John's problems myself. And as I think I've said before, I'm just writing the therapist I'd love to have. LOL.

A few people in the thread mentioned that the story was rather Sherlock-light/Johnlock-light and perhaps too John-centric. I'd never thought of it that way but I suppose it's true. So, because of that, I've added "John-Centric", "John POV" and "Character Study" to the tags. I know certain users are more interested in stories that focus on them one-on-one and if that was something I was looking for I might be a touch disappointed with this one. I know, in addition to this there's some reluctance to start a WIP. I also admit I'm just as wary when it comes to WIP's and tend to avoid them myself. This slow burn is turning out to be a little longer than I anticipated but I'm ok with that if you guys are.

Ok, so that's all for now, again, I'm always so giddy when I see something of mine has been recommended. Thank you all for the lovely comments!

-Maribor :)}
Dr. Vikram snapped off his glove in that authoritative way they were all taught to do it med school. It was a trick John had employed in the past as well.

"We'll, of course, have to wait for some of the bloodwork to come back but I have to say, Dr. Watson, you are a man in excellent health."

John waited for the "considering"; considering your age, considering your past, considering the nonsense you got up to in the past year.

Apparently, there was no considering coming.

"That's great." John replied with a bit of disbelief he couldn't hide.

"You sound surprised."

"It's been a difficult year. I wasn't sure about lasting effects. I...I know I was in the news, you may or may not have seen."

"Anything I viewed on television is irrelevant." He said with a comforting smile. "You are a new patient and you're baggage free as far as I'm concerned. So, let's go down the list of your registration form, yes?"

"Yes, let's." John tried to feel and appear comfortable and casual as he sat in the thin gown on the crinkly butcher's paper.

"Ok, you checked off depression, are you being treated for that?"

"Yes, I'm seeing a therapist regularly."

"And how is that going?"

"Well, I think I've made progress, I think my doctor would say the same. I can see more silver lining than clouds nowadays."

Dr. Vikram smiled.

"Excellent. Are you currently on any medication?"

"No, I'm not a big fan of drugs."

"You prefer a more holistic approach?"

"Not exactly, I just don't really like the way I feel on meds. Well, I imagine I wouldn't like the way I feel on them."
"So you've never tried anything before."

"Umm...no." He admitted, immediately on guard.

"Relax, Dr. Wason, I'm not going to force anything on you you're not ready for and I'm also not going to subvert your therapists work. You also checked alcoholism."

"I'm in recovery. Attending AA."

"Is that also going well?"

"Yes, I haven't had a drink since January 1st of this year."

"Congratulations."

John recalled handing these forms out to new arrivals at the clinic. Or rather Mary handed them out and once the patients were in the room with him he gave them the once over. They were actually a lot longer when you filled them out as opposed to double checking the patient's concerns. But he'd been as honest as possible. Acknowledging his issues and being as thorough as needed.

When they'd covered everything on the form, Dr. Vikram, who'd been nothing but accommodating all while treating John as both a patient and an equal asked if he had anything further.

His primary purpose had been to get a clean bill of health to further cement his job application to the surgery. But since he was here already...

Well, it was now or never.

"I um...actually did have another question if you had the time." He forced himself to say.

"Of course I have the time."

"I've been having some lingering issues with erectile dysfunction. I was wondering...I was hoping maybe you could help me."

"Let's talk about it. I've got a few questions first. Can you get an erection at all?" He asked pen raised over a pad of paper ready to record his answer.

"No, not at all."

"So, nothing hard enough for penetration? Nothing that you gain and then lose?"

"No, not even that."

"Are you married?"

"Widowed, actually. She died early this last year."

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Thank you."

"Do you have any partners at the moment?"

"Yes, just one. I've started a new relationship...with a man." He said clearing his throat.

Doctor Vikram glanced up briefly but continued on without comment.
"Are you gay or bisexual?"

"Bisexual."

"Do you get morning erections?"

"No, not anymore."

"How about when you masturbate?"

"I...don't really try anymore. I guess I got tired of the disappointment. But when I tried to nothing, it didn't work. Just flaccid."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Well, my wife was pregnant in late 2014 early 2015 and wasn't really in the mood. There was a lot going on in general so we didn't have sex. Our daughter was born in January and- " he stopped short deciding to leave out the part about the confusing affair and infidelity-wanks. "I was able to masturbate in those early months but after she died...any ability to do that was gone. I started drinking, I got really depressed. That all started in February of 2015."

"You haven't been able to engage in masturbation or intercourse for over a year?"

"It hasn't really been a priority until recently. I thought that part of my life was probably over. I was ok with that. But after a lot of treatment and therapy I've decided that...it's just not good enough anymore."

"I understand. And just once more; you don't drink or smoke or engage in recreational drug use?"

"No to all three."

"Good, good. And your partner, do you feel any pressure from him regarding your performance?"

"No, he's been nothing but understanding and helpful and unbelievably patient."

"That great and very important."

The doctor scribbled a few more notes onto his pad before setting it down.

"Ok, so, here's what I think. I could prescribe some of the more common drugs, Viagra, Cialis, Levitra but I have a feeling you don't want to take anything. Am I correct?"

"Yeah, correct."

"There's Alprostadil, which isn't a pill but can be injected directly into the penis or inserted as a suppository."

John practically cringed.

"I'd really rather not have a penis injection of any sort so let's not go any further in that direction. And a suppository just isn't a good idea for the sort of sex we're ultimately planning. Not to mention, they're still medications."

"Understood on both counts. Some men have had success with VED's."

"Penis pumps?" He asked with surprise. "Those things work?"
John's mind immediately rushed back to the gruesome overblown ads he'd seen in the back of gents magazines he'd stolen from his dad when he was 12. The same sort of ads that still appeared as pop-ups on some of the porn sites he frequented now and again.

"They don't actually permanently increase length or girth but they've been known to help men both achieve and maintain erections. Though, admittedly, VED erections do differ from more natural erections."

"Differ how?" He asked with a frown.

"The temperature of the penis is lower and the vacuum pressure may cause the veins to appear distended. There is usually an increase in girth and there may be pivoting."

"Pivoting, you said?"

Doctor Vikram cleared his throat.

"Yes, the penis may pivot at the base so you might need to stabilize it during sex."

"Hmm. So, a penis pump can give me a cold, fat, veiny, pivot cock?" John said with a nod. "And yet somehow I remain unsold on the idea."

Doctor Vikram laughed.

"I thought as much. Let me give you my honest opinion. You have suffered unimaginable trauma over the past year and a half, the loss of a spouse, severe depression, alcohol dependency, recovery and the start of a new relationship. Any one of these could have brought upon ED, you're dealing with all of them nearly at once. You're healthy, you're strong and unless your bloodwork reveals something unexpected there's nothing physically wrong with you."

"So, it's all in my head is what you're telling me?"

"Yes, but not in a dismissive way." Doctor Vikram pointed to his temple. "There is something in here unresolved. Perhaps a few things. And I know, it's cruel, that at a time when you may need release the most, your body is denying you, but I do think that's exactly what's going on. Now, while you get your head back on straight there is the option of prostate massage. As ED is, practically speaking, a lack of blood flow to the area, prostate massage will help to increase blood volume."

"I've given men prostate exams before I assume it's relatively similar. I mean, I have books at home but if there's more information you can add."

In fact, he'd given many a prostate exam and had to calm down many an overly-apologetic, overly-embarrassed man who got an erection or even orgasmed right there in his office. It was perfectly normal, which he'd tell and which he believed but they usually left looking red faced and unconvinced.

"It shouldn't be quite as clinical as what you've done with patients but the basic principle of slow penetration is the same, followed by steady application of pressure to and manipulation of the prostate. You can do this yourself, with a toy or better yet with the assistance of your partner."

John nodded and sighed. He was sure Sherlock would be game but was reluctant to turn their intimacy into something that could be so detached.

"Thank you, Doctor Vikram for your time today. I do appreciate it."
"My pleasure, Doctor Watson. Now, I should tell you that most patients with ED report that orgasms achieved via prostate massage are not as intense as those to which they're accustomed. Though some do say just the opposite. Also, this is unlikely to help you achieve an erection, at least not fully, but it can go a ways in getting your sexual health back on track. I'm afraid the only real solution is inside you."

John had decided this was to be the day of killing multiple birds with one stone. Going to see the doctor had drained some of his courage reserves and he was about to do it again.

He timed the appointment so that it would likely allow him to cut across London via cab and arrive on time if not early for the LGBTQ meeting at the small chapel.

John was used to the set up of AA now. Every meeting room was strangely interchangeable but that was just as likely because most churches were interchangeable as well. The same poorly lit rooms, the same primary school chairs in orange and yellow, the same weak tea and burnt coffee and biscuits straight from the tin. he wasn't complaining, actually, the uniformity of it all was dependable.

St. Bridget was no different and as it turned out he was early which suited him just fine.

He was expecting grim faces and guarded looks, that was 80% of what he'd experienced so far but as people filed in he was greeted with smiles and welcoming nods.

The room filled quickly and people segregated themselves off, talking in small groups. John decided to do what he always did in these situations; take out his phone and looks terribly busy. He pretended he didn't notice the man who walked over and sat down next to him until he spoke.

"Hope you don't mind me intruding but are you new?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact I am. Guess I have that look about me?" John replied with a smile.

"Little bit, yes. But don't worry about it. I'm Eric."

Eric was tall with red hair and open features and seemed to be somewhere in his mid 30's.

"John." He said extending his hand which the other man took. "Nice to meet you, Eric."

"You as well. Thanks for coming today. I'm the chairman of this group. We're pretty relaxed and informal here. So just make yourself at home. No one is forced to talk if they don't want to, we won't even have you introduce yourself until you're ready. All we ask is that you just listen. And we hope something you hear today helps."

It was the first time John had been welcomed before the meeting even started and it felt...nice. He thanked Eric for his kindness and that was that. The man didn't press him for more information, he didn't ask him to provide more than he was willing he simply made his offer and retreated, giving him the space John so keenly wanted.

A few more people came in and seated themselves. As best John could tell no one else had the same unsure, new person look he must have been wearing. Quite a few people smiled or acknowledged him in some way and he nodded or smiled in return.

The meeting started promptly on the hour.
"Afternoon everybody. I'm Eric, I'm an alcoholic and I'd like to welcome you to this Closed Discussion meeting of Alcoholic's Anonymous. Before we get going today I want to start by reading from the Big Book. Can you all turn to page 66?"

John took out his text and along with the others turned to the page.

"Anybody want to read starting from 'If we were to live'?"

No one seemed eager to volunteer so John decided to go out on a limb and raise his hand.

"John, thanks so much. Just from where I said until that last word 'poison'."

"Sure." He said before clearing his throat. "If we were to live, we had to be free of anger. The grouch and the brainstorm were not for us. They may be the dubious luxury of normal men, but for alcoholics these things are poison."

"Thanks so much, John. So, I wanted to start off with that passage because that's a really big issue for some of us, myself included. For those of us who have been in AA for awhile, I think we can all agree that certain passages of the Big Book have more personal meaning than others. This has always been one of the ones that stick out for me. I love it and I hate it. I still get very resentful about it sometimes. Now, it's childish resentment but I'm going to voice it here anyway because I know I'm among friends. There are times when I get really, really angry that I can't have one drink every now and then."

This was received with a few chuckles of laughter and murmurs of agreement.

"I can see some of you know just what I mean. I felt and sometimes still feel that it is one of the few luxuries afforded in life. And somehow it's been taken away from me. For some reason, I don't get it anymore. Then, on top of that, I've got this big moralizing book telling me I don't even have the luxury of getting angry anymore. I can't get angry that I can't have a drink and I can't get angry that I can't get angry. So here's another thing I've lost. And you know what I do sometimes when I get trapped in that spiral of how I'm angry but not allowed to be angry. I get really, really, really angry."

This time John laughed as well. He couldn't deny this sounded absurdly familiar.

"But I think we should look at that passage again because over the years one word has stood out for me just as it was meant to do. Dubious. Dubious means untrustworthy, suspect, questionable. Now what this tells me is that something I see as a plus, as a bonus, as a gift afforded to people who aren't alcoholics isn't that at all. This "luxury" isn't anything of the sort. Now, the book categorizes us more than once as the opposite of "normal" which I suppose means we're abnormal. I've never really liked that classification but I do find it especially helpful here. Because normal or abnormal we're all human and anger poisons us all the same. I believe the point that we should be understanding is that it poisons us at a different rate, a faster rate because our addiction has made us more vulnerable. Don't envy this dubious luxury. Don't envy the anger you used to be able to carelessly express. Don't lament it's loss. Understand that whatever freedom you felt from it, is and was false. Someone very wise once told me, Anger replicates easiest when it is unexamined. I am constantly working on examining my anger, understanding what is really upsetting me, what's at the heart of it all and how it threads into my desire for alcohol. Now, I'm going to go against the Big Book here for a second and I'm going to say I don't think we can ever be free of anger. I think that's a tall order, perhaps best left to monks and demi-gods. But I do think we can dissect our anger, control it, deflate it and subdue it. It's going to flare, of course, because we are only human, but it doesn't have to burn out of control. Ok, I have monopolized way more time than normal so I'm going to turn it over to you guys. Go. Take it away."
Eric concluded with a genuine, winning smile and sat down motioning for anyone who wished to take the floor.

John looked out at all the faces, really looked as he listened to them talk. And he didn't feel afraid. Something about the way they threw around the word partner without hesitation or worry. Something about how the women said 'my wife' and the men said 'my husband', was jarring but also jarring was how it put him at ease. They seemed comfortable in their own skin and for the first time since he left The Location he was in a meeting where he was starting to feel comfortable in his.

He didn't think it would feel different. Why should it feel different? People were people and they were in the situation they were in because they liked booze far, far too much, not because they were queer. Hmm...queer. He thought to himself. The word didn't quite stick in his craw the way it used to. Why did he feel safer here? He still had to censor. Couldn't exactly say that his dead wife was an assassin. Couldn't talk about the cases he and Sherlock had been on. Couldn't talk about how close they were, whether they liked it or not, to the British Government by way of Mycroft. Couldn't even say he'd been at The Location. He was just as gagged as he ever had been, except about this one thing. He hadn't even realized or considered that maybe he'd felt stifled, smothered, angered...despondent at the idea of keeping the reality of his relationship with Sherlock, a man, under wraps at a place where openness was encouraged. But maybe he had. What other explanation was there? What other reason was he responding so positively to the fact that if he did choose to speak about his partner or his life he didn't have to couch it in ambiguous phrases like "my significant other", "the person I'm seeing" "the one I'm dating". He was sitting there in this badly lit room, in yet another church in a cracked and old plastic chair and he was having an epiphany that being here as himself, as John Watson, recovering alcoholic trying desperately to mold his relationship with his best friend, his male best friend into a romantic partnership mattered. The fact that when he walked in and sat down everyone in this room knew that he was going home to a man and not a woman mattered. When he entered this church he was carrying one less secret. And it mattered.

Everyone, well everyone who wanted to, was volunteering a story where they recently got angry or lost their temper. In their struggles and stories, John heard himself. It resonated. It got in. And for the first time in a long time, surrounded by a bunch of strangers he began to relax.

At a lull in the conversation, he decided to take a chance.

"Hi.." He began. "I'm John and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hello, John." They intoned.

"This is um...my first time here and, well, what you're saying really, really lands with me. My therapist says that I have anger issues and I recently got into a fight with my partner about money."

He watched a few heads nodded knowingly.

"He doesn't think I need to work, I beg to differ. We started bickering about it and it blew up into this whole big thing. I felt very righteous at the time. Very firm in my convictions but my w...a friend told me that I have a tendency to pick fights. That's it my way of avoiding bigger issues. And now, of course, when I think about it, I don't really believe he meant anything by it. I probably shouldn't have been so offended by his offer to take care of me and my daughter. And...while I didn't really want to admit it at the time..it made me want to run and drink. I wanted to drink that anger away. And um, I'm very glad that I didn't."

"Thank you for sharing, John." Eric said with a soft smile.

While John still wasn't what he'd call a sharer he did miss the comfort and camaraderie of group even
He wondered if Hanah ever got tired of being right.

The hour went by quickly and John was actually a little disappointed when it ended. This had been exactly what he needed on a topic so relevant it stung.

Before dispersing they did something John hadn't experienced in any other meeting. Standing in their circle they joined hands and repeated;

"What you see here. Who you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here."

By God, he liked that.

A few people stopped to welcome him on their way out, touching his arm and expressing hope that they'd see him again. John found himself promising that he'd be back.

He and Eric ended up exiting together.

"Thanks again for coming, John. It's great to see new faces and I'm really happy you decided to share with us today."

"Thank you, I...I've been to a lot of different meetings lately, all over the city and none of them felt right. I can be kind of picky and I was beginning to think I should just settle on one, work my steps and shut up about it but...I don't know. This...today at least, felt right. I was so tired of passive meetings and this felt...actionable."

Eric smiled and nodded as though this made absolute sense to him.

"I think that's common. Sometimes finding the meetings where you feel the most at home is the result of research and just plain old fashioned shopping around. If you combine that with being newly out of the closet it's natural that it'll take some time."

"I don't recall telling you I was newly out of the closet," John said.

Eric laughed and clapped him on the back.

"Let's just say you've got that look about you too."

John was in the middle of reading the chapter on arse play in his newly acquired sex guide book when he heard Sherlock arriving home. A fairly hefty box full of texts had arrived from Amazon the other day and he had eagerly grabbed this one first and been lost in it since coming home to an empty flat. He didn't know why he felt the need to hide the book but it was somehow his first instinct and he shoved it beneath a copy of today's newspaper on the sofa before standing up.

Things between he and Sherlock had remained tense since their fight days prior. John had apologized...badly, clumsily and pettily, making certain that he did it in a way that assigned no personal guilt. Sherlock who knew precisely what he was doing as he was doing it, had scowled briefly before brushing past him to make tea. They managed to put everything aside where work was concerned but their private hours together remained icy. John had had just as much of it as he could bear and so he met Sherlock at the door.

"Hi." He said.
Sherlock looked at him and narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Hello."

"You deserve an apology from me. A real apology. I'm sorry for how I acted the other day. I picked a fight with you when you weren't doing anything except trying to express how you wanted to take care of Rosie and I. You care about me. You love me and you're likely worried that any undue stress might push me some place neither of us want me to be. You were just being kind and I cut you off at the knees. I'm sorry, Sherlock. Please forgive me. Oh and you're right, I bloody hate being a GP. I hate it. But something tells me I need to do this. Maybe that something is wrong but I need to find out for myself. And I promise I'll take it easy. Will you forgive me?"

Sherlock nodded and glanced down at his feet for a moment.

"Of course I forgive you." He said after a silence that stretched far too long in John's mind but was likely only 10 seconds at the most.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you. Now can I kiss you? We haven't kissed in days."

"Please do." Sherlock said and John was so happy to see that his smile had returned. The flat wasn't the same without it. John wasn't the same without it.

They kissed, finally, lips and bodies pressed to one another and slowly reality, which had been tilted so unpleasantly, slid back into the upright position again. Still rather excited from what felt to be a successful day John volunteered to cook and filled Sherlock in. His partner was both supportive and attentive all while helping to chop vegetables for their stir fry.

They ate a pleasant dinner, though John mostly just nibbled on the noodles. They watched a little telly before John excused himself for a quick session with Hanah. Once done he called out to Sherlock that he intended to take a brief shower and then maybe they could watch Great British Bakeoff if he was so inclined.

10 or so minutes later John emerged from the loo having again forgotten his comfy night clothes in his old bedroom. Hair damp and wearing nothing but a towel which he held closed about his waist with one hand he entered the living room.

"Sorry, won't be a moment."

He stopped short when he saw Sherlock sitting in his chair, thoroughly engrossed it seemed in The Complete Guide To Pleasurable Gay Sex, the book he'd hidden beneath the paper and promptly forgotten about.

Well, he was effectively caught now. He supposed he could at least make an attempt at playing it cool.

"See anything you like in there." He asked.

Sherlock ran his eyes over John's body and smiled slyly.

"Oh, I see several things that I like." Sherlock paused before standing up, awkwardly. Once on his feet, he pressed the heel of his palm to his erection trying in vain to subdue it. "I've been told that one of the few upsides of having a row with your boyfriend is making up."
John grinned at his words, he always liked when Sherlock was flirtatious.

"I'd like to make up." John agreed. "Properly. *Nakedly.*"

"I know of no better way." Sherlock replied with a matching grin. "I hope you don't mind but I was reading your book. I glanced at the page you had stopped at."

"Did you now?"

"And I was wondering if you might like to try prostate massage?"

Well this was all just a bit too lucky, wasn't it? John thought to himself.

"Tonight?"

"Mmmhmm."

"We'd need lube-"

"I have lube. Bought some ages ago."

"Well, look at you."

"Go to our bedroom, get out of that towel and I'll lock up out here and turn out the lights."

"Yes, sir." John replied cheekily and without argument headed to bed.

Once in their room he tugged off the towel and slipped under the cool, clean sheets to await his partner. Sherlock appeared not long after and John took great pleasure in watching him disrobe. He left his t-shirt on but John didn't mind though he had been making more of an effort into coaxing it off of him. He suspected it likely had to do with the bullet wound scar on his chest. He didn't want to be a distraction or an emotional burden at these intimate times. John needed to make it crystal clear to him that he could never, ever be a burden.

Sherlock was already half hard as he set the bottle of lube on the bedside table and slid into bed. John was suddenly salivating just at the thought of having him in his mouth again and once his boyfriend was within striking distance he kissed him lustily.

"Can I suck your cock?" he pleaded against his lips and Sherlock chuckled gently in reply.

"Have you forgotten so quickly why we're here?"

"No," he grinned. "But I saw your cock before you got into bed and I just...I love having you in my mouth."

"Maybe later, sweetheart. For now...I want to touch you." He said running his hands down John's bare chest, nails scratching him lightly. "I liked your book."

"Did you?"

"Lot's of pictures. Lot's of guides and suggestions."

Sherlock tweaked his nipple before rolling it between his thumb and John groaned happily.

"Sherlock, I-"
"No. Now is the point where you warn me about what you can't do. I want to show you what I think you can."

He'd been right of course. John had been prepared to launch into the litany of what he couldn't manage as well as multiple apologies but his boyfriend's words stopped and relaxed him.

"Ok."

"Ok. Can we dispense with the sheet for now? I'd like to see you."

"Yeah of course."

Sherlock drew away the sheet exposing John's lower body. His cock was lying limply between his legs.

"Can I touch you, John? You've never let me touch your cock before."

"Yes, ok." He didn't expect a reaction but it would still be nice to see Sherlock holding him.

His boyfriend took the bottle of lube and squirted more than was necessary into his hand before wrapping that hand around his penis. Sherlock began a gentle stroke, up and down and John watched as his cock grew slicker and shinier from the lube. Sherlock seemed to know what he was doing, mimicking how he handled himself; a corkscrew grip, up and down, thumb occasionally swiping across the tip. Though he didn't so much as twitch, John did find that it was indeed highly erotic.

"If you're this size before you're erect..." Sherlock said with more than a bit of marvel in his voice.

John wished he could feel something, wished he could show Sherlock just how big and hard he remembered he could get. Just before embarrassment could take hold Sherlock moved his hand down to cup John's balls, massaging them with warm fingers. And again, it certainly wasn't unpleasant.

"Kiss me, Sherlock." He said softly.

"I love you, John." He said before doing as was asked. They kissed softly, breathlessly, desperately. While John didn't hear the lube being opened he did feel the liquid as it was drizzled from the base of his balls to flow between his arse cheeks.

He gave a surprised soft gasp which was mostly swallowed by Sherlock' kisses.

"Hush, love." He comforted him as he slid his fingers between his cheeks, "Spread your legs for me."

John did just that, letting his legs fall open to give Sherlock whatever access he needed. But as receptive as he was when he felt a finger pressing against his arsehole he tensed.

"Sorry..." He breathed.

"Don't apologize. Let me relax you, darling."

John returned to focusing on the kissing. The kissing he could handle. Even so, he was aware of the persistent gentle pressure Sherlock was exerting. After not so long it began to feel rather nice. He knew the anus had a high concentration of nerve endings and he was pretty sure Sherlock was hitting each and every one.
A soft moan tore from his lips and his partner smiled.

"Good?"

"Yes...yes, good."

"May I penetrate you?"

Sometimes Sherlock's formality was toe-curlingly sexy.

"God, yes."

At first, he winced, not because of pain but just because it was an unfamiliar sensation. But after awhile he willed his body to calm as he let Sherlock get to work. They were still kissing, soft and a little sloppy as John's hand found the curls of Sherlock's hair. He could feel his boyfriend cock, hard and warm pressing against his thigh and only their closeness prevented him from reaching for it.

"You're going to bottom for me some day, aren't you?" Sherlock whispered in his ear and it was the last thing John expected to hear. Dirty talk? Oh yes, please and thank you. Sherlock was going to try his hand at dirty talk.

He was inside him now, pushing and probing gently, unhurriedly and John opened his legs wider than before.

"Yes," he replied. "Yes, for you, yes, anything for you."

"You're tight, John." He said against the pulse point of his throat. John's blood was thrumming through his veins and he knew Sherlock could feel it against his lips. "I can only imagine how tight you'll feel around my cock."

The image of Sherlock playing violin suddenly entered his mind, those fingers, those long, studied fingers one of which was inside him now, playing him like an instrument.

The first brush of the pad of his finger against his prostate left him no choice but to moan low and filthy.

"OH! GOD! Sherlock, fucking HELL!"

He had had lots of sex. Varied sex. In several combinations and no shortage of positions. He'd had good orgasms and great orgasms. He'd had the kind that made your leg twitch, the kind that likely caused you to make a face you'd be really embarrassed of later. He'd had the kind that almost immediately put him to sleep afterward. He'd had the kind that made him shout and swear and keen and plead. He had been touched in just about every way he thought possible but had never, not ever had a sensation or a touch that felt anything remotely like this. It was as if his whole body was alight, as though Sherlock had flipped a switch and turned him on. It was too much and not nearly enough all at once and he couldn't understand how something like this had existed, effectively, dormant in his body without him knowing. It took him a moment to focus, to come down, to see and think straight. He felt as though he were vibrating, practically trembling and though he wanted more he was relieved that Sherlock had retracted the advance of his finger just enough for him to regroup.

"A little too much?" Sherlock asked.

"A little," John said with a nod. "Just go slow."

He nodded and continued working his slick finger inside him easing steadily but slowly back toward
John's prostate. This time he only gave him the most gentle of nudges, practically a feather touch swipe, and John was able to process it just that much better. It still made his lower half feel like warm jelly and the tips of his fingers tingle but it was so much more manageable. And he wanted more.

Someone in the room was panting and whining and it took John a few moments to realize it was him. Using his imagination he pulled back from the experience briefly to picture how they looked on the bed. Sherlock flushed to the tips of his ears, whispering soft, lovely, filthy things in John's ear. His long arm stretched between quivering, sweaty thighs. His finger vanishing again and again inside John's tight hole. John's hand first in Sherlock's hair, as always tugging on those curls, then quickly switching to holding and stroking his forearm, raising his hips up towards it, hanging on for leverage and dear life. He would have envied the pair he envisioned on the bed if he wasn't one of them. The brief fantasy had allowed him some distance from the feelings building in his body but once he returned they were nearly off the chart.

"Sherlock...oh Sherlock....yes, love, yes, please, please fuck me, just like that, just like that..."

Having regained his senses John became aware that Sherlock was in the midst of speaking almost as if he hadn't heard his plaintive 'Fuck me' entreaty. But the smile in his voice betrayed his cool demeanor.

"There were so many different positions in that lovely book. And after we make love many, many times face to face I want you on your belly, face down, a pillow underneath you to raise your arse off the bed, just where I want it. And I want to thrust into you, slow and practiced as you beg me to go deeper and deeper and deeper."

Which each "deeper" Sherlock was timing the movements of his fingers, thrusting forward and then making sure to graze John's prostate as he retreated only to do it over again.

By this time John was writhing on the bed, twisting the sheets in one hand. Wanting both to retreat and surge forward he was careful not to pull too far away from Sherlock but was undeniably overwhelmed by these sensations. His last sexual encounter that ended in orgasm filled him with embarrassment and shame. Texting the bus girl who turned out to be Eurus. The things he'd said. The flattery he'd so willingly, eagerly and stupidly basked in. The pathetic, middle-aged fantasies he'd played out. Betrayal atop betrayal of the two people who mattered most to him.

"Hey..." Sherlock whispered softly, his tone quite different from the one that was so recently doling out filthy fantasies. "You're with me now. Whatever is going on in there. Whatever you're holding on to..." He leaned forward and kissed him on the tip of the nose. "Let it go."

The sentiment and the kiss nearly made the tears start to flow. As it was, they only rose in his eyes, burning before he blinked them away. And like that, he was back where he belonged if not deserved to be. With Sherlock, safe and happy and sound and desired.

He glanced down at his body, wanting to see from this angle Sherlock's arm and where it disappeared between his thighs, wanting to see the twitch of muscles as they worked. He was instead, however, absolutely shocked to see that his cock was flushed, half hard and leaking like a sieve onto his abdomen.

"Sherlock..." He said weakly wanting him to see but too lost in his own pleasure to form a coherent sentence.

He felt warm, deliciously, optimistically warm. It was happening, after so long, it was happening and he didn't care if it wasn't what he was used to or what he expected he just wanted it to happen and happen now. He finally wanted to say these words to him.
"Sherlock, oh God, I'm gonna come. Please don't stop."

"I won't stop." he said clearly gathering his courage for what he said next. "Come for me, John. Please, let me watch you come."

John let his legs fall open as far as possible, rolling his hips with Sherlock's movements until he grabbed hold of his partner's wrists and finally let go.

"Oh...oh...God, ohhhh Sherlock...yessssss..."

The precum that had been leaking from his cock and dotting his belly was now followed by ejaculate and a surprising amount. In better days with better health when he was younger, leaner and better hydrated he could get a bit of distance with his come. It was a silly thing to have taken pride in but there it was just the same. This time he didn't so much shoot as steadily ooze from his twitching yet semi soft cock. The book had said prostate orgasms felt completely different from any other type. Doctor Vikram has said due to the ED it was unlikely to be as satisfying or as strong as he might expect or be previously accustomed. In this case, only the book was right. This was light years beyond any orgasm John had had to date and John arched and keened in a way he hadn't done in months and months and months upon months. He kept his eyes shut and one hand firmly on Sherlock's wrist wanting to hold him in place as long as he could as his hips snapped upward. After so long a wait this was an incredible release and that steady, probing finger of Sherlock's was bringing wave after wave of pleasure. As it finally started to ebb, as he descended that peak Sherlock took the cue and lowering his head started to lap at fluid on John's belly. When he'd cleaned it all away with his tongue he eagerly and without preamble took his softening cock in his mouth, sucking enthusiastically unbothered by the fact that it was non-reactive in his mouth. But perhaps any disappointment was eased by the fact that John did arch off the bed at the contact. Sherlock's mouth on him, watching his cock disappear between those plump, pink lips, feeling that talented tongue. Erection or no erection this wasn't to be missed.

Before it became too sensitive, too painful, too much, Sherlock slowly removed his finger and before John had a chance to grow embarrassed he took his lips away from his cock. A moment later those lips were on John's and he was reminded of the fact that he didn't mind his own taste either. He kissed Sherlock hungrily and lovingly. This was good. This was important. This was a moment. This was something they'd shared and judging from the bright eyed look he'd seen on Sherlock's face, a look he knew he mirrored, his boyfriend felt the same.

"It was even more beautiful than I thought it would be."

"What was, Sherlock?" He asked breathlessly.

"Your face when you come. It was this mixture of pleasure and pain. I'd tried to create a composite in my mind for years and years but nothing compares to actually seeing it. This was lovely. You're lovely."

"So are you, Sherlock. Thank you." He said placing a hand on either side of his partner's handsome face. He felt giddy and weak and energized all at he same time and the last thing he wanted to do was waste this sensation. "Now, it's your turn. You must be so painfully hard. And now I want to try the same thing on you. Yes?"

"Yes." Sherlock replied with an eager nod. "How do you want me?"

"On all fours. That's what I studied in the book. And that's what I've been fantasizing about. Is that ok?"
Sherlock answered by changing his position and setting himself on the bed on his hands and knees.

Seeing his lover like that was indescribably hot. He was still wearing his t-shirt but the rest of him was nude and the shirt itself had ridden up a little. The muscles in his arms were bulging ever so slightly as he supported himself. There was the tantalizing dip of his lower back. The curve of his well-muscled arse. His strong thighs and calves even his feet were somehow attractive. But, as hot as all that was there was one element that took John by surprise with how attracted and ready and aroused and loving her felt. The vulnerability. This position and the speed with which Sherlock had assumed it showed nothing but absolute trust and it hurt just as much as it felt wonderful. He hadn't imagined anyone would ever trust him like this again, that anyone ever should. But here he was, Sherlock, the love of his life, waiting patiently, eagerly for him.

John kissed him once softly to calm him before changing positions so he was behind him.

Futilely he spared a thought for how much he wished he had his cock in hand, hard, ready, eager, dying to be buried inside his boyfriend. But this wasn't a time or place to feel pity. He had and was enjoying himself and it was more than time to return the favor.

John ran his mostly dull nails over Sherlock's lower back and down his arse cheeks, first one then the other. They left slight pink trains which disappeared as quickly as they came. Next, he took his left hand and simply palmed his boyfriend's arse cheek, not a smack, just a squeeze and then a gentle pat before running it down the back of thighs and up again. He did the same with his right hand and the right cheek before using both hands. Sherlock sighed and sighed again growing accustomed to the caresses and the position. Neither of them seemed to be in any sort of rush and John was glad because by God he loved Sherlock's arse. This was, in fact, the first time he'd seen it from this position and he was enamored. He liked rubbing it, liked feeling the muscles beneath his palms, liked the pale, virgin skin.

"May I give you a few swats, Sherlock? Not too many but I just feel like this arse of yours is just begging for at least a light spanking."

There was only the slightest of pauses before he replied with "Yes."

John licked his palm and without further warning connected it soundly with Sherlock's cheek. His lover hissed and stiffened and John immediately soothed the pink handprint on his flesh. He did the same with his right hand, lick and stroke and again was met with a hiss that sounded far more like pleasure than John had anticipated. He'd thought they might need to work up to this. But then again was it any wonder that the handsome detective with the impudent manner and the smart mouth wanted just a shade of discipline from his Captain.

"You like that?"

"Yes, John."

"Want a few more?"

"Yes, yes, please now."

"Alright, because you said please."

John spanked him and again and then once more alternating cheeks for each round. By the fourth and final go Sherlock was pressing into the swats, soft little "Ahhs" escaping from his lips.

God, but it was perfect.
Sherlock's arse had gone a very light tone of pink, nothing that wouldn't fade in 5 or so minutes. But it was so pleasant to see.

So what now? What else to do when he had such a lovely treat in front of him, he wondered.

John hadn't expected this, certainly hadn't seen this inclination coming but with Sherlock there on all fours in front of him, pretty arse in the air he wanted to do only one thing.

Placing a hand on each cheek he pulled them slowly apart. The pale skin of his arse was smooth, supple but here between the cheeks there was just the hint of ginger pubic hair. Most delightful were the few nearly blonde hairs around his arsehole which was precisely where John decided to lick.

"Jesus Christ, was that your tongue?!" Sherlock began but John cut him off further by doing it again.

He thought he'd heard every sound Sherlock could produce but this gasping, low, moan was brand new.

John wanted to hear it again.

Stopping for a moment to adjust his positioning he returned to work, flicking and pressing his lips and tongue over Sherlock's puckered opening which he could feel contract and expand against his mouth.

Yes, this was good, this was better than good, better than great and from the noise, Sherlock made when he penetrated him just slightly he agreed.

Sherlock started to rock against John's mouth encouraging him on and the latter happily continued. With his free hand, he blindly sought out his lover's cock and found it hot and erect between his legs. John began tugging and stroking him loosely as he ran his tongue from his arse hole, down his perineum and back up again. He repeated this movement a half dozen times over the following minutes stopping to suck every now and then on each of Sherlock's balls, pulling one and then the other into his mouth. John then turned his attention back to Sherlock's perineum and began rubbing it in slow circles with the pad of his fingers. The perineum shared a wall with the prostate and if Sherlock hadn't been aware of that before he was then as he gasped before pushing back against John's fingers. Enjoying the reaction John continued his ministrations until his lover was panting out his name. John started to wonder if this alone was enough to bring his boyfriend to orgasm and dammed but he wanted to try...but not today.

Pulling back only slightly he gave Sherlock a teasing bite on one arse cheek.

"Hand me the lube, sweetheart." he mouthed against his flesh.

He watched as Sherlock clumsily reached for the lube and handed it back to him.

"Thank you." He replied as he got back to his knees. "You still comfortable?"

"Yes, fine, thank you." He replied his voice already raw.

Popping open the bottle of lube John drizzled it over the crack of Sherlock's arse and watched it drip down and pool over his hole. Then, for good measure, he coated his finger with the gel like liquid wanting the experience to be as gentle and smooth as Sherlock had made it for him. He could still feel the lube, slick and warm between his own arse cheeks and it made him shiver happily.

He started slowly, as the book recommended, making practiced circles around the circumference of his hole, all the while pressing gently with the pad of his finger.
"I love you, Sherlock Holmes." He said softly before leaning forward to resume kissing his cheeks. He grazed the pale flesh with his teeth as he kept the movement of his finger steady and firm.

Sherlock was breathing heavily but expectantly. John knew the feeling, of course, being both eager and hesitant for what was to come.

"Deep breaths for me." He said as he kissed the base of Sherlock's spine and worked just the tip of his finger inside. There wasn't a hiss of pain, only a stillness and a cessation of breath.

"I said breathe, darling." He repeated. "It's alright, it's all, alright, I'm only going to move in and out."

Sherlock nodded and John began to do just that, working his middle digit inside his tightened arsehole. His boyfriend readjusted his position on the bed so he was resting his face against a pillow and in the process he spread his legs wider.

With each thrust of his finger, John made sure to continue applying gentle pressure to the tight ring, working to loosen and relax his lover back into enjoying himself. He added more lube, unbothered by the excess dripping down his hand and onto the bed before thrusting in a little further. Sherlock finally let out a breathy sigh that far more in the moment than anticipatory and John smiled.

"Good boy, I want you to enjoy this."

"John..." Sherlock said in reply but it wasn't a question or a statement, rather a dreamy murmur. Pulling back from kissing his lovers flesh John noticed the slight movement of his thighs and hips. Sherlock was rocking back ever so slowly, tentatively asking for more.

"Want me to go in just a touch more, Sherlock? I'm almost there."

"Yes, please." he said lengthening the last word.

"Ok, make sure you're settled firmly on the bed because this is going to feel very, very good."

Trusting John at his word Sherlock steadied himself once more on all fours.

"Ready." he replied.

John pressed in again and felt it. That rough rise of the prostate, firm and no bigger than a walnut. Sherlock felt it too.

"John!" He said and it was nearly a shout.

"I know, sweetheart, I remember. Now, you may feel some pressure in your bladder, but it's alright, it's normal. It'll pass."

"I...I remember...from the book..." He said and John could just see him gripping the sheets with his long fingers.

John was mesmerized by the site of his finger disappearing then reappearing from Sherlock's arse. Someday, someday, some bloody day soon it was going to be his cock. He was going to be inside him and that tight heat that was enveloping his finger would be surrounding his hard erection. His hand would be free and he'd have them both on Sherlock's hips controlling his movement controlling everything until they both came loudly together.

John was suddenly taken by the overwhelming need to see Sherlock's cock and he wasn't disappointed. He was leaking precum in long, clear, sticky rivulets. Beaded, streams ran freely from
the tip and when one ended another soon followed culminating into a relatively speaking large and growing damp spot on the sheets.

"Look at you, Sherlock, you're so beautiful. Look at the lovely mess you're making all over our sheets."

Sherlock only whimpered in reply.

"I love it, I love it so much and I wish I could taste it and you. I wish I could be in two places at once. Make a mess, my love. Yes, my darling boy, make a mess for me."

"Oh, God...John...John, this is..."

"Want to rock back against my finger? You can control it, love."

Sherlock nodded vigorously and started to do just that, taking control of the action, choosing when John's finger brushed against his prostate.

Freed of being responsible for the rhythm John used his left hand to grip Sherlock's penis which was still flowing with pre-ejaculate. He'd never seen quite so much precum and it was absurdly erotic. He wanted to put his lips under that cock, he wanted to drink from him like it was a lovely, copious fountain, he wanted it to fill his mouth.

Among other things the book had said prostate orgasms were in a way less predictable than traditional orgasms making the build up and coming release unclear. And Sherlock, for his part, had been far less chatty than normal giving John little indication, aside for moans where he was in the process.

When he started to buck against his finger John had the impression that it had taken even Sherlock by surprise when after a few firm pumps from John's hand he started to come.

By this time John was no stranger to Sherlock's orgasm but this...this was something new.

He came and he came and he kept coming, spasm after spasm, ejaculate shooting out of his cock onto the sheets. What didn't hit the sheets coated John's hands as he continued to messily stroke his lover's still not flagging erection smearing it happily.

Throughout the entire affair, Sherlock was moaning the most lovely, filthy, erotic things as his back curved and arched. John's only regret was that he couldn't see his face as he came, those cheeks pinked from the exertion, his lips parted, eyes closed except for the occasional flutter of his lids. Sherlock was practically cherubic in the throes of orgasm but he could always see him next time. When it was all finally, finally ebbing, John felt Sherlock begin to pitch forward clearly looking to rest on the bed, but a hand placed on his abdomen stopped him.

"Wait, Sherlock, I just...I want to..." He didn't bother to finish his sentence and instead withdrew his finger slowly. Then, like a mechanic sliding under a car he lay on the bed on his back and slid beneath Sherlock lining up his cock with his mouth. It was still dripping, nowhere near flaccid yet and so, so beautiful. John raised his head and took him in his mouth. Sherlock gave a strangled sort of cry which wasn't lacking in disbelief. But John wasn't quite done yet. Blindly he reached both hands up to cup Sherlock's arse. he sought out his hole again and found it still wet with lube and still very much open and inviting. He slipped his digit back inside and Sherlock almost instantly helped the progress as he tilted his hips down. By design, this also meant that every time he pressed back and down onto John's finger he pressed his cock into his waiting mouth. Sherlock grunted as he pushed himself toward a second orgasm he no doubts didn't know he had in him. John was beyond
happy, he'd wanted Sherlock's cock in his mouth since he'd seen it hard and ready earlier in the evening and now, just as he'd imagined there was precum gathering on his tongue, forcing him to swallow every 3rd or 4th thrust. Neither of them were under the impression that Sherlock could last very long and soon he was once again coming, shooting over John's taste buds and down his throat all while contracting wildly on his finger. When Sherlock was able to move he inched forward slowly allowing for John's finger to slip out of him. Eventually, he let his body go limp and he slowly if not awkwardly rolled to the side and collapsed down onto the bed.

John stayed where he was, an exhausted, sated mess. "That was lovely, Sherlock, my God, that was absolutely beautiful."

"Lie down with me," Sherlock said weakly.

"I will, let me just brush my teeth so I can snog you properly."

John slowly pushed up and got to his feet to amble toward the bathroom. Once there he took to brushing his teeth, gargling and scrubbing as much of the lube and sticky come from his hands as possible. Once done he practically flew back to bed. Sherlock didn't appear to have moved though most of the sheets were now balled up on the floor.

"We can rest on the mattress." He said sleepily.

John slipped under the remaining clean sheet along with Sherlock and turned toward him quickly to engage him in a kiss.

"That was...mmm... incredible. John...mmmm...that was..." He couldn't seem to space out his kisses or his words evenly and John smiled as accepted and gave kisses in return. "I feel so...so..."

"Me too, Sherlock, me too. I love you, sweetheart, I love you."

"Can we do that again? With me facing you? I don't like to come when I can't see you."

"We can do anything you like." *he said running his fingers through his hair. "You ok? You satisfied?"

Sherlock laughed salaciously.

"I am absolutely satisfied. Are you?"

"Mmmhmm, am I ever."

John knew what Sherlock was thinking. Maybe this was a turn around. Maybe this was the start of something. Maybe he was on the way to being cured. Maybe this was the giant leap ahead they'd both been waiting for because, of course, this was about more than just sex. So much more. He knew all of that was running riot through his head and he was so grateful when he didn't say any of it.

"John?"

"Hmm?"

"If you don't go to the dentist I will kill you."

"I know. I made an appointment after I finished my meeting with Hanah. Can't put it off any longer."

"Thank God for that." Sherlock said and he angled his body to rest his head on John's chest.
"I heard something I really liked in group today. Anger replicates easiest when it's unexamined. I think a lot of times anger is my default. It's my go to. I'm working on it. I just need you to know that."

"I know, John."

"And most importantly, I'm not angry because of where I am. I am happy to be here, right here with you. There's nowhere else I'd rather be. Thank you for putting up with me and my nonsense."

Sherlock kissed his chest sweetly and held John tighter.

"That's usually my line."

John planted his lips to the crown of Sherlock's head first kissing him and then just inhaling his scent. He felt good. Today had been a good day from start to finish and he felt hopeful. He felt that just maybe he might look back on this moment one year, five years, ten years from now and be able to say this was one of those days that everything changed for the better. This was the day he left so much shit and baggage and unhappiness behind.

At the very least he could hold his partner in his arms, close his eyes, and hope.
Chapter 63

Seventy-Six Days In

157 Days Clean

June 9, 2016

Journal of John Watson

My latest blog entry "The Case of the Bonfire Killer" is really taking off. Sherlock hates the title but he hates all my titles. I have to admit I feel more than a little surge of pride with this one as it was one of the few times I was able to connect a dot he couldn't. Oh, I'm sure he was fast on my heels as he happily told me later that night. But the point is for once I beat the great Sherlock Holmes to the punch.

It was such a great story, you know? The blog, by its very nature, has to be more factual than lyrical but there's so much I can't just shoehorn in there. So much that relevant to the narrative. He hates when I use that word; "narrative". "It's not a story, John, it is an assemblage of facts! Must you turn everything so fanciful!"

But I usually just ignore him when he talks like that.

Plus, I'm still right. There's so much more to say here. And not just how I was able to figure out that the killers' plan was to set the train carriage on fire with the people bundled together like kindling. And certainly not the part where I figured this out because of the overhead announcement at the train station that I predicted would next call for "Inspector Sands". Sherlock then made the leap that every place we'd been had had intercom announcements telegraphing his next move. All of that is fantastic and exciting but the intrigue in between, the false starts, the missteps, the clues that lead nowhere, the moments of inspiration. The story!

Well, in any case, we solved it, came home and to celebrate I painted his balls and arsehole with honey and gave him a rim job that left him trembling, mewling and exhausted. I had to tell him to wipe that "I've-just-had-sex." grin off his face before we went out to eat afterward. "Why? I did just have sex. And it was fantastic." After we came home I went for him again, pinning him to the wall and downing his cock past my fucking tonsils. I haven't told Hanah just how active we are because I'm dreading she might try and link it to the sex addiction. But I'm not sure that makes sense. Can it be sex addiction when it's just with one person that I love? There has to be a line between a high libido and sex addiction. Honestly, I'm not overly concerned at this point.

I love him so bloody much.

He seems to be over the fact that the next attempt at prostate massage didn't go nearly as well as the first. I don't know why. He doesn't know why. All I do know is that everything that went so smoothly with me the first time was a fucking mess on our second attempt. I don't believe he was doing anything different. I think it was just me. Which I tried to tell him when I was, as gently as possible, yanking his finger away from my arse. Maybe it wasn't as gentle as it should have been or, in retrospect, as I would have liked. I worried at first that I'd offended him but I think we're ok.
It's not as if I don't want to come like that again. It's not as if I don't want to be with him, to have his hands on me and in me like that again. But maybe this just isn't the time. For now, I just like to service him. I like to taste him and tease him and see how many times I can make him orgasm in a single night. I like to hold him afterward when he's soft and pliable and lovely and warm. I can't complain about that. How could he complain about that?

Hanah says stuff like that is avoidance plain and simple which is why I don't want to update her. But I just think in this case she's wrong. We've found something that works for us. I don't see how that could be incorrect.

Work is going surprisingly well. They seem to like me which these days is an unexpected bonus. The schedule is a little lighter than initially reported by Mike but that works out perfectly as consulting business has surged. At the moment, I have enough time for both and we're slowly making our way out of the red and into the black with finances.

After an obnoxiously long wait, my dental appointment is tomorrow. Though I'm dreading it, getting a break from this pain may just be worth it.

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Seventy-Seven Days In

158 Days Clean

June 10, 2016

He wasn't surprised by the diagnosis. He needed a root canal and badly. He'd let it go on far too long and it was, to quote the dentist, "a mess in there". He had the option to get the root canal today and come back later for the crown. Or to endure a lengthy arm-rest clawing process or root canal and crown but at least have it finished in one go. He chose the latter and hours later with a swollen face and a brutalized jaw he walked out of the office slurring like a cartoon drunk, prescription in hand.

John called an Uber and put in the address of the nearest Tesco. He wanted nothing more than to go back to the flat and crawl into bed but more than that he wanted to get this over and done with first. He asked the driver to wait and after dropping off the script took a seat, his eyes wandering to the cheap and awful wine selection to his left. He'd found, and mentioned at his last meeting that sometimes he thought addiction was like a ghost.

"It's like those movies where you're in a haunted house. And all these things have been flying about and you've heard the moans at night and the chains rattling but it's been quiet for awhile. And you think, maybe, just maybe it's gone. It's stopped. Maybe I can glance in a mirror and I won't see anything awful there. So you risk it, you look, and sure enough..."

His description had hit home with a few people and that's what it felt like sitting in the cheap vinyl chair next to the free blood pressure cuff reader. He glanced over at the alcohol section thinking, maybe, just maybe it won't mean anything today. Maybe it will just be a row of colorful bottles and nothing more. But it wasn't. The ghost was still there.

"The spirit of the spirits." He chuckled aloud wishing he'd come up with that line at AA. An old woman who had been about to take her blood pressure looked at him warily and decided against it. This unfortunately only made him laugh harder which made the pain shoot through his half
Luckily, the script was a quick fill and he was back in the car, then back in Baker Street and finally back in bed as fast as he’d hoped. He didn't even remember falling asleep but the next thing he knew Sherlock was kissing the back of his neck as he settled into bed behind him.

He'd never predicted that Sherlock would be a gentle caretaker but the sweet and gentle responses he would give to the occasionally moaning mess sharing his bed happily surprised John.

"How are you?"

"I've been better," John said, words still coming out altered because of the swelling. "I'm sure I'll be fine tomorrow."

"Mmm." Sherlock hummed noncommittally behind him. "I brought you something. I researched what people are allowed to eat post root canal. I went to the store and got applesauce, rice pudding, yogurt, hummus and a milkshake."

"You didn't combine them all together did you?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Have you ever had anything like this done before?"

"No, of course not, I have perfect teeth." He teased.

"You should have upper-class teeth. They should be as crooked and weak as a neglected fence post but of course, they're perfect like the rest of you."

"Did you just call me perfect? Did the dentist give you a great deal of gas?"

John chuckled, winced at the pain and reached his arm behind him to draw Sherlock even closer.

"You ok, baby?" Sherlock whispered.

"I thought you didn't like 'baby'."

"I'm trying it out as an experiment. Also, maybe it's because you're being an adorable baby."

"You're an arsehole," John said. "And stop making me laugh. It sends all the blood to my face and makes it hurt worse."

"Sorry, sweetheart."

"What flavor milkshake?"

"Chocolate syrup, vanilla ice cream."

"Mmm bring it here."

A second later the dessert appeared in front of him.

"You brought it in with you? You knew I'd want this one."

"Of course."

John raised his head to take a sip. The flood of chocolate and cream and sugar and cold hit his
tongue and he sighed.

"Fuck me, that's good. Have some, Sherlock."

He passed it back to him and Sherlock took a sip.

"It's...sweet." Was all he could manage charitably. "I'm glad you like it."

"The cold feels nice."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Maybe an ice pack? After I have a bit more of the milkshake."

A moment later an ice pack appeared, like magic.

No, not like magic, he thought, like Sherlock.

"Thank you, love."

"Were you given something for the pain?"

"I picked up a script for something. I honestly didn't even check. Probably high dosage ibuprofen."

"Shall I get them for you? You can down it with your milkshake," he said kissing just behind his ear.

"No, I'm going to try and sleep it off."

"Want me to let you rest?"

"No, stay with me if you're free."

Sherlock slid further under the sheets, putting an arm around John's waist.

"I'm free."

As the milkshake melted on the bedside table and Sherlock curled up securely against his back John slept. It was neither a sound nor recuperative sleep and he eventually woke up in the darkened room his mouth throbbing and full of blood. Blearily he removed Sherlock's arm and eased out of bed heading for the loo and stubbing his toe along the way. He grabbed the chemist's paper bag from the table where he'd left it and stepped into the bathroom. As he urinated he turned his head to the side spitting blood into the sink the entire time. When he was done he rifled through the bag pulling out first one bottle then the other. Vicodin and Ibuprofen. Both said to take two every six hours. He shook four pills into his hand, swallowed them dry and stumbled back to bed.

John woke up the next morning not feeling entirely better but not worse which he considered a plus. A glance in the mirror told him the swelling in his face had gone down so at the very least he looked normal With the novocaine having long ago worn off he sounded normal too. After a quick shower, a very gentle swish of mouthwash, four more pills and a hearty breakfast of absolutely nothing he was ready to go.

"Sherlock, I'm off." he called to him. They'd switched places once John had come out of the bathroom and he could hear the shower running.

"I'll text you later, John. And be sure to eat something. The hummus is still in the fridge."
"And that's where it'll stay, love." He teased before hurrying from their flat.

Work was busy and he was grateful. He'd always rather a day where he was rushed off his feet as opposed to one that dragged. He chose a yogurt cup for lunch and kept up on the pill schedule and the combination did go a long way in making everything slightly more bearable. By the time the workday ended he was exhausted but had the throbbing somewhat under control. That being said, he could see now why this was usually stretched over more than a single appointment.

On the cab ride home his mobile began to buzz and removing it from his pocket he saw it was his sister.

"Harry, what's up?"

"Hey, Johny, you busy?"

"No, just got off work, everything ok?"

"Yeah, everything is great. I was just wondering...well, I wanted to take Clara on a date tonight. You know, some place posh, something just for the two of us."

"And you're calling me for tips?"

"Oh God, no." She laughed. "I was calling to see if you and Sherlock might be able to watch Rosie. The sitter canceled and I'm sort of in a bind."

"Oh...oh, wow, um...tonight, you said?"

He couldn't rationally explain why the idea filled him with such dread but it did. Not because he didn't want to see Rosie. In fact, either Clara or Harry or both had dropped by both announced and unannounced with the little girl in tow over the past weeks for a few hours and it had gone well. They'd also been having Skype sessions at night, right before Rosie's bedtime when their schedules allowed. The little girl had grown used to them with Sherlock while John had been in rehab and seemed to like it just as much when they both participated. John liked it too, a great deal. But the idea of just he and Sherlock handling her alone didn't hold as much promise.

"Yeah, tonight. Why, did you already have something planned?"

"No, nothing that I know of. But I would have to ask Sherlock. I'm not sure of his sched-"

"I rang him before I rang you. He's keen on the idea, he said to bring her over and it sounds delightful. Those were his exact words; It sounds delightful."

"Well, if you rang him first why...ok, yeah, yes. I think it's a great idea. Bring her over. I'd be happy to see her. I miss her, actually." He said truthfully.

"Fantastic! We'll be there about 7:30. I won't thank you because she is your daughter and I've never believed that fathers babysit. But I will say, we appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah of course and I'm sorry for hesitating."

"It's ok, this is an odd situation. We're all doing the best we can."

"See you then, Harry."

"See you, Johnny."
By the time John arrived home, Sherlock was 80%-85% finished assembling a cot.

"Did your sister reach you?" He asked and John smiled at the obvious excitement in his voice.

"If she hadn't I'd be even more confused by what I'm seeing. Need some help?"

"No, I'm nearly done. You can unwrap some of the items in those bags."

Sherlock was on his knees, wrestling the piece of furniture into submission and John seated himself on the floor cross-legged drawing the bags closer. He pulled out a white fleece blanket with green and blue stars and another that was orange with bees on it. There were a few children's books and a walking toy in the shape of a butterfly.

He thought about teasing Sherlock about the fact that she was only staying for a few hours. But he was far too touched by his boyfriends exuberant dedication to Rosie.

"This is wonderful, Sherlock." He said instead.

"It's also finished. Perfect if she wants to take a nap." Sherlock beamed and leaned in for a kiss before pausing midway. "Would a kiss hurt your tooth?"

"I'll risk it." John replied as he pulled his boyfriend in.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart." He murmured against his lips.

"Better than yesterday. The meds are helping. Mmm...but so is this." He said before sliding his tongue into Sherlock's mouth.

"John...I'm not sure we have time..."

"Of course we do. They won't be here until 7:30. Any cases waiting?"

"I...have a de-gloved hand in the refrigerator," Sherlock replied breathlessly. "I'm waiting for some acidity results on that."

"You romantic, you."

After a spirited grinding session that resulted in Sherlock coming in his trousers, followed by clean-up and trouser change, placement of the cot, a removal of anything sharp or grown up or case related or downright weird, they were ready to welcome Rosie. John grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen and downed his next dose of pills just in time as Harry arrived at 7:30 on the dot.

"Glad you lads were free and could take her." She said with a grin. "We shouldn't be too late but we'll likely worry you with frequent calls throughout the evening to check on how you're doing. Now you have both our numbers?"

"Yes, Harry. You look smart by the way." John said with a warm smile.

"Thanks." She said dismissively, clearly more focused on the task at hand. "Here's the number to the restaurant, if something goes wrong have us paged. She's already had dinner but she might like a bit of mashed banana in a half-hour or so, after that a bath and straight to bed."

"You can absolutely trust us." Sherlock said his hand on John's shoulder.

"Yeah, you absolutely can." John intoned.
Harry glanced at them both, perhaps debating until the very last minute before finally handing Rosie, who was clutching tightly to Bumbly, over to John.

All was fine as Harry kissed her goodbye, gave a few more instructions and then kissed her again. It was about this time that John felt the little girl tense in his arms as she got wise.

"Mama!" She called out reaching her arms toward Harry. That was the first time John had heard that. It was the first time he was ever confronted with the truth that his daughter would call someone else other than Mary by that name. The depth of sadness it prodded inside him was a surprise. But he was glad. He was. Mary was gone and Harry and Clara had stepped up when he couldn't and wouldn't. They were Mama and what, likely Mummy, he supposed?

"Harry, all the books say a clean break. Prolonging the goodbye only agitates the child." Sherlock said gently but firmly pushing her out the door.

"Sherlock you and your baby rearing books. Promise you'll call if anything weird happens!"

"We promise, have a lovely evening with Clara, everything is fine here, good night, Harry." He said in a rush and locked the door tightly.

Rosie who was still wailing and struggling in John's arms let out a screech once the door closed and Harry was no longer in sight.

"Mama! Mama! MAMA!" On the last word, she threw Bumbly to the ground in anger and waved her small arm.

"Shhh...shhh, it's ok, Rosie, it's ok, Daddy is here. Daddy and Sherlock are right here." He tried to make his tone soft and gentle but he wasn't even sure if she'd heard. She was working herself into a proper red-faced fit, tears coursing down fat cheeks, small face contorted in anguish. He understood, he could only imagine how jarring this must be. Her affection for Sherlock aside when had she ever been apart from her mothers? This was world shattering and he'd likely have burst into angry tears as well. Not to mention she was currently being held and not at all comforted by the person she knew and trusted the least.

He tried to bounce her in one arm while running his hand up and down her small back with the other.

"Darling, I know, I know, I'm sorry, my Rosie. I'm sorry. But it will be ok. I promise. Daddy absolutely promises."

John watched Sherlock bend down before them and retrieve Bumbly before disappearing again out of sight.

After a moment he felt his boyfriend standing close behind.

"Sherlock, maybe you should-"

"Shhh." He said softly and out of the corner of his eye, John could just make out the yellow and black stuffed animal Sherlock perched behind his shoulder. The movement also caught Rosie's eye as she had a better view and whatever Sherlock was doing was enough to disrupt her crying cycle.

Her mouth was still downturned in a look that nearly broke John's heart but she'd gone slightly still at least willing to see where Sherlock was going with this. Though he still couldn't see John could feel the movement of the toy on his shoulder as his partner's hand made it bound and bounce in a way that now had his daughter rapt. She sniffled and watched and John could hear little gasping noises,
exaggerated sounds of surprise as Sherlock, no doubt, reacted to the 'unpredictable' antics of the small bee.

First, she gave a tentative smile, a few tears rolled down her cheeks but they had brimmed in her eyes before Bumbly began his show. In a few moments she was smiling and then laughing and it was like the sun parting the clouds or at least that's how John felt about it. Finally, she reached eagerly for the toy. Sherlock emerged and flew Bumbly over, letting the stuffed animal boop her in the nose before she grabbed it and hugged it close.

"You are a bloody genius. That was amazing." John said softly and Sherlock chuckled and kissed his cheek.

"There was a time when you called me amazing because I deduced you down to your socks based on your phone. Now, it's because I entertained a toddler with a brightly coloured piece of fabric stuffed with wool and synthetic fibers. We're really going to need to raise that bar."

John laughed and turned his head to kiss him properly before saying. "I'm going to take her to the loo and get her cleaned up."

"Excellent idea." Sherlock said as he easily found the baby wipes in one of the many bags that came along with Rosie. "I'll prepare the mashed banana should she want it. It's always better if these transitions are seamless."

John walked to the bathroom with Rosie in his arms and spoke to her softly.

"You've no idea how glad Daddy is to see you. I missed you, Rosebud. I'm so, so lucky to have you. And I'm going to make certain you know just how much you were and are wanted."

He turned on the light and they both blinked at the brightness and for a moment in the mirror looking at their reflection he saw himself in her face.

"That's my good girl." He whispered into her dark hair.

She turned her head to look at him and smiled and he, in turn, smiled back.

"Let's say we clean up your face, eh?" He asked her as with one hand he popped open the lid of the wipes. Gently he ran it across her small face, wiping away the salty tears and result of her runny nose. When he was finished he turned her so she was facing outwards and could see herself, see them both in the mirror.

"Look at my smart pretty, pretty girl. I'm not going to leave you alone again and I'm sorry that I did. I won't ever do that again. Not ever, ever, ever. Ok?"

"Ok." She replied merrily and he chuckled against the burn in his eyes and the lump in his throat.

With one hand she thrust Bumbly toward him.

"Do you...do you want me to hold him?" he asked her.

"Bumbly cried." She said sadly.

"Oh he did? Bumbly cried too? Well, then we'll have to clean his face up as well, won't we?"

She grinned, relieved he'd gotten the idea. Rosie watched carefully as he took the same wipe and ran it gently over the toys frozen facial features. Once she was satisfied she pulled Bumbly away and
then held him close.

"Thank you." She said politely.

"You are so very welcome."

The mashed bananas were more played with as opposed to eaten which necessitated a warm bath. When Sherlock had gotten a toddler bath seat, John had no idea but it was waiting in the tub when he came in with the baby shampoo and the child's towel with the hood that looked like a crab's head and one bath toy, also a bright red crab.

John had done a nappy change and Sherlock had carried her in naked and seated her in the warm water. Baby powder waited on the edge of the bathroom sink along with a fresh diaper, the towel, and Bumbly who kept watch over the proceedings.

Sherlock was on his knees at the side of the tub, sleeves rolled up talking to her excitedly.

"Mind you, she does like to splash." He warned. "So be prepared to come out of this far wetter than her."

"Splash!" She said and then completed the action sending a bit of water flying up at them. John made an exaggerated face, as he'd learned to do from Sherlock, at being so doused and she cackled with delight. It felt good to make his daughter laugh.

Together they did their best to de-banana her, Sherlock in charge of the washcloth and John washing her hair. He got it nice and sudsy at one point, thick enough with soap he could form it into a unicorn horn-like shape. Removing his phone from his pocket he snapped a few pictures and immediately forwarded them to Harry with the text "See, all is well. Hope you're having a nice time." Eager to see what she looked like Rosie reached for the camera and luckily his grip meant it didn't wind up in the water. "Me!" She said as she looked at the picture.

"That's right you and look at your hair! Look how silly!" He replied and she laughed again. "Actually I'd like one of all of us."

Without any protest Sherlock got into place, John at his side and Rosie peaking up from between them and behind. John extended his hand and snapped a few selfies before putting the phone away.

A few good rinses a few more splashes and a few more giggles and bathtime was over. It seemed to have done the trick because Rosie was fading fast putting up very little fuss as they worked to dry her, powder her, diaper her and put her in her night clothes.

The cot had been moved to their bedroom as they both agreed they wanted to keep a close eye on her.

"She likes a bit of violin to send her off." Sherlock said as they deposited her in her cot. "Never makes it through the whole song."

Indeed she was sitting up in the crib looking both terribly sleepy but expectant.

Sherlock left the room and returned with his violin and bow and sure enough, she broke into a drowsy smile.
"Lie down, Honey Bee." He said softly and she did as asked.

He raised his bow and started to play and John leaned against the wall and watched the man and little girl he loved as the music began.

It took a moment for him to recognize the song and once he did he frowned with surprise.

"Is that-?

"It's her favorite." He said in quick reply.

As Sherlock had predicted she was sound asleep before he was even halfway finished. John raised the blanket over her small frame and gave her bottom a little pat.

"Goodnight, darling."

They crept out of the room as silently as possible shutting the door behind them. Once back in the living room Sherlock put his violin back in its case.

"Well, I think that was a remarkable success." He said giving John a nod.

"Yeah, me too. Hey, Sherlock?"

"Hmmm?"

"Dance with me." He said extending his hand toward his partner.

"What?" He frowned in confusion at the simple request.

"Dance with me."

"But there's no music." He said even as he approached.

"Sure there is." John said sliding his arm around his waist.

Sherlock smiled shyly. The shy smile was one of John's favorites.

And there in the living room of Baker Street with no hesitation or fear they began to dance, swaying softly in one another's arms.

After a few moments, Sherlock began to hum something softly in his ear.

"What's that?"

"An unfinished piece."

"Yeah? What's it called."

"It's called "John".".

He wasn't sure how long they danced, moving there in unison, the floorboards creaking softly beneath their feet. At some point, they started to kiss and John wrapped his arms around Sherlock's neck drawing him in.

When they finally broke apart it was only to quickly make dinner and retire to the sofa. Harry had said time and time again that Rosie could sleep through an armed robbery and a five-alarm fire but they kept quiet anyway. For John, it was worry about waking the baby but also an excuse. He loved
this quiet time with Sherlock. Eating soup on the couch, limbs entwined, speaking barely above a whisper just because it was nice, the peace of it all was nice. Once they were done John picked up one of the novels they were working their way through and pulling Sherlock between his legs, his head resting on his chest he started to read.

He managed three chapters before Sherlock was resting heavily against him as he dozed. John closed the book and his eyes as well letting sleep pull him down too.

His phone buzzed with several rapid-fire messages sometime later. He pulled it from his pocket without waking Sherlock and tried to get his eyes to focus. The time told him it was quite a bit later than he thought and the texts told the tale.

There'd been a problem with the reservation. They'd had a long wait but hadn't considered going anywhere else because this was Clara's favorite spot. They were halfway through dinner but by the time they got dessert and the cheque, it would be later than anyone had thought. It might make more sense rather than waking Rosie to take her home at some ungodly hour for her to just stay at Baker Street and would that be alright.

Without hesitation, John replied that would be more than fine. Rosie was sleeping soundly and they'd all three had a quiet and non-stressed evening. They could pick her up tomorrow or John could drop her off.

A few more texts and it was settled. John told them to have a good time and slid his phone back into his jeans.

"Sweetheart?" he said softly.

"Hmmm?" Sherlock replied.

"Rosies staying here tonight, with us. That's ok isn't it?"

"Absolutely fine." he said never really waking up. John smiled and started to lightly stroke his chest unwilling to break the pleasant, dreamy mood or the moment. He wasn't sure when he again drifted off to sleep.

The surprisingly loud cry from the bedroom woke them both up with a start. Again, John wasn't sure how long they'd been asleep on the couch but the plaintive cry of "Dada!" cleared the cobwebs almost instantly.

"Sherlock, get up." He said but it was pointless as Sherlock was already on his feet.

"She wants you. Go on, go to her. I'll follow behind." He said putting a hand on John's back and nudging him toward their bedroom. John hurried on ahead, opened the door and switched on the light. Rosie had pulled herself up to a standing position and was wailing as she had when Harry had first left.

But no, that wasn't exactly true. This didn't seem to John to be a wail of anger or frustration. This seemed more like fear. He hurried over to the cot and lifted her out.

"Rosie, Rosie, love, it's alright. Did you have a nightmare? I understand. I'm here, Daddy's here." He said against her ear.
He'd hoped it would calm her down. But it didn't. Not in the least.

But it didn't. Not in the least.

Not in the least.

"Dada! Dada! Dada!" The cry came, again and again, her little voice growing rougher until finally, she was coughing at the exertion.

"Rosie, I'm here, I'm right here." He said bouncing her and putting a hand to her forehead. She wasn't warm and she certainly wasn't lethargic. She had good coloring and her lungs sounded clear. She didn't seem ill at all which was a relief. He tried to hold her up so she would look at him, even touching her little chin to turn her face toward his. But she batted it away and looked toward the door still shouting "Dada!"

"Sherlock, um, a little help, please." He hated how easily his daughter could send him into a panic but he wasn't too prideful to ask for assistance. "I'm here but I don't know what she wants."

Sherlock was there immediately

And then something occurred that John never saw coming.

Rosie reached out both arms toward Sherlock, wiggling her fingers for emphasis and called "Dada!"

Both men froze for a moment but only a moment. Sherlock, a look of abject confusion on his face reached for Rosie taking her out of John's arms.

"I guess...I guess you're Dada." John said haltingly.

"John I..."

"No, it's ok. Hold her. She needs you right now. She needs you."

Sherlock cradled her head and she seemed to begin the process of calming down almost immediately.

"John, I never asked her to call me that. I would never presume... I wouldn't..." he protested softly.

"Hush, Sherlock, she chose what to call you because that's how she sees it. You didn't do anything wrong."

The pain in his chest felt acute, sharp, piercing. He meant what he'd told Sherlock, Rosie had chosen as was her right to do. It made sense, it all made sense and he had no right to be upset with either of them. He was only upset with himself.

"I'll um...I'll go get the wipes. She might need a change as well." he said and turned to leave the room to give them their time.

"Daddy!" Came the little cry from behind him.

John turned around surprised and both Sherlock and Rosie were looking at him with fixed stares.

"She said."John began

"Yes, she did." Sherlock replied with a smile. "It seems she wants both of us. Come back over here."

John happily returned to the two of them and Rosie extended a hand to grab onto his shirt. He drew
closer and finally wrapped an arm tightly around Sherlock's waist feeling both their bodies against his. They stood there quietly rocking the little girl as she calmed and rested her head on Sherlock's shoulder, still gripping John's shirt.

"She must have had a nightmare. Or perhaps it was waking up in an unfamiliar place." Sherlock said softly. "I think she's settling down."

"Shall we put her back in the cot?"

"I think we can try. We'll see if she stays down." Sherlock replied. "We should get to bed as well."

They put Rosie in her cot and the little girl stood and watched as they exited the room one then the other to change clothes and ready for bed. John gingerly brushed his teeth, sucking in his breath sharply every now and then, took his pills and headed back to their bedroom. After switching off the light they climbed into their bed trying to ignore that Rosie kept large watchful eyes on them for the entirety.

"Goodnight, darling." John said.

"Goodnight, Honey Bee." Sherlock added.

"And goodnight to you too," John said giving him a kiss.

"Dada. Daddy. Dada. Daddy up." She repeated though John noted she wasn't upset just insistent.

"I don't think she's going to just curl up and go to sleep." John whispered.

"Honey Bee, it's night time. Lie down, my love." Sherlock said softly but all he received in reply was a "Dada. Dada up."

They tried. John kept still at Sherlock's side wondering if she might tire herself out. Did toddlers ever tire themselves out?

"How long before we admit that we're beaten?" John finally asked, trying and failing to stifle a laugh as he buried his face against Sherlock's chest.

"John if we give in now she'll know we're pushovers. We must stand strong." Sherlock said suppressing a laugh of his own. It seemed it was infectious.

"You're right. We have to stand strong."

"Up! Daddy up! Dada?"

"But she just sounds so small." John added.

"John, you're wavering."

"What could be the harm. One night. It's a strange environment. We won't make it a habit."

"A habit? Y-you intend on having her over more often for more overnights?" Sherlock asked unable to keep the hopeful tone from his voice.

"Yeah, I do. I want that. I want that very badly, Sherlock."

The kiss was sudden and likely a little more forceful than Sherlock intended as it rattled the soreness of John's mouth but he didn't mind. Sherlock was happy and he never minded that.
"You're right! One night surely can't hurt." Sherlock said as he hurried out of bed and lifted Rosie and Bumbly from her cot. He brought her back and placed her on the mattress between the two of them.

"There now? John asked her. "All better?"

Rosie had her head facing him, her cheek on the mattress. With a little hand, she reached out and touched his cheek. The gesture was enough left him practically undone and he pressed his lips together to gather some pretend composure.

"Goodnight, Rosie. I love you." He said kissing her hand.

The little girl almost promptly fell back asleep.

"She called me Dada." Sherlock said so softly John wasn't even certain he was meant to hear. "She did indeed. That's who you are. You're Dada and she loves you."

He saw Sherlock nod in the dark and he knew he wanted some time to ruminate on this in the quiet. "I like it." He said finally. "Let's get some rest."

"I like it too, sweetheart. And yeah, let's," John replied as he turned to his side and placed a hand on Rosie's back. He felt the rise and fall of her breathing and took a deep settling breath. She was perfect. absolutely perfect. She came into the world right from Mary into his hands. Crouched there in the gravel on the side of the road because there hadn't been time for anything else. Because there was never enough time for any of them. Right there he'd been the first person to hold her. He'd cleared her pathways and stimulated her into that first gasp and cry and he'd watched her take her first breath. Red-faced and tiny and naked and squalling and he had never had a moment so pure and so perfect. Mary had cried and he had cried and Rosie had cried and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Sherlock had shed a tear or two as well. They had all shed fresh, new tears for Rosie. That was her real baptism.

The world had felt infinite and small and everything that mattered was right there. Everything.

The three of them.

Then the four of them.

How had it lost that feeling that at the time had felt so large, so all-encompassing, so real that it seemed like it was a part of him? How did he lose something like that? How did he lose her? How did his love for Rosie somehow get subtracted from his world?

The three of them.

Then the four of them.

And now...back to the three of them. Just a different three.

"Sherlock...I never told you..." he cleared his throat as softly as he could so he didn't wake her. "I never told you why I gave her to Hary. I mean, the alcohol, yes. Of course. But it wasn't just that. I didn't love her."

John watched as Sherlock's head turned to him and he saw his eyes catch what little light was coming in the room.
"I just didn't." He continued. "I tried. Not very hard, I admit. But I tried to get back some of those feelings I had when she was born, when Mary was alive but, it was like they were gone. And I knew that even if I had been well, that wasn't any way for her to grow up. I felt like a fucking monster. I feel like a fucking monster when I think back. But all those bad feelings didn't fix it. And when she was gone, I didn't miss her. But...oh God...and I know I don't deserve some sort of medal for this, I don't deserve...I don't...she's my daughter. You don't get some sort of prize for loving your daughter. I know...I know I don't..."

"Just go on, John." Sherlock said comfortingly.

"I feel her absence when she's not here. That space that was blank and dead it's come alive again. I remember now. I'd forgotten. I'm a piece of shit and I'd forgotten but I remember now." He said unable to hold back his tears.

"What do you remember?"

"I remember that I love her."

Authors Note: So, this is the very last day of a lovely and very much needed two-week stay-cation which allowed me to do nothing but watch Netflix and write. That's why my productivity was slightly higher as of late. Unfortunately, tomorrow it's back to the old grind. I hope you liked this chapter and this dash of Parentlock.

Be sure to right click (and open it in a new window) on the link for a sample of what I imagine it sounds like when Sherlock plays the violin. Oh, and "Inspector Sands" is a code phrase used by public transport authorities in the UK. It's a clandestine way to let staff and police know of an emergency like a fire without shouting "Oh my God, there's a fire in the train station!" and creating a panic.
"Is there something your mum likes?" John asked as they readied for the day in the kitchen that morning. They were both eating breakfast standing near the kitchen sink having dallied a bit too long in bed. John would admit that that was almost 100% his fault as he had tugged and teased and kissed and nuzzled until Sherlock was warm and pliable and oh so ready. Lying beneath him with Sherlock above, grinding against his thigh until he came.

*John, you know we don't always have to...*

*Don't always have to what?*

*Nothing.*

"Likes?" Sherlock asked around a mouthful of scone.

"Yeah, like, you know things that mums like. I'd like to bring her a gift." John prompted.

"That's not really necessary, John."

"Well, gifts are rarely necessary but all the same."

Sherlock sighed and brushed a few crumbs from his hands into the sink.

"Umm...well she always has far too many mugs in the cupboard, I suppose she'd like even more. That's an odd habit of hers, collecting things which she already possesses in excess. There are guest towels which I'm never allowed to use, I'm sure she'd be delighted with more of those. Probably little boxes would be well received."

"Little boxes?"

"Yes, you know, tiny little colorful boxes that are too small for anything useful except even smaller items that are made specifically to fill little useless boxes. Oh and roosters. She loves little wooden roosters. Basically, anything you might find in TK Maxx; some strange ceramic pineapple or a hand painting of a cockatoo would be sure to make her squeal with delight."

John chuckled as Sherlock sounded like any slightly harried and entirely bewildered son.

"Are you nervous?" He asked as he rested his hand on the small of his back.

"Why would I be nervous?" Sherlock replied.

"Well...you've never brought someone home before, you know? That can be nerve-wracking for anyone."

"They've already met you and received you well. They like you and they trust my decision-making."
If I have decided that you're a suitable partner, and I have, then they will respect my decision."

"Thank you for finding me suitable," John said, eye roll implied. "High praise, indeed."

"You're welcome," Sherlock responded with just the hint of a quirk at the corner of his mouth.

"Another thing," John began as he quickly washed and dried his hands. He was very nearly in danger of running late but he wanted an answer to this next question. "Your parents seem like they might be old-fashioned. Are they going to insist on separate rooms for us?"

"John we're two grown men in our 40's and-" Sherlock stopped short as he appeared to be thinking. "Ok, well, actually they might. But we'll just strongly insist on a single one."

"Obviously I want to share a bed with you. I can't imagine sleeping without you and don't want to."
John said wrapping his arms around Sherlock's waist and hugging him from behind. "So, that said, so long as we're respectful they won't have a problem, right? I mean, it's not like we'll be messing about in your childhood bedroom."

"Oh, won't we?" Sherlock said glancing at him over his shoulder. "My dear, John. You and your quaint country manners. We're really going to have to snap you out of that."

"Mmhm, it's all well and good to be daring here in the safety and comfort of Baker Street and list all you'd like us to get up to. I think you talk a good game but you'll be as chaste as a parson when we arrive."

"Spoken like a man who hasn't known many parsons."

"And what about your dad? What are you getting him for Father's Day?"

"He likes plaid shirts. A lot like the ones you wear. Again, a swing by TK Maxx and Bob's your uncle. John, we're not gift-y, I mean, as a family."

"Your parents are incredibly gift-y, as you put it. There were an absurd amount of presents under the tree for me and Mary and you and even Mycroft. I think what you mean is you don't typically give gifts to them."

"We have a system and it works for us."

"Well, would you mind if I added a bit more bang?"

Sherlock sighed again.

"Only if you let me pay for it. They're my parents and it's only fair."

"You'll pay for yours and I'll pay for mine. And then we'll have a joint gift."

"This conversation is putting me to sleep. Take my card from my wallet and go mad. Just don't make me listen anymore."

John gave him a cheerful smack on the arse. To his amusement, he saw Sherlock drop his head and blush.

"Alright, I'm off to work. I'm going to take in a meeting during lunch, swing by a shop after work and pick up stuff for your parents and then I'll be home."

"Were you not able to reschedule your dentist's appointment?"
"Couldn't manage it. But it's early tomorrow morning, then we swing by to see Rosie and we're off."

Sherlock handed him his travel cup of tea with a smile.

"Loaded down with honey, just as you like it."

"Mmm, thank you, sweetheart. Now let me give you a proper goodbye." He slipped his free arm around Sherlock's waist pulling him in for a kiss. Sherlock placed his hand on his cheek as their lips connected, the fingers splayed in a gesture John had come to adore and what's more, count on.

"Love you," John said as he pulled away.

"Love you, too."

"Any issues with discharge, swelling, that sort of thing?" The dentist asked him.

There's a thing about lies that John had come to realize without realizing it. Sometimes there are lies that make their presence known, as they're forming. Sometimes, they coalesce in a lazy, easy going sort of way. Sometimes, they arrive at the perfect moment, right there on your tongue. The kind of fortuitous lie you use to get out of going to dinner or showing up at an event you really don't want to attend. Then there are the panicked lies that happen when you've likely been caught in a small one and an even larger one has to be formed haphazardly and erratically and once done, you send it out into the world, completely slapdash but the best you could come up with on short notice.

Then...then there are the lies you didn't even know you were creating. You just open a door in your psyche and there they are, fully formed, slimy and eager and solid and waiting for you to use them, just as they always knew you would.

"Yes, actually." He lied.

The dentist looked at him and waited for him to continue.

"Not so much discharge but I can't really chew on that side either. It still feels, well, it feels rather new. Almost like you just put it in."

"Well, not everyone responds to same day crowns with the same amount of success. This may have to do with your bite or even the cement used. Not to mention, as I did say at the time; it was a mess in there. I'm not noticing any swelling but I'd rather be safe and sorry. I'm going to up the dose of antibiotics and give you another round of the Vicodin as well. Any side effects with either?"

"No, they've been perfect. Thanks, I do appreciate it. I'm going away for the weekend and I'd rather make a good impression without having to ask that all my food be porridge." He joked easily.

Easily. It was easy.

"I completely understand. If this persists, come back and see me again. We'll dive back in there if we have to."

"Thanks so much."

"And don't forget you still have a few cavities that need filling so you should make an appointment at the front desk before you leave."

"Fantastic, will do, cheers."

He didn't think about the prescription. He didn't look at it. Looking would be acknowledging. Acknowledging might start him planning and he didn't want that.

This was just a backup.

"When you were drinking you'd buy bottles and hide them about the house. For "backup". That's what you said then too. Remember?" "Mary" asked him in the cab. She was facing forward as he was, appearing to watch the London traffic go by.

He didn't reply and not just because it would have looked like a crazy man talking to an empty seat.

"Those backup bottles got downed pretty quickly though didn't they?" She continued.

He inhaled sharply through his nose, indignant at how right she was.

"Remember what I told you in rehab that night? I told you things are going to get harder now. I told you, you weren't close to done and that there was more." She turned to look at him directly, shifting on the seat. "I told you that you're going to have to fight and be clear-headed and brave."

"Stop being so dramatic." He hissed and the cabbie eyed him in the mirror.

"Eh?" The driver asked.

"Sorry, not you. Bluetooth." He said gesturing to his right ear. "I'm on a call."

John pressed his finger to his ear holding the non-existent device in place.

"And I told you, you were a harbinger of doom."

"You can still stop this, right now. Please just throw them away."

"You are making a tremendous deal over nothing. It was never pills, not ever. Every pill I was ever prescribed went untouched. You know that. It was alcohol. That's it. That's my danger, so long as I stay away from that, like I have been doing, I'm fine."

"Your tooth is better. You're healed. So you need to answer this question for me. What pain? What pain are you holding on to these for?"

He didn't answer her and looked out the window before shutting his eyes tightly.

"What pain?" She repeated.

"Sorry, you're breaking up. I'll have to call you back later." He said and ended his pretend phone call.

He didn't look at her again for the rest of the trip and she didn't exit the car at Baker Street.

After a quick drop by at Harry and Clara's where they both picked up handmade Father's Day cards from Rosie, they were off. Sherlock slid the cards carefully into the pages of their hardcover bedtime reading. "So they won't get bent." he said.

His boyfriend had them packed and on the road with impressive efficiency. He'd rented a car for the weekend and seemed pleased to drive, even opting for the slightly longer more scenic route. He was
chatty at first and John was happy to engage in conversation, occasionally turning up the radio to sing along. But as they drew closer John noticed a change. As mile after mile racked up on the odometer Sherlock grew quiet, just skirting sullen.

Are you sure you wouldn't rather stay at a hotel?" Sherlock asked not for the first time.

"Do you want to stay in a hotel?"

"I'm simply asking."

"No, you're not simply asking, or rather you have been asking for over a week. I am happy to stay at your parent's house. Do you not want to stay there?"

"It's usually Mycroft and I. We usually...split our duty with them. It will be difficult and odd to handle them by myself." He said gripping the steering wheel.

"Hey, you won't be by yourself because I'll be there, right?"

"Right, of course." He said with a nod, his eyes locked on the road ahead. "Though, perhaps a weekend was ambitious of us."

"Ambitious?"

"Yes, maybe we should only stay overnight."

"But Father's Day is Sunday."

"It's hardly the holiday to end all holidays." He scoffed. "They'd understand if we needed to leave early."

This was something John hadn't planned for. He didn't realize that Mycroft and Sherlock, for all their bickering, worked in tandem when dealing with their parents. Maybe his boyfriend wasn't as settled into his denial about them as he'd previously assumed.

"If you want to turn this car right around and go home, we can. If you want to drive there, have dinner with them, give them our regrets and drive home tonight, we can. If you want to stay one night and leave tomorrow morning we can. Whatever it is you need to do or want to do, Sherlock, we can, no judgment. Just tell me. I know that you and your brother likely have a very intricate system developed over decades with all sorts of Holmesian signals and winks and handshakes and eyebrow waggles and whatnot. I know, I'm not a good substitute for that, but I'll do the best I can. And I'll be there in any way you want me."

Sherlock smiled softly. "I'm being silly."

"You're being every adult child heading home to see their parents for a long weekend. That would drive anyone mad."

"Adult child. That is precisely how they make me feel."

"That's how it is for everyone, Sherlock. What you're experiencing is quite...normal."

Sherlock glanced at him and quirked another small smile which John returned.

"John?"

"Hmmm?"
"Father's Day...I hadn't even considered whether this would be a difficult time for you-"

"I have had 21 Father's Day's without him and managed just fine. The 22nd won't send me round the bend. I'm fine, Sherlock. I'm glad you invited me."

"Ok."

"Ok." John cleared his throat. "And don't forget, you will have the upper hand."

"How so?"

"You're bringing home a boyfriend. You're setting the tone, calling the shots."

"I hadn't thought about it like that."

"It's all very dramatic. You'll love that." He said quite tongue in cheek. John even managed to keep a straight face when he felt Sherlock turn his gaze on him. "And it helps that your boyfriend is pretty remarkable, right?"

"Quite remarkable." He agreed reaching a hand out to take John's in his.

It should have helped things. It should have eased some of the tension around Sherlock’s mouth. It should have stopped the little head tilts he was doing every now and then to loosen the muscles in his neck. It should have stopped the way he was reflexively gripping the steering wheel. But it didn’t. In fact, Sherlock seemed to be winding himself up even tighter.

"There's something I didn't tell you."

John turned in the passenger's seat to face him, as far as the seatbelt would allow.

"What's that?"

"After everything with Eurus...after you were almost killed. After Victor Trevor's remains were found, my parents fell under...not suspicion but negative attention. They started to receive hate mail, threatening calls. Most of these eventually died down except for one. I investigated and found that it was Victor Trevor's older sister, Perry. She initially denied it but when I went to see her she confessed. She was furious, heartbroken, as anyone understandably would be. She thought I was a solicitor at first until I introduced myself. Then she said she remembered me a little. She remembered me dashing by, usually running after her brother, always playing pirates."

Sherlock swallowed hard before going on.

"She had plans to file a civil suit against my parents accusing them of wrongful death. Mycroft wanted to carpet bomb the entire situation, as usual. Dig up her past, exploit some weakness, engage in vague yet pointed threats until she backed off. I told him no, I would talk to her and keep talking to her and I did. Nearly every other week I drove past the empty, overgrown lot where Musgrave used to be to her home and we talked and we talked and we talked. Finally, after a great many tears I was able to convince her that it would be better to put that time and energy into something that celebrated his life as opposed to avenging his death."

"Whose tears, Sherlock?" John asked softly but his boyfriend didn't answer.

"Together she and I planned a small memorial service. I insisted on paying for everything it was only right. Her parents had already died so it would have fallen only to her. I couldn't attend. I wanted to but I was in the midst of a case and couldn't get away. She and a few family members had a
ceremony and erected a stone that we two had chosen together. And finally, he was laid to rest, properly."

"And your parents?"

"What of them?" Sherlock had kept his eyes riveted to the road and only now did he glance at John.

"How did they handle the harassment, the press?"

"Well. Easily. I believe you have the wrong idea about my parents, John. It's not your fault, everyone does. Just because they appear to have mastered the social norms, the joviality of human interaction, its natural give and take, does not mean it came or comes naturally to them. Mycroft and I...and likely even Eurus, we knew we were odd. And two people do not produce three such oddities by chance. We are not random, we are bred. For us to have all been a coincidence well-

"The universe is rarely so lazy." John supplied. When Sherlock glanced at him again this time quizzically he smiled. "I listen to Mycroft on occasion too."

"Yes, well...my mother has a dizzying intellect. Her one and only book "The Dynamics of Combustion" which she wrote in her 20's was derided as absolute nonsense when it was released. Since then it has become one of the foremost sources for mathematical physics and theoretical mathematics. There is not a week that goes by where she is not contacted by some asking if she would be interested in being a visiting professor, a speaker, writing another book, proofreading a thesis, assisting on a project."

"Yeah, Mary thumbed through that book at Christmas. She couldn't stop talking about it when we got home. Raved about it, called it positively revolutionary. A lot of it went over my head but well, it wasn't often that I heard Mary gush."

"Well, she was right to."

"And your mother never accepts these offers?"

"Never. From what I can glean she is never even tempted. No, she sought to change the world through her children."

"I suppose she did."

"Mmm." Sherlock said noncommittally. "My father is a quantum chemist with an interest in organic chemistry as well. He taught for many years at Cambridge, eventually retired after declining a departmental chair. Now he likes to do his little "scribblings" as he calls them. Of course, those scribblings are submitting papers to academic journals and working on of the three books he's writing. All this when he isn't misplacing his glasses."

"I thought...well, I thought they were just sort of ordinary pensioners," John said with disbelief. "Your father spent ten minutes telling me about when they saw Hamilton and then showed me his commemorative t-shirt and mug."

"He is. They are. And they aren't."

"I just assumed so much. Sherlock, are you close to them?"

"As you well know, intellect, at least the way we tend to exercise it as a family is not very...cuddly. What I am trying to tell you is they are just like me, just like Mycroft. You cannot get close to my parents. They are their own unit. They have their own symbiosis and they are a decidedly closed
"Darling, I didn't know. And for the record, you're not like that anymore. Give yourself a little credit."

"I didn't want to tell you, not exactly." He replied, ignoring the entire second half of John's comment.

"Sherlock, we absolutely don't have to do this. If you're going out of a feeling of obligation, I mean...well...please don't."

"I want to go. Human interaction is complicated. The connections between parents and children, it can and often is just as complex as romantic relationships. That said, I often don't like who I am around them. I don't like the things I say and do. It's so difficult to remain clear-headed and focused around their chatter and...machinations."

John reached out and slipped his fingers into Sherlock's hair, gently scratching his scalp.

"I'll keep you right." He said.

Sherlock nodded but didn't say anything.

He didn't say anything for awhile until;

"I want to tell them. About us, I mean. I want to tell them."

"Ok, I figured as much." John replied, surprised at the sudden vehemence with which it was said. "Have they griped at you over the years? About finding someone."

"On occasion, but it isn't that. This will be mine. It'll be something that can't take away. Something they didn't have a hand in. Something they can't...contort. I want to tell them."

There was something underneath Sherlock's emphatic sentences that John couldn't quite put his finger on. It bothered him, yes, but he chalked it up to the idea that his partner's nerves were rubbing off on him.

"We'll tell them." John reassured him.

"No, I want to tell them. I want it to come from my lips."

"Ok, love. You'll tell them and I'll stand at your side."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He felt safe admitting it to himself now in a way that he hadn't before. He was excited. Not to see Sherlock's parent's, not exactly. But...he was excited to be claimed. He was excited that after today two more people were going to know. He was excited that Sherlock placed him, them on a high enough echelon in his life that their relationship was worthy of being discussed, acknowledged. It was silly, really, he knew that. And he didn't quite have the courage to tell Sherlock, but that was ok. For right now it was enough to sit with this warm little coal of happiness, glowing inside him. Ugh, it was so saccharine even he almost cringed. Almost.

"Now..." John continued. "If I ask you something will you take it at face value and not like I'm insinuating something?"
"I don't assume you're insinuating things-"

"You do, all the time," John replied good-naturedly. "So, will you not this time?"

"Fine. What is your question."

"Do you love them?"

It was as close as John dared to get in this moment to asking him do you think they abused you, manipulated you, hurt you, put their needs always, always before your own.

"Yes."

That was all he said. Just yes. Not an indignant yes or even one that implied he thought the question untoward. Just, yes.

"Ok."

"May I ask you one in return?"

"Of course."

"Did you love your father?"

"No," he said and Sherlock looked at him briefly. "In fact if I could have gotten away with it I would have killed him stone dead. If he'd ever laid a hand on Harry again I would have killed whether I could have gotten away with it or not."

Upon arrival, Sherlock's parents greeted him warmly. He hadn't seen them since that Christmas but they had sent a lovely and tasteful arrangement for Mary's funeral.

A few steps inside their house he realized he'd forgotten to ask Sherlock just what they knew about his drinking and rehab and-

"John, you look positively refreshed!" His mother exclaimed. "Healthy tone, good weight. I'm so glad to see you well."

"Well, thank you so much." He said with a smile. "It's very good to see you too. Thank you for being kind enough to have me."

"Oh nonsense, you're always welcome. You know, a very good friend of mine was a drinker. She used to get absolutely Dot Cottoned."

So he had told her everything.

"Mother." Sherlock said.

"She did, she was bluttered most of the time. Until one day and that was that."

"Well, what happened?" John prompted.

"She joined a cult, shaved her head and moved to Hertfordshire."

"Is that what happened to Nancy?" Mr. Holmes asked.

"No, Nancy married a plumber and moved to Swansea." His wife replied. "Gretchen joined a cult."
"Oh, oh of course." He agreed.

"Now, if any of these presents are for me, boys I already told Sherlock I didn't want anything." She said motioning to the gift bag. "It is, after all, Father's Day on Sunday. Nothing at all to do with me." She insisted.

"It was John's idea," Sherlock said with a shrug.

"It was a joint effort." John supplied as Sherlock's mum made her way over to coo about her son.

"You look so healthy too. So tall and strong and handsome. You've even got a bit of colour. Why if I didn't know better-"

"Could we have some tea, Mother. I see the kettles' on. We can sit down and you can open your gifts." Sherlock said and John could hear the attempt to blunt the sharpness in his voice.

Putting their bags just out of the way they four seated themselves at the pleasantly cluttered kitchen table. Mrs. Holmes immediately launched into a story, gossip it seemed, about many of the things Sherlock had missed since his last visit.

John listened genially but every time he glanced at Sherlock he saw him twisting in on himself tighter and tighter. He wanted to reach out, to grab his hand to be a steadying presence. But he was reluctant to jump the gun. This was Sherlock's show. At least for now. Sherlock could lead and he could follow. That was more than fine. He was more than certain that he'd feel better once it was all out in the open. He knew he would.

By the time John returned his focus to Sherlock's mum even he had lost the narrative thread of the story. She was asking her husband something but shaking her head at every answer he gave.

"No, the one who hosted The Generation Game." She said.

"Graham Norton?" He asked.

"No, the other one."

"Bruce Forsyth?"

"No! The racist one."

"She means Jim Davidson." Sherlock said with a weary sigh.

"That's right!" His mother said. "Jim Davidson. Her dog looks just like Jim Davidson that's what I was thinking when-"

"Yes, well, hadn't you better open your gifts?" Sherlock said cutting her off.

"If you insist dear." She said with a shrug.

With the Fathers Day gifts put aside until Sunday the Holmes parents set about opening their presents.

"What a lovely cock!" Mrs. Holmes said upon seeing the wooden rooster John had purchased. She'd enjoyed the other things but the wooden carving seemed to be the big hit. "Father, look at the handsome cock that John and Sherlock bought."

"Please stop saying that word," Sherlock said and John, like a child, giggled.
"It is a very lovely. It'll fit in nicely with the cocks you have displayed on the sill." His father insisted.


"Stop being such a child, Sherlock." His mother shushed. "These are all very thoughtful of the both of you."

John accepted a kiss on the cheek from her. Sherlock did as well but stiffened in the process. John had noticed when they’d first arrived that he’d first arrived that he’d embraced her rather robotically. He recalled their first meeting and the way Sherlock had quickly ushered them out of the flat upon Johns arrival. He’d also been rather cold to them that last Christmas, though a lot of what went on those few days was a blur. Considering everything that was to follow John had assumed Sherlock’s behavior added up to being distracted. Who wouldn’t be? But now, after what his partner had spoken about in the car with trepidation in his voice, he could no longer believe his reactions were the result of immediate circumstances. This was apparently how he normally behaved.

He immediately thought of Mrs. Hudson.

He couldn't help it and no matter how much the contrast started to bother him he couldn't quite stop. Mrs. Hudson was the first person John ever saw Sherlock smile at. The first person he ever saw him embrace. His landlady, who he saw every day, he hugged her. He’d snapped at Mycroft on more than one occasion when he belittled her and once even threw him out of the flat. Mrs. Hudson who feeds him up. Feeds them both up, truth be told and brings Sherlock his tea and biscuits just like he liked them. Mrs. Hudson who fusses about not being their housekeep while keeping their house. Mrs. Hudson who'd hoped they’d be together and take care of one another. Mrs. Hudson for whom Sherlock had thrown a man who had dared lay a finger on her out of a window. Mrs. Hudson who he kisses on the cheek. Mrs. Hudson for whom he had a stern word with Mr. Chatterjee and warned him not to mess about with her heart anymore.

He'd yet to hear the full story of how they met. If she'd come to him for help. Implored him. But they’d known each other for years now and she had only grown dearer to him, he knew that much. He knew enough. Sherlock loved Mrs. Martha Louise Hudson, body and soul. He wanted her presence, needed her presence and this fact was so well known that she made her way to Moriarty's kill list. Mrs. Hudson who he trusted enough to know that she'd secured The Woman's phone from his second best dressing gown. Mrs. Hudson who, if she left Baker Street, England fall. But perhaps it wasn't England that Sherlock was worried about falling.

It made Sherlock's reticence which bordered on recoiling from his mother all the more apparent. He wondered if he had always been this way or if things had turned decidedly chillier since Eurus. He wondered if Sherlock was even aware on a subconscious level that he had switched allegiances.

It also answered another question that had been nagging at John for years.

*Did they know, too? That you spent the last two years playing hide and seek?*

*Maybe.*

*Ah! So that's why they weren't at the funeral.*

But that didn't quite make sense. The point of telling them would have been two-fold. First, so they wouldn't worry. But second, so they would make an appearance, pay their fake respects for their youngest son. Unless...unless their appearance would raise more suspicion because he and his
parents were effectively estranged. Unless what for anyone else would seem like a normal act of mourning would, in fact, be extremely out of character.

No. This wasn't something new only brought about by the secrets of Eurus. This had history, he decided.

"John?" A voice asked and from the tone, he could tell it wasn't the first time.

"Sorry, miles away." He said apologetically. "What were you saying?"

"I was saying you boys should take your things up to your rooms and get scrubbed up for dinner."

Rooms. Plural. Well, the moment had come a little sooner than he'd planned. But here they were. And he was excited. He'd only done it once before, sure, but, he liked this part. The part where they reaffirmed what they meant to one another. The part where they claimed each other.

He glanced at Sherlock and raised his eyebrows as if to say; You ready?

Sherlock opened his mouth to speak, closed it and then tried again.

"Thank you, Mother. We'll drop our things in our rooms." He said quickly before heading out of the kitchen.

That was that.

No announcement.

Not a word.

Sherlock didn't even wait for him to catch up and he didn't glance behind him.

I want to tell them.

The tremor in his voice. The underlying current of panic.

There were other lies too. There were likely as many different kinds of lies as there were people on the planet.

I want to tell them.

This was the lie you spoke aloud as fast and as strongly as you could because you hoped it would become honest. You hoped you could breathe life into it like a golem and it would take the shape of truth if not become truth itself.

But your hands shook and your voice shook and you were as unsteady in the force behind your words as you were in your desire.

That was what John couldn't put his finger on then but he could now.

And that was the lie Sherlock told.

As he watched him disappear down the hall, John picked up his bags.

He had no choice but to follow.
A/N: Sorry this is so late. I was going to post it as one massive 10,000 + word chapter but decided to split it up. Plus, I'm still working on the second part and I got tired of waiting for me to finish. :) This is an incredibly busy work week so I'm not sure if/when I'll get the second part up but I'm working on it.

I went through a very brief re-watch of His Last Vow so I could get a good look at the Holmes' kitchen. Sherlock's mum does have an awful lot of mugs and a few wooden roosters. And for the rest of Sherlock's suggestions I literally just went to the TK Maxx website and wrote down the first things I saw. LOL

Ok, everyone, it's an ugly world out there. Growing uglier by the day, it seems. Be kind to one another and take care of yourselves.

-Maribor
They had the same rooms as last Christmas. Sherlock in his childhood bedroom and John in the larger one he'd shared with Mary.

He was, in a word, flabbergasted, when Sherlock walked away and without so much as a glance back, headed to his bedroom. John stood there in the upstairs hallway gawping at his back for a moment before turning in the opposite direction and going to his own quarters. Everything was fresh and clean, the bed newly turned down but he barely gave any of it a passing glance. Instead, he set his bag on the floor and promptly went toward Sherlock's bedroom.

Without giving him much of a choice he stepped inside, closed and locked the door behind him.

Sherlock was facing away from him, removing things from his bag in an orderly and distant fashion, setting them on the bed and refolding the already perfectly folded clothes.

"Do you mind telling me what the hell that was?"

"Shhhh!" He said turning sharply and putting a finger to his lips. "Lower your voice."

"I thought you wanted to tell her we were sharing a bedroom. I thought you wanted to tell them both we were together." He whispered. He tried hard to keep the harshness out of his voice. He knew this was difficult for his partner, it was written all over his face. But he'd thought that was one of the primary reasons Sherlock had invited him along. To ease things, to share things, to be in this together.

"I didn't think it was the right time." He said with a small shake of his head.

"Ok...when do you think the time will be right?"

Sherlock was rifling through his bag looking for something John would have bet didn't exist. But it kept him from having to make eye contact which he really seemed against at the moment.

"I don't know, John."

"Do you want me to say it? I can if you like." He approached him and put his hand on his back. It was a warm day and though Sherlock had decided to go semi-casual in his attire, well, semi-casual for him, the men's dress shirt was the wrong material for this late in spring. It was slightly damp against his skin. "Sweetheart, you're going to soak through this." He said quietly, soothingly as he rubbed his back.

He felt it happen but his disbelieving mind didn't quite register it even after Sherlock arched away from his touch.

"Please just...just stop."

John shook his head trying to wrap his mind around Sherlock moving away from him.

"Stop what? Stop touching you?"

"No...yes, I...just need a few moments to myself if that's alright?" He said, his voice strained as he stood with his back to John.

"Fine. A few moments to yourself. Fine." John said trying to quell the swift anger.
This is difficult for him. He tried to remind himself. Coming home, coming back here after everything that happened, this is difficult.

Without another word he opened the door and left the room and returned to his own.

John sat on the bed just to gather his thoughts for a moment. The pain in his tooth (Yes, Mary, the pain.) had come back full force and he rummaged through his bag to find the bottle, popped the top and took two of the pills. A second later he thought better of it and took one more.

John closed his eyes for a moment, trying to digest what exactly had happened. What was happening. He was willing to hear him out and half hoped and assumed Sherlock might knock on his door, if not chagrined then at least willing to talk and explain. But he didn't knock. He didn't seem as though he were coming at all. The trip had left him uncomfortable, stiff and sweaty. Sighing heavily he again got to his feet and with a change of clothes in hand headed to the shower.

If he'd had any idea, even the slightest inkling of what awaited him at dinner he would have begged off. Pretended to be ill or too tired from the trip and just remained in his room.

But he didn't and so he went with a smile on his face. He could, after all, pretend to just be Sherlock's friend. They were friends. Being lovers hadn't stopped that and, contrary to what Sherlock seemed to imply earlier he didn't need to be touching him all the time.

That had hurt. John had tried to shake off the feeling in the shower but it remained, lingering. When he'd last spoken to Hanah they discussed self-esteem both pre and post-rehab. Even as he was saying to her he felt good. That he'd always felt rather good, he knew he was lying. He was in fact, easily crushed. The truth of that embarrassed him to no end which of course, Hanah said was a useless and unhelpful emotion. But that didn't exactly change the situation. And though he was loath to admit it, his self-esteem had just taken a heavy hit all courtesy of Sherlock. Was he touching him too much? Was his too clingy? Too affectionate? Too much? Some of his past girlfriends would have laughed at that thought. John Watson, too emotionally involved? Chance would be a fine thing, they'd say. Now, too horny? That's whole other situation altogether. Always up for it, always eager, always willing to lift a skirt or pull down some panties, always with one thing on his mind...

John, you know we don't always have to...

Don't always have to what?

Nothing.

But no. When was the last time Sherlock didn't speak his mind?

Well, an hour or so ago, as a matter of fact.

But this was different. He would have told him. He would have just said it. Besides, he didn't seem as though he wasn't enjoying himself. Not at all. They both were.

No, this was fine.

They were fine.

Again, he knew something else was going on here. He could take this. He could handle it. If Sherlock didn't even really care that much about his parents emotionally then maybe it didn't matter if they knew.
That was the thought he tried to keep in the forefront of his mind as they began eating. None of this really mattered. They were still together.

When the conversation turned to Mary he thought there'd be some polite discussion, remembrances and then moving on. Instead, Sherlock's mother had a good deal to say about his dead wife, a great deal. None of it negative, all glowing in fact. All about how she could tell, even though things had been strained and stressed what a lovely and amazing marriage they'd had.

That part was fine.

Then she talked, at length, about how tragic it was that she was taken so soon.

That too was fine...sort of.

Then she talked about the trials and tribulations of depression.

This too was relatively fine.

But then...then she talked about moving on. About how he mustn't rule the possibility of love out of his life. About how he never knew what might happen, who he might find.

That was not fine.

But what truly wasn't good, not in the least was the fact that Sherlock didn't make a sound. Not so much as a word, though she was giving him every opportunity. Silent and preoccupied he barely even acknowledged the conversation and John felt his patience and his pain meds wearing thin. It wasn't even so much that he needed him to out himself in that moment. But to just say something. To draw the conversation in another direction. To provide some interference, some cover.

But he didn't say anything. Instead, he just pushed food around on his plate like Rosie might.

"I know it's difficult but if you're looking you can't go about still wearing that wedding ring. It looks as though you're still attached."

He quickly removed his ring hand from sight, feeling embarrassed, as always, when someone called attention to it.

"Another lovely woman may just come along, John." She continued as Sherlock's father nodded along to the sentiment. "You never know."

"I don't know, you're right. And, yes, she very well may." John agreed and at that Sherlock's head jerked in his direction. Finally.

It was a petty thing to do. Petty and small. But he was feeling small. He was willing to go along with any ruse, anything at all but he at least deserved an explanation. If Sherlock wanted or needed to freeze his parents out of this part of his life, John could deal with that. But a sudden 180 left him frozen out too. And that was not sitting well. Not at all.

After dessert and coffee, John professed to being tired from the long car trip and asked to be excused. Mr. and Mrs. Holmes wished him goodnight. He nodded at Sherlock and left to head to the privacy of his bedroom.

Once there he changed quickly into his nightwear and pulled out one of the books from Hanah's pile that he'd brought with him.
But reading wasn't really what he was in the mood for and after about 10 minutes of staring at the same words on the same page and not absorbing anything he closed the book.

Taking out his laptop, he woke it from sleep and opened an ever-growing document file.

He had an odd way of writing, couldn't exactly do it in a linear fashion. And though he was knee deep in the meat of the story by this point, he hadn't been able to come up with an opening. Until now.

*There are many dangers that arise when you walk alongside Sherlock Holmes. The dangers of London. The danger posed by the criminals that scuttle in and out of the shadows. The danger of finding yourself caught in a web you realize only too late was spun just for you. But there is another danger, for me at least. The danger of watching him and nothing else. There is a brilliance to my old friend, a sort of captivating pull to watching him work. If I wasn't careful I found myself drawn in, focusing far more on the how he deduced than the case he was deducing. What follows is a recounting of just such an instance that I'll call "The Case of the Agony Column". Otherwise known as the time where we both nearly got the other one killed.*

It was funny, despite how furious he was at Sherlock at the moment he could still write him the way he saw him on the best of days in the best of lights. His anger didn't affect that. If anything, maybe it made him think more clearly. He'd been working on this story for quite awhile, ping-ponging back from one section to another, checking his notes to make sure the facts were straight. But he struggled with this part. How to start it off. How to welcome the initiated and uninitiated into the world he lived in and shared with Sherlock Holmes? How to prepare them for an adventure?

He liked it. He didn't love it. But he liked it and that was a start. This was, for now, a secret passion. It was likely to remain secret truth be told. But for a while now the confines of the blog had felt too confining.

He found himself consumed with "What if..." What if he tried his hand at something more? Something a little more ambitious, and grand? What if he tried expanding the blog? What if he started from the beginning and didn't skip anything this time around? What if he had an actual knack for this? What if he tried? What if?

Eric had brought up the concept as recently as this morning's meeting.

**The Big Book**, page 110

"To watch the eyes of men and women open with wonder as they move from darkness into light, to see their lives quickly fill with new purpose and meaning."

"I think in AA our reach should exceed our grasp. This isn't to say we should be trying for the impossible or that we should ignore the daily steps and successes. But I'm a believer that this shouldn't simply be about rebuilding our lives. Sobriety should be about finding new purpose and new meaning in addition to the old. Alcoholism and addiction barrelled through and we allowed and helped it to ravage our lives. If our lives were, metaphorically, a self-contained little house, then this was a storm that blew through and leveled it to the ground. So, what do we do? We start to rebuild. And that's good. That's a big, hard job and it is to be admired and applauded, but, this is also a time to consider, do we want something more? Because if there is one benefit, one dark joy to be found in destruction it is that we can set out sights on constructing something new. So, do you have a new purpose? A new meaning? Is there something you'd like to try, something you'd like to do or learn or see? I don't want you to think in terms of big or small. And I don't want you to think in terms of something necessarily material. Now, I'm not saying a trip around the world wouldn't do everyone some good but I live in the real world, right here on this planet where we all have money problems
and families issues and obligations. So, let's not focus on things like that. Let's focus on internal things, day to day things. Things that help to lift our spirit. Things that drive out the darkness. What's your new purpose? What's your new meaning?"

It felt silly, premature, fatuous, egotistic to even think of himself as a writer but...the draw was strong and getting stronger every day.

Why not? He asked himself quietly, but only in his head. He didn't dare ask aloud. Why not?

Of course, there were other "What if's?" What if he wasn't good enough? Smart enough...

Shit.

Oh shit, smart enough.

Maybe that was it...maybe that was the reason Sherlock had changed his mind.

Maybe when confronted with the idea of introducing him; the very dull, the very ordinary, the very average John H. Watson as his partner, Sherlock had panicked. Maybe it was too much. What had Sherlock called his mind, ages ago? Placid. Straightforward. Barely used. He was, after all, just a scrap of ordinary.

There was yet another body blow to his self-esteem. Brought down another peg. He knew how Mycroft saw him. Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Holmes were the same. Perhaps now it had finally spread to Sherlock.

The room seemed to suddenly have a lot less air in it than it did moments before. Carelessly he flung the laptop to the side as a wave of nausea overtook him. He swung his legs over the side of the bed but upon contact, the floor felt pliable, like wet sand beneath his feet. He hurried toward the loo, staggering through red trees and ionized particles, unsure as to whether his dinner was going to come back up again.

"A panic attack. A goddamn panic attack. Right here. of course. Of course right fucking here and right fucking now." He muttered as he sank to the ground next to the toilet.

He lifted the lid and the seat as a precaution but followed that by leaning his head back and resting it against the wall.

He felt that unmistakable adrenaline sweat start to run from his pores and it wasn't long before the collar and armpits of his t-shirt were soaked.

"Fuck. Anywhere but here." He whispered.

He wished he was anywhere but right here. It suddenly felt alien and unwelcoming and he longed for the familiarity and yes, the safety of Baker Street.

All he wanted to do was leave this feeling behind.

All he wanted to do was leave the Red Forest behind.

It took 5 minutes before his heart stopped racing. 10 minutes before the sweating and the tremors in his hand stopped. Another 5 before he was able to get to his feet and go back to bed.

He needed a distraction because everything around him was trying to pull his mind back toward the dark thoughts and the dark ideas of what might be crumbling around him. Everything wanted to pull
him back kicking and screaming to that massive prison of weeds and bark.

He grabbed at his laptop, woke it from sleep and went to his email. Nothing much there upon first glance. Real Estate agents doing cold contacts, trying to see if he was interested in selling the house. Essentially just a lot of spam and nonsense.

But, there was also a surprise.

He was just about to open the email when there came a tentative knock on the door.

He didn't say anything at first. Instead, he just sat on the bed, perfectly still.

Another knock, softer this time.

Apologetic.

_Knocks aren't apologetic, you knob._ He chastised himself internally.

"Come in." He said finally, not looking up. Of course, it was Sherlock. He knew it was Sherlock.

The handle turned, the figure stepped in on bare feet and shut the door behind him. He walked across the room and John felt the weight shift the mattress as he sat.

They both sat like that on the bed, John unwilling to give even an inch. He wasn't going to start this conversation. He wasn't going to let Sherlock in or give him an opening. If he had something to say he could say it. If he didn't, well he could march the fuck out.

"You're probably looking for an explanation," Sherlock said.

"An explanation would have been good a few hours ago," John said still not looking up. His voice was hoarse and unused and he cleared his throat to strengthen it.

"You're cross." He said with a short nod of his head.

"Oh no, Sherlock. We have rocketed past cross. I am pissed." John knew that Sherlock was frowning and likely appearing at least mildly contrite without even looking at him.

He wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of eye contact.

When Sherlock put his hand atop John's knee and gave it a squeeze the latter moved, pushing him away.

"I'd really rather you didn't do that, mate." John replied.

"Mate." Sherlock repeated, rolling the word around on his tongue and clearly finding it unappealing.

"That's what we are, right? Mates? Pals? Buddies?"

"You know that's not true."

"Yeah, not sure where I could have gotten that idea."

"You didn't mean what you said?" Sherlock began. "About finding another lovely woman, did you?"

"That's what you came in here to ask? Unbelievable. Well, I'll tell you, after everything that's
happened tonight I'm not certain you'd care."

"Don't be ridiculous-"

John raised his gaze from the laptop which he had only been staring at blindly and glowered at his partner. Sherlock for a moment seemed taken aback by the anger he saw on his partners face but recovered soon enough.

"No. No don't tell me not to be ridiculous when all of a sudden you've gone back into a closet you told me yourself they never even put you into. You let your mother prattle on about me finding love again and settling down and a mother for Rosie. You let her do this right in front of you without so much as a sound. Just a word, Sherlock. You could have said just a few words to put a stop to it. You could have changed the subject to literally anything else. You didn't have to pull the bloody rainbow flag out of your arse but you could have said a word. For me. But you just left me out there twisting in the goddamn wind like a fool. So yeah...you'll have to excuse me if your silence might make me think you were questioning things."

He hadn't expected that last part to come out.

This was their first test of coming out to an audience where the reception was not guaranteed. Neither of them really thought any of their friends would kick up a fuss at John's return home party. But this was different. And if this was enough to cause Sherlock to have second thoughts...

"Being here...is bringing up very complicated memories for me. Memories I didn't expect. No...no I don't want to tell my parents now. I just can't." Sherlock drew in and released a ragged breath. Something about the atmosphere here, the bedroom, the knowledge that his parents were present just a few rooms away, even what he was wearing to bed all combined to make Sherlock look very young, a little small and clearly very rattled.

Unexpected memories.

That one was hard to argue with.

John sighed and debated with himself on whether or not to press him on those memories.

He softened. He softened as much out of sympathy and confusion as out of exhaustion. His body still felt shaky and slightly weak from his earlier bout of illness. He simply didn't have the energy to stay mad at him tonight. He just didn't want to.

"You know, you can talk to me about those memories. That's part of the reason I'm here. And I don't mean here in this house I mean here in your life. It always has been."

"Not just now." He said again shutting his eyes.

"Ok, ok." John said and steeling himself he reached out to cup his chin. "And no, you daft man there is no lovely woman I'm waiting for. There's you and only you. I just wanted to...to lash out."

"I understand."

John leaned in and kissed him. It was rather quick as he wasn't certain Sherlock could handle much more. The kiss was returned in kind and then his partner simply embraced him. He felt his body shudder for a moment and again wanted to press on and figure out just what had frightened him so badly. Why had he changed his mind? But he imagined all would be revealed in its own time. Or at least he hoped.
"John?" He asked still resting his chin on John's shoulder as they hugged.

"Hmmp?" He asked.

"Are you alright?"

"What? Oh you mean because I'm kinda clammy? Yeah, don't worry, I'll take a shower in a bit. Sorry, I got-"

"No, I didn't mean that. I mean I can smell the sick sweat on you, so yes I'm concerned about that as well. But I meant is your tooth still bothering you?"

"Yeah, every now and then. Actually, it was earlier. Why?"

"I see you have a new prescription."

Ah yes, He'd left the pill bottle on the nightstand. He tried not to stiffen in his arms but felt it was unlikely he succeeded. He didn't want to be questioned about this, about something so small and insignificant, not now.

"Yes, what of it?"

"Nothing. I... hope the pain fades soon." He said quietly.

John gathered himself, having braced for an argument but relieved when none came.

"Ditto." He said pulling him tighter against him. "But I'm here. Long beyond this weekend, I'm here."

"Ditto."

The hug was nice and needed and only now did John realize how much they hadn't been touching in the last few hours. He put his hand in Sherlock's hair before running it down his neck and finally his back. He could feel the knotted muscles beneath his fingertips; tight and inflexible.

"You're really tense." He said.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Want me to help? I can loosen you up, relax you?"

To his surprise, Sherlock pulled away as he made an irritated noise in his throat.

"You know, not everything can be solved by that, John."

John frowned at him in confusion.

"Solved by what?" He paused. "You think that was a come on? I was offering a massage."

"I'm sure." With an obvious roll of his eyes.

"Not everything is about sex, Sherlock."

"Oh, now that's really my line don't you think?"

"I beg your pardon?"
"It's always about sex with you, John. Anytime anything comes up you think it can be handled by an orgasm."

John was completely caught off guard but through his anger, he rallied.

"You know what, Sherlock, fuck you. I didn't realize I was such an overwhelming fucking burden. I'll keep my hands to myself then, alright?"

"I doubt that you could." He sniped.

"Believe or not, you're not that irresistible. Especially now."

John returned to his laptop, ignoring his boyfriend and opened the email had been just about to dive into before.

"What are you doing you?" Sherlock asked after a moment clearly upset at both the truncated argument and being ignored.

"Responding to email."

"In the middle of a row?"

"I'm sorry, are we arguing? I was done. Plus, I assumed you'd have to be running off for Mummy to tuck you in."

"Is it a work, email? Something about a case" He asked with a frown.

"Duck."

"Duck?"

"It's a Duck email. An email from Duck. He's going to be in town and wanted to know if I'd be interested in having dinner. I think it sounds like a marvelous idea. Don't you?"

Sherlock didn't say anything but then John had most certainly gotten the last word. He was probably fuming, jealousy and anger were likely colouring his features. John didn't care, he was wounded and hurt from what felt like an unprovoked attack. He could give as good as he got.

"I think we're done here for tonight," John said glancing up before looking toward the door dismissively. "You should probably just head back to your room now."

Worldlessly Sherlock did just that.

It was a minor victory and as John was starting his reply to the email he felt vindicated.

Like all victories of that sort, it soon soured.

John had hoped they'd have ended this first night with two new allies to their still new, still fresh relationship.

Instead, it ended with he and Sherlock not speaking.

Sherlock was gone in the morning.

After a restless and largely sleepless night, John had gone down to the Holmes kitchen for breakfast
but found only the parents. He wasn't exactly sure that he wanted to make up, at least not just yet, but he'd figured they'd feel one another out. See where they stood with the sun up. That, apparently, wasn't going to happen.

"Yes, he marched out about an hour ago, said he had things to take care of. Fancy some breakfast, John?" Mr. Holmes replied when he noticed John's silent, searching look about the room. "I'm a whiz in the kitchen these days."

"Um, sure. Whatever is easiest, I'm not picky." John cleared his throat and sat down as Mrs. Holmes put a mug of tea before him.

"I'm using one of the ones you boys bought me." She said with a smile.

"Yeah, that's great. Glad you liked them. So, um, he didn't say where he was going?"

"Oh no," she said. "You know how Sherlock is."

John nodded.

"I do indeed."

"I had wanted his help today but of course he disappears." She said with a shake of her head.

"Is it something I can help with?" John asked.

"That would be lovely. Would you mind going with me to the shop later this morning? There are a few heavy items I'd like to get. There's no telling when my youngest is coming back."

"Of course I'd be happy to help." He replied by rote.

It wasn't until a few moments later when her words actually resounded in his ear.

My youngest.

She could have meant her youngest son. But he didn't think so. And since he knew it was unlikely Eurus was to be released anytime soon for good behaviour...well. Had both the Holmes parents "Redbeard-ed" their daughter out of their lives as well. After everything that had happened they had to know she was alive. Did they just not care?

He'd just assumed that...

But he stopped himself. Assumed what? That the entire Holmes family has sat themselves down and had a heart to heart? Truly discussed things, from start to finish. That couldn't be more unlikely.

Still, John lost himself enough in these thoughts that the next thing he knew he was in the bread aisle of the nearest grocery, pushing a trolley, while Mrs. Holmes went over her list.

"And how is your daughter? How is Rosie?" She asked as she scratched off an item on the paper in her hand.

Sherlock's mother was, as Mary had once put it, a woman of presence. She was short, a bit round and she seemed partial to flowy clothes that floated around her figure as opposed to clinging. She was more likely to wear her silver hair up than down, captured by an army of pins to keep it in place. She had piercing eyes that seemed almost designed to make one nervous. Or at least that was how he felt.
"She is formidable, I'll say that for her." Mary had added.

"What do you mean? She spent most of her time trying to ply us with tea and biscuits. Hardly what I'd call formidable. Rather like Mrs. Hudson, I thought."

Mary had smiled at him. It had been a long and rough night. After saying goodbye to Sherlock, knowing really knowing he'd never see him again...he had been joyfully, if not oddly reunited with him moments later after Moriarty's message. But then they'd had to contend with him coming down, crashing. He'd refused to go to hospital and instead he and Mary and Mycroft and Sherlock had returned to Baker Street to tend to their friend. John had doctored him while Mary nursed and Mycroft fretted until he was told to just go home. The commotion had awakened a sleeping Mrs. Hudson and when she saw Sherlock in such a bad way she'd planted herself next to him, stroking his sweat-slicked hair. He'd smiled faintly and angled himself closer to the touch.

"No," Mary had said later that night after Sherlock was settled and sleeping for the night. "She's nothing like Mrs. Hudson."

"Wonderful, actually. My sister took care of her while I was getting well and she's just come along marvelously. Kind, chatty, charming, smart."

Mrs. Holmes smiled indulgently before reaching for a box of cereal.

"How smart?" She asked.

John frowned for a moment in confusion.

"Beg pardon."

"You said she was smart." She replied as she set the item in the trolley just before locking eyes with him. "How smart?"

"I...smart as a whip. I mean, she knows her colors and animals, she speaks clearly, gets her point across." John chuckled dryly and humorlessly but she just kept looking at him, studying him in a way he found both familiar and alien. Sherlock had studied him in the beginning but it had felt a lot less foreign, less probing. "What... I mean... would you like a number?"

Her face broke into an almost convincing smile.

"Oh don't be daft, John." She said turning away and walking ahead. He then started to push the shopping trolley after her.

He laughed a bit louder but it was mostly out of relief that she wasn't looking at him anymore. What was that Sherlock had said? About he and Mycroft always handling her in tandem. Never alone.

"I was starting to think you wanted her IQ." He joked.

"Preposterous." She chuckled.

"Yeah, well I-"

"IQ test results before the age of 4 are historically unreliable. Absolutely useless. She should be at least 6."

He stopped where he was even as she rounded a corner and vanished out of sight.

"Don't dawdle, dear!" She called out and he hurried to catch up. When he did she was looking at
coffee, the cheap stuff that all pensioners seem to drink as if they'd lost what mattered of their taste buds.

"Mary was a genius." She said and it wasn't a question but a statement of fact.

"Why do you say that?" He asked quickly. He was still, after all this time protective of his dead wife and the secrets she wanted to keep.

Mrs. Holmes gave him a slight eye roll that again reminded him of his partner.

"John." She said wearily. "I'm making a larger point. Mary's past is incidental."

"And that point is?"

"Can you reach the wheat flour. That one, just there?"

John cleared his throat and reached for the container she was pointing to, getting it down and setting it next to the other items.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now-"

"Boys are so much easier than girls."

"I'm sorry?" He asked. It was hard to know where she was going next and he speculated that was exactly the point.

"To raise, I mean. Boys just tend to raise themselves, they need very little looking after."

"I'm not entirely sure I agree with that."

"Well, I've raised two so I speak with some authority on the subject. Take Mycroft, for instance. He was always just a bit slow. And Sherlock always a little too over emotional. Oh, you never want to think ill of your children of course. This is just something you speak about late at night with your spouse once they've gone to bed. But it's true. We thought giving Mycroft more responsibility might fire something in him but it didn't work. But this is my point. I suggest you get Rosie's IQ tested as soon as reasonably possible. That way you'll know her abilities and limitations. When and where to push her. If you know what a child is capable of you can guide them. You don't want her to be lazy or undisciplined. Mary was remarkable and Rosamund has every chance to be just so. We tried that with Mycroft but he proved limited. But that doesn't mean I don't stand by the theory."

John knew that the brothers were frequently needling one another about their intelligence and who was in fact, the smarter Holmes. But buried within it, not all that deep was a real sincere respect and admiration for what the other brought to the table. John could see it plain as day. And neither of them is what he would ever call slow.

"Still," She continued. "We did our best. And it all officially started after the IQ tests. We had a good idea what we were dealing with early on, especially with Mycroft. We knew he was bright before he spoke his first words. The data that we got then was invaluable."

Nearly every part of him wanted to run from this conversation but the morbid part of him needed to keep it going. He knew this was important.

"What sort of data?"
"Do you like eggs? Or are you allergic?" She asked picking up a carton. "So many people are allergic to things nowadays." She said with a head shake.

"I'm fine with eggs. Please, what sort of data?"

"Oh, how he responded to stimuli, attention, distraction, affection. How he behaved when he was left alone in a room. What he was afraid of, what he wasn't. That was why we spaced the births apart. When we felt he was getting lazy, too coddled, too at ease we knew it was time for a second child.

John, it's not considered acceptable now but the truth is children are ripe for...experimentation. You have to be able to catalog and pinpoint their strengths and deficiencies because that's the only way you know what to encourage and what to shore them up against. For instance, Mycroft became absolutely obsessed with food, sweets mostly. Couldn't get enough of them. That meant they served as an ideal tool of motivation, a bargaining chip if you will. As for Sherlock, well, he would often become too attached to things. You don't want to raise an overly sentimental child, believe me. So, when we saw him obsessing over one particular item we would take it away."

"You'd take it away?" He asked in disbelief. "He was a child and you'd take away his toy?"

"Yes, of course. And he learned from it. But still, we were worried about his mawkish ways and the boys were getting too close, too secretive, too independent. So we decided it was time to have our third."

"Eurus. I looked up that name. It seems it always has a negative connotation in literature."

"Is that what you found?" She asked with a raise of her brow. "Not always. Eurus is harsh but fair. She sweeps away what needs sweeping. Leaving things cleaner, better, stronger. Eurus was meant to be the sunshine when the storm has cleared."

"Not exactly how things worked out."

This was absurd. This whole conversation was chillingly absurd. And the fact that they were currently having it as Mrs. Holmes hemmed and hawed over frozen chicken wings made it doubly absurd.

"No, no they didn't. But as I said, girls are harder. Father and I got what we wished for in Eurus. None of the sentimentality or anxiety or attachment of the boys. But we were, surprisingly to us, unprepared. We couldn't control her, couldn't steer and guide her. She caused nothing but disruption in the family. Eventually, we simply drifted apart from one another."

"Drifted ap- you can't drift apart from your own child!" He very nearly shouted and she turned on him quick as could be.

"Can't you?" She asked so pointedly he nearly took a step backward.

"A little boy died." He stated though not as firmly as he would have liked.

"And we grieved him. We tried to set things right. Tried to get her to tell us where he was and what happened. But it was no use."

The conversation stopped. They were approaching the checkout lane and things had to slide back into reality.

John unloaded the groceries onto the belt.
He watched Mrs. Holmes as she smiled at the cashier and pulled out a series of coupons neatly held together by a rubber band. He watched as she paid by cheque and he followed her back out to the car. He opened the passenger side door for her, let her get seated, shut it, then went to the trunk to begin loading in the items. Everything felt rather dreamlike and surreal. He couldn't quite believe what he'd been hearing and yet it all made sense, every bit of it, every single word. It fit with everything he knew about the brothers. His heart started to hurt when he imagined Sherlock; small, helpless, at their mercy, her mercy with Mycroft as his only trusted friend.

He did dawdle as he situated the groceries not eager for the short car trip back.

Eventually, though he had to get in and he did so, putting the key in the ignition and starting to drive before he'd even clicked his seat belt.

"It seemed like a miracle when Sherlock forgot it all. We thanked our lucky stars, you can believe that. We hoped things might return to normal but then there was the fire and Mycroft's deception."

She sighed heavily at those last words. She was still angry at her oldest son though John couldn't imagine why.

"But, we're trying to forgive, trying to mend things as a family."

They rounded the corner, perhaps a bit fast, that lead back to the Holmes property.

"The visits to Sherrinford help. All five of us together, you know. She's not my daughter now. She's something else altogether. But still..." She trailed off.

It took a moment, just a moment for his racing, tired brain to catch up.

"Five of you?"

"Yes, five. Me, Father, Mycroft and Sherlock visiting Eurus. She doesn't speak, of course. Doesn't say a word. But I think it's important that we see her."

"And Sherlock goes." Needing it clarified right that very moment. "Sherlock goes with you?"

"Of course he does. It's his sister. Typically he meets us there. We agree on a Saturday and that's that."

He'd never told him. All this time. He'd never told him.

A Saturday. He remembered a Saturday in fact where Sherlock said he had some business to take care of, business that didn't involve John or a case. John didn't push him on it and Sherlock seemed relieved. He honestly hadn't given it very much thought. No thought at all.

He was seeing her. He was seeing the woman that had nearly succeeded in killing him. He was seeing her behind his back.

"He brings his violin and he plays so beautifully. Though he really should practice more."

"Oh he plays for her, does he?" He asked his voice on the edge of one of those loose, mad laughs.

He pulled into their drive and put the car in park, his hand gripping the steering wheel so tightly it went beyond pain into numbness.

"Help me bring them inside, will you dear?" She asked as she exited the car.
"Yeah, of course."

John switched over to autopilot as he carried bag after bag into the house.

Duplicitous. That was the one word that kept running through his head over and over and over again. Duplicitous lies.

On his last trip to the car to grab the final bag he spotted him. There was Sherlock walking up the drive having nearly reached the car.

John stopped and glared at him. Simply glared.

From his perspective, Sherlock knew right away something was wrong. He paused and tilted his head as he analyzed the positioning of John's body, the set of his shoulders. John knew he was deducing that this was not just the anger from the previous night. This was something else entirely.

Sherlock resumed his pace, faster now, making a beeline for his partner. "John... John... what.."

"John?... John... what.."

But he didn't finish his sentence and instead turned to his mother.

"What did you say to him?" He shouted accusingly. "What did you do?"

"Say to him? I didn't say a thing, Sherlock." She protested.

And John believed her because he was certain, to her, she hadn't said a thing. Nothing at all.

To her this was normal. It was all normal. Their conversation, her children, their lives. Except for a few upsets and inconveniences, this was all perfectly normal.

High functioning sociopath. John now had an idea as to who had served as Sherlock's model.

John headed to the trunk, picked up and shoved the last bag of groceries into Sherlock's arms hard enough that his partner was pushed an inch or so backward by the force.

He felt sorry for the little boy and all that he had heard he'd been through. But he was enraged at the man.

"John, wait, please, just tell me-"

But Sherlock cut himself off and instead dashed toward the house, John suspected, to drop off the bag and interrogate his mum.

He wasn't going to wait because right now he didn't care. Right now he just wanted space between himself and this house of lunacy and he lets his striding pace carry him away as fast as it could John was striding away as fast as his feet could carry him.

Sherlock was soon behind him, feet audibly striking the pavement and then he was at his side.

"What did she say to you? Tell me, please."

"Go back home, Sherlock. We're not going to do this now, we are really not."

"Why?" He demanded.
"Because if you push me I may just say things I can't take back."

"It seems to me that if there were things in your mind dark enough that if you couldn't take them back they'd be so damning all is lost anyway."

"Is that what you want?" John asked suddenly, turning so quickly Sherlock nearly slammed into him. "Is that what this weekend was about. Some sort of stress test created to make me break. Put the stupid rat in maze that will make him break. Do you want me to do it because you don't have the stomach for it?"

"Do what?"

"End this. That seems to be where it's headed. Am I wrong."

The colour that drained from Sherlock's face told John he was indeed wrong. But he was unwilling to back off now. He was too incensed. Too angry. Too hurt.

"Why-"

"Don't. If you're about to ask me why would I think that I really suggest that you don't. Do you know why people lie about things, Sherlock? It's because they know what they're doing is wrong and if they admit it they'll have to own up to it and face what it makes them."

"I don't think we're wrong, John." He said firmly.

"I'm not talking about us you knob. No, actually, I am, I mean it could certainly be bent that way. But at that particular moment I was referring to something else."

"As much as I do love theater do you think you could truncate this speech and get to your point?" He snapped.

"Sherrinford. Truncated enough?"

Sherlock blanched and swallowed hard. He threw a quick glance back toward his parent's house and scowled.

"Sherrinford is my point. And the look on your face just told me everything I needed to know."

John said with a nod before he started to walk again.

"John, please, let me explain."

"Explain what? Explain how you've been sneaking off to see your sister at her high-security madhouse."

"I haven't been sneaking."

"The same sister who tried to kill me."

"If you'll-"

"Who LEFT ME TO DROWN in a well next to the bones of your former best friend! Is this at all ringing any bells with you? And I know what you're going to say because I left you wide open for it. What about Mary? What's the difference? Well, let me tell you the difference, everything. Mary and I were in the open. I never went behind your back saying one thing while omitting the truth only to pop up months later to announce; Guess what? I've mended fences with the woman who nearly killed you! Sure hope you're alright with that!"
"John-

"You lied to me. You lied about all of this, all of it." He roared, stopping and turning on him again.

"Do you think I want to do this? See her?" He shouted back.

"I don't know what you want, Sherlock!"

"I don't want to join some little family parade where we all march off and I play a recital with my mute, murderous sister. Do you think I feel as though I have a choice? No, I know what you think. You think I'm a weak little boy peeking out from behind his mother's skirts ready to do her bidding. You think I'm a coward."

"Then why do you do it!"

"Because I have never been able to say no to her." He said in a sharp exhale that was part shame part anger. "Because I am caught. Because when Mycroft and I come here as a pair we become children again but at least we are children together. I don't want her attention, I don't want to fall under her eye. Though it may sound counterintuitive the best way to remain ignored is to go with them all to Sherringford."

John felt his anger abating, or at the very least taking a bit of a breather. Sherlock looked unsteady on his feet and taking him by the elbow he lead him over to the shade of a tree. He sat down on the ground.

"Sit." He ordered him and Sherlock obeyed.

"You feel betrayed and I am sorry, John. I am deeply, deeply sorry. You called them ordinary when you first met them but they're not."

"I know they're not." He said simply. His voice was low and weary. He leaned his head back against the trunk of the tree and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry for not telling them about us. But...oh, it's so stupid when I even think about saying it aloud."

"What?" John asked still not able to look at him.

"When I was very small, my mother had this theory that I shouldn't be allowed to grow attached to my toys. I had this..." He paused to chuckled sadly. "This little stuffed dog I named Beauregard. I loved him as all children love their little animal toys. She saw that. One day I came home from playing and he was gone. I always left him on my bed, that was his place. I asked Mycroft where he'd gone but he said he didn't know. Though he wouldn't look me in the eye. I went all around the house looking for him, calling for him, as though he would answer. Finally, she came to me and told me to stop my caterwauling. She said Beauregard was gone and he wasn't coming back, not ever. She said it was very dangerous and foolish to place all your care and affection on one object because you were then telegraphing the one thing most important to you. The thing people knew to take away."

John slowly turned to look at him. Knowing where this was going but still needing to hear and watch it play out to believe it.

"I thought, stupidly...somehow I came back here and I thought if she saw how much I cared about you. How much I favoured you above all others...that she might somehow take you away." Sherlock sniffled. "It's stupid really."
For the first time since the prior evening, John reached out to touch Sherlock, taking his hand.

"I'm not a toy, Sherlock. No one can easily pluck me out of your life. I won't be discarded or run off, understand? Not even your mother can do that."

Sherlock gave him a broken smile and nodded.

"Don't hide things from me, anymore, alright? Just tell me. I may look delicate but I can take it."

He nodded and smiled more sincerely this time.

"You said you usually take your parents on in tandem, right? You and Mycroft. But he's just as much a slave to all of this as you. Listen to me. I'm not. I will be respectful and polite but I am under no obligation to take their shit anymore than anyone else's. I can be your tandem partner. I can be your other half. Now, I'm going to do something. I'm going to take charge right now and if you don't want me to, you can tell me. But you brought me up here to do something and I want to do it."

Sherlock nodded, content to let him do as he pleased. John took out his phone and brought up the web page of the hotel he'd investigated before they'd set out.

After a few minutes of quiet, he turned to his partner with a smile.

"We have a suite booked at the Dashwood Hotel, we check in this afternoon at 4."

Sherlock released a relieved sigh.

"We do?"

"We do." John said as he linked their fingers together. "I'm sorry I shouted at you. My temper has been...shorter than usual."

"I'm sorry I lied to you and lied to them about you."

Raising his hand John cupped Sherlock's opposite cheek before bringing his closest one nearer for a kiss.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Want to go for a walk?"

"In a moment." He replied raising their hands and kissing John's knuckles.

"Where did you go this morning?"

"To Victor Trevor's grave. To pay my respects. Offer him my apologies. Tell him...I loved him. And say goodbye."

They sat in comfortable silence for 10 or so more minutes before rising to their feet. They set off down the path, away from the Holmes house, hand in hand.

Along the way they stopped at a honey stand. Just, what was to John, a surprising wooden structure there on the side of the road with no one else in sight.

Jar upon jar filled with the dark amber liquid sat on the shelf unattended.
John picked up a few and smiled at the homemade labels.


"I'm partial to Gallberry myself. It's from an evergreen, imported from America, Difficult to find here."

"Gallberry it is then." John said. "Comb honey. That's a clever name."

"Actually, it's his real name. Mr. Comb. Uncle Rudy gave me my first education on bees when I was a boy but Mr. Comb was instrumental as well. He was a very bright spot of my childhood and he also gave me a lot of honey. It was a secret and a treat Mycroft and I shared. He didn't care for the insect but he liked the sweets."

Without another word, Sherlock grabbed a second jar of the Gallberry which John knew was for his brother.

"Well, where do we pay?" John asked looking about.

"Right here." Sherlock said pointing to a red box that said "Cash" fastened to a wall of the stand. "It's the honor system."

"And that works?" John replied dubiously as he took out a few pounds and folded them so they'd better fit in the slot.

"Indeed. Studies have shown that when someone treats you kindly or demonstrates that they trust you, your brain releases a small amount of oxytocin. This chemical makes you feel good and want to reciprocate their kindness and trust which makes you put money in the box."

"Genius." John said.

"Elementary."

They started to walk away from the stand, each carrying a jar of honey in one hand while linking their free hands.

"Trust breeds trust. I trust you. You get a chemical buzz. You trust me. You get a chemical buzz. And so on and so on. It's circular." John said and then paused. "Isn't it funny how everything has an element of getting high, doesn't it? Love, chocolate, heroin, alcohol, kindness, trust."

"That is apparently how it works." Sherlock nodded. "Odd as it may be."

"A trust circle. I like it...we should probably try that." He said squeezing Sherlock's hand.

"Yes, we probably should." He said and squeezed in return.

Telling Sherlock's parents was less dramatic than John had anticipated.

Sherlock, ever dedicated to a plan once he decided upon it, marched back inside and stated quite plainly;

"Mother, Father, I should have said something earlier and I regret that I didn't. John and I are together. We're dating. I never should have agreed to separate bedrooms. We certainly don't sleep apart at home. We share a life. And a bed. And we don't just sleep in it either."
"Ok, that'll do, love." John had said softly, trying to stop the flow of words. "Also, we've decided it might be best if we spend tonight at a hotel. It seems like the best way to get you both to adjust to the situation. We're just going to pack up and be off. Come on, sweetheart."

And that was that.

Mrs. Holmes started to protest and headed off after them with her husband hot on her heels. Trying to convince and cajole them into staying. Anytime Sherlock started to falter or pause or let the distraction creep in John stepped forward. He kept the narrative on the present, not the past and more importantly he kept Sherlock moving. With surprisingly little fuss they were soon in a car heading toward the hotel, promising they'd call when they arrived.

Sherlock's mum gave John a look as they left, one that was none too friendly in his estimation but he didn't worry. He'd gotten Sherlock out. He'd gotten them both out and the tension in his boyfriend's body was already easing.

It felt just as good as he had imagined it would be to be claimed.

After a quiet and early supper, they both found themselves in bed, each having confessed to an almost non-existent night of sleep the night prior. John's mood was already elevated and just to top things off he surreptitiously popped another pill. He was just happy to be out of that house and back where he and Sherlock belonged; together. Sherlock seemed thoughtful but his dark mood had lifted for the most part and John assumed he likely just wanted to sleep the rest of the evening away.

"I could turn in. What about you? Want to call it a night?" He asked. They were already tucked in the large and foreign yet comfortable bed. One bedside lamp on John's side illuminated the otherwise darkened room.

"Not just yet." He said and John frowned when he heard the strain in his voice.

"Sherlock? What is it?"

"In the interest of honesty, there's still something I need to tell you. You've been very good about not asking or pushing and I have so appreciated that. Allowing me to come to it in my own time. Well, I'm ready now. If I start speaking can you promise me you won't interrupt?"

"Of course. I promise."

"Thank you." He took a deep breath and began. "After my ill-planned meeting with you and Mary at the restaurant, I went to see Graham."

John nearly interrupted him to say "Greg." but held his tongue instead.

"He greeted me with surprising warmth and after a short chat, I decided I just wanted to go home. I'd had enough reunions for the day and could stand but one more. I entered Baker Street and nearly scared Mrs. Hudson to death. But after she calmed she hugged me and fed me and hugged me again. As I ate in her kitchen she went upstairs to the flat and changed the bedding and made it presentable enough for me to have a decent nights sleep. I told her it wasn't necessary. I would have been happy to sleep on the floor, but she wouldn't be persuaded. I finished eating, cleaned my plate at her insistence and then headed upstairs. I bid her goodnight and went into my bedroom to get some rest. I thought she had gone back downstairs. It was quite late and I'd promised to catch her up on everything the next day. But I suppose while I couldn't hear her, she could hear me. I was taking off my shirt and she must have heard...heard me whimper because she did something she never does. She came into my bedroom. Didn't even knock. I was embarrassed and angry and tried to shoo her
"out but once she saw-"

"Saw what?"

"Please, just let me finish. Once she saw she wouldn't be moved. They were much more raw then, practically brand new. She told me to stay right where I was and not to move. I was in so much pain I didn't have the energy to argue. She left and came back with salve and antiseptic and bandages. She cleaned me up and covered my wounds and...But that's not the point. Or rather it is the point but not the only one. When Mycroft came to get me out of Serbia, when we were back on safe soil he suggested I come back here, home, to our parent's house just for a day or so. He'd provide me with all the papers and equipment and surveillance footage I might need to keep an eye on the terror group. Everything to get me up to speed. He thought a mother's touch might be just the thing after what I'd been through. It's always easier for us to agree on who and what she is when we're not within close proximity. I was going to go. I got into a car to go, I was on my way but the closer we got the worse I started to feel. The more convinced I became that she would only exacerbate the situation. In the end, I had the driver turn around and take me back. I went directly to Mycroft's office, got a shave, a new suit, my marching orders and the address of where you'd be dining that evening and that was that. He didn't even question why I'd come back. He knew. Alright. You can ask me now."

"What did she see? What did she bandage, Sherlock?" John asked but he already had an idea, a terrible one.

Sherlock brought his hands to the hem of his t-shirt and leaning forward he pulled up and over his head.

"She saw this."

John hadn't meant to but he gasped aloud but he couldn't help it.

"Oh, sweet Christ, Sherlock." He said quietly. "Who did this to you? Who did this?"

"I didn't catch his name." He said aiming for a joke and missing by a country mile.

"Hypertrophic scarring." John scanned quickly to see if there were any close to the joint as those were most likely to cause issues regarding mobility. The injuries were localized on the back area though there were areas on his sides, near his ribs that had caught someone's brutal attention. The scars were thick, ropey, skin clearly showing that it tried to heal itself, was broken open again and again before finally coming together. "Signs of...infection. Cured now. Punct-Puncture marks caused by some sort of crude instrument, a nail? Perhaps a board with a nail in it. Clear indication of burn marks flanking each side. Various fading unidentifiable abrasions. Evidence of sharp trauma to the dermis, possibly going as deep as the underlying trapezius."

He said these things, the words pouring out of his mouth all his med school book knowledge flooding out faster than he could process it. He remembered triaging in the war, assessing, assessing, assessing as fast as he could. Deciding life or death, who would get help now, later, when they could manage it or never. He understood assessment and categorization. What he couldn't understand at this moment was someone torturing Sherlock. He couldn't comprehend that, couldn't think about it in an emotional way."

"Is there still pain?"

"No. Not really."
"Ok, ok, then there's unlikely to be a neuroma. And do you have a full range of motion?"

"Yes."

"Ok..." He said and found himself more than a little breathless. This was hard to take in, hard to accept.

"Could Dr. Watson leave the room and usher in John, please? I'd much rather speak with him." He asked quietly but firmly.

"Yes, oh God, yes, love I am so sorry. I'm here. I'm right here."

John ran his fingers over the rough terrain of the scars. Not the touch of a medical professional. But the caress of a partner.

They'd all healed differently as if they each had their own story to tell.

It made sense, everything recovered in its own time. He winced at the rises and falls of the flesh beneath his fingertips. Some of the marks...lashes?...were smooth, shiny, made up of dead, pearlescent skin that likely no longer felt anything. Some were rougher, no doubt having at some point gotten infected but since cleared up.

"We've kept too much from each other," John whispered. "You from me. Me from you. Everything locked up so goddamn tight."

John eased behind Sherlock, pulling him between his open legs.

He started kissing his shoulder and then he moved lower, brushing his lips over the ravaged skin.

Sherlock inhaled deeply and released a ragged breath.

“And you swear it doesn't still hurt?" John asked with concern.

“Not the skin, no, not the skin.”

"Is this better?" he asked quietly.

"...yes."

He kissed his neck, just below his hairline, little curls tickling the tip of his nose as he did so.

"And this?"

"Yes."

He kissed down the slope of his neck to his right shoulder then repeated the action on his left.

"And this?"

"Yes, please."

It wasn't erotic. Just loving, peaceful. Quiet. After so much noise it was quiet.

"Sherlock...I am so sorry I never asked. I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am. It was so, so wrong of me."

“I don’t know if this is a case of one person being right and the other wrong. I appeared back in your
life like a joke. I thought it would be funny. It was cruel. You didn’t ask me but I never asked you either. We mutually agreed in our silence to put it behind us. But John, you and I are not men who easily put things behind us. We drag our memories and our grief around like Marley drags his chains and we berate anyone who dares question the rattle.”

John couldn't disagree. He was right. That was an apt description of them both and he felt a pang of guilt for the things he was still holding back from Sherlock.

“Whatever armor you feel the need to wear out there,” John began. "Let it come off when we're together, ok? When we're home, in bed, in our flat, That is our space. Just yours and mine, alright? Our flat. Our bedroom. Our bed.” John inched closer to him, as close as he could before wrapping arms around his waist and pressing his chest to Sherlock's back. "Now...tell me what happened to you."

There were times during the story where Sherlock would grip John's hand. He always had a loose hold on it but sometimes it would become vice-like just as the story turned exceptionally dark turn. The worst of it was Serbia. Serbia was where he’d gotten those scars. Serbia was where a man has lashed into him over and over and over again for days and days as he bled and sweated and drew upon near superhuman strength not to cry out. Serbia was where his back was flayed open, salt and dirt and muck and blood covering the damaged skin. Serbia was where he had been pummeled in the side day after day until his skin was bruised purple and he was pissing blood. Serbia was the last stop. Serbia was where he finally got out.

John was silent except for the occasional; "Jesus Christ." or "I know, love, I know."

When Sherlock seemed to run out of steam he whispered in his ear.

"I said something very wrong, unintentionally wrong to someone I very much cared about and loved, once. I told them the problem of their past were their business, but the problems of their future were my honor. I'm not going to make the same mistake again. All of your problems, past, present and future are my problems, my responsibility, my honor and I will bear them with you and help you through them. Ok?"

He nodded

It was nearly ten minutes of virtual silence, punctuated by their breathing, slow kisses and nuzzling by John and the occasional "I love you, sweetheart." before Sherlock began to cry.

He'd never seen Sherlock cry before, not like this. There had been the angry, frightened tears at the Cross Keys and when he thought back, really thought back he likely heard him crying just before he jumped from Barts. But this was entirely different. He was pressed so close he could feel each great inhale of breath that proceeded the sob that wracked his body. He could hear the little cries and squeaks as he exhaled and tried to regain control.

He knew those tears and he knew those cries. He knew what they felt like. How it seemed as if your whole body was threatening to fly apart. He knew how badly he at least had wanted someone to wrap around him as if they were holding him together, keeping him safe and earthbound. So that's what he did for Sherlock.

"Would you tell me...?" His boyfriend sniffled.

"Hmmm? Tell you what, sweetheart?"

"Would you tell me about your father?"
He'd promised Hanah he would do this, promised Sherlock at some point as well and absolutely promised himself.

"Yes, sure, I will. Ok, well...where to start. My father was a cop. Worked his way up from Constable to Chief Inspector. My mother died when I was very young, five or so. I don't remember her. Sometimes I can remember her face, just in that weird period right before I fall asleep. I like to think she was a good woman. That she would have been the perfect mother. Ignorance grants me that luxury. My father was a short-tempered, violent, vicious little man. The first time he laid a hand on me that I can remember I was very small and he grabbed my pinky finger so hard that he broke it. It was this one and it healed pretty well but as you can see it's a little wonky and it clicks like castanets." he said with a dry laugh.

Sherlock took his hand then and brought it to his lips and kissed it.

"We fought a lot. He drank a lot. Hannah thinks that the root of a lot of my problems go back to my father. I'm not sure. I know when I think about him I get angry."

"You must have been frightened all the time." Sherlock said.

"Yeah, yeah I was but I learned how to live in it. It made me sharp, I think. I think it gave me a chance to learn to read people. That has to be worth something, right?"

"You paid a high price." Sherlock replied.

"I've found that most lessons come with a high price."

"To hear what he did to you...it makes me so angry. Who would hurt a child?"

"I feel that same anger at...at the people who hurt you." He said not quite saying all that he wanted.

"Will you tell me more about your childhood...if I tell you more about those two years?"

John smiled against Sherlock's cheek.

"Yes, I will. But let's lie down first, alright?"

"Alright?"

They lay on the bed, John spooning Sherlock. The naked flesh of his chest pressed to the naked skin of Sherlock's back. And they talked. They talked likely as they should have months maybe even years before. They talked as freely as they had that first morning together in rehab. He talked about the ugliness and pain and broken limbs, and ostracization and abuse and neglect of growing up. Sherlock spoke about his travels through Tibet, New Dehli, Nepal, Moldova, Slovakia, Montenegro and on and on and on. The drama and the danger and the fear. The time he'd been jumped in an alley. The time he'd had to run across the top of a moving train. The time he'd somehow served on a murder trial jury. But he also spoke of the loneliness. The crushing emptiness of a life without the familiar. He confessed to reading John's blog. Just to feel connected and daring to leave one comment.

"That was you! The anonymous one. For a half second, I let myself believe."

"I needed to somehow pretend that we were talking again. That we could."

"I understand. For two years my life was your headstone. I never left the graveyard, not really. I was always talking to you."
They continued on for hours under the safety of the blankets and the dim lamplight. Because they'd gone to bed so early it was only near midnight when they'd finished, voices raw and tired.

"We should get some rest, don't you think?" John asked after Sherlock had yawned for the fourth time.

"Mmhmm."

"Ok, we'll have brunch with your parents tomorrow and be on the road by early afternoon. We'll be back home before you know it."

"Thank you for getting me out of there."

John kissed the shell of his ear.

"I'll always get you out of wherever you need to be gotten from. I'll always come for you."

"John, I want to buy Mrs. Hudson something," Sherlock said suddenly.

"Of course. I agree." He said reaching to turn out the lights. "Some flowers?"

"Yes."

"And maybe some of those little cakes she likes?"

"And some herbal soothers." Sherlock chuckled.

"Do you think we'll be able to find a dealer?"

"Between here and London? Easily."

"Some scratch-offs, maybe?" John added.

"She doesn't need scratch-offs," Sherlock said with a shake of his head.

"We're willing to indulge her weed addiction but not her gambling?"

"No, I literally mean she doesn't need scratch off, she has plenty of money."

"She does?" John questioned.

"Long time wife and now widow of one of Britains most notorious and prosperous drug dealers, Frank "The Shank" Hudson. She owns two luxury automobiles-"

"Two?"

"As well as property in a vibrant part of a London. Also, consider the fact that she was able to keep our flat vacant for two years without taking in other tenants to make up for the loss of income."

As usual, John found himself surprised when Sherlock laid all the bare facts before him. It seemed so obvious.

"She's rich." He said.

"Obviously," Sherlock agreed. "She doesn't need scratch-offs."

And so after a brunch where they set the tone and the boundaries and where they allowed Mrs.
Holmes no footing they set off back home. controlled the ebb and flow of they stopped and bought Mrs. Hudson flowers and chocolates and a laptop and some of the finest marijuana they could find.

"John, what did my mother say to you when you were alone together at the store?"

"Nothing much." He said before clearing his throat and changing lanes. "Some unsolicited advice on how to raise Rosie."

"Well, I should hope you won't be raising her based off of any of that advice." Sherlock scoffed.

"No." He said with a smile as he kept one hand on the wheel and with the other grabbed Sherlock's. "We won't be raising her based off any of that advice."

Authors Note:

This chapter took awhile. A long while and I'm not even sure I'm completely happy with it. But it felt like one of those things that if I didn't just edit it and post it now, I never would. So here it is, a few minutes before 2 am on Thursday morning and I hope you liked it.

As always, Ao3 has been doubling and tripling some sentences and paragraphs so I apologize if anything came out wonky. Not to mention it loves to just freeze when I'm in the middle of editing. Remember that old tv show "The Weakest Link"? Remember how there were like 10 contestants and they all had to answer trivia questions one right after another and choose when to bank the accumulated money because if they didn't say "Bank!" and got the question wrong, everything they and the other contestants had won up until then would be lost. It's like that on here when I edit. After every paragraph or two, sometimes after every sentence I "Bank!" by hitting "Save without posting" because I've lost too much work already with the page freezing. Just a word to the wise if any of you are having that problem as well. Always save!

Ok, enough of my whining. I'm off to bed!

Thank you, as always, for reading, reviewing, and reccing. You're all lovely. :)
Chapter 66

One Hundred And Ninety-Two Days In

0 Days Clean

October 3rd, 2016

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

Alright, maybe that was a bit dramatic.

It was Autumn and he remembered loving Autumn. Regents Park was always particularly lovely with a carpet of vibrant leaves, crunchy and bright and lively as they were picked up and redeposited by a stray breeze. He remembered liking Fall.

But it was just a memory at this point.

He'd left the surgery early today and made a beeline to the park, just to think. Just to have a moment to himself and think. A moment had turned into two hours but it was alright, he wasn't expected at the flat for a while.

A young woman, far too young for him were he even into to such a fling anymore smiled at him. She was sitting on the bench across the way. He smiled back politely and she took it as an invitation to come over. She seated herself next to him, closer than necessary and smiled again.

"Nice day for it."

"Yeah," He said rising trying to sound as cheerful as possible. "You should walk about and enjoy it. Cheers, love."

And he started to walk away. He could feel her frowning at his back but he didn't turn around. His ability to be polite was in short supply today and he felt it was best to nip any flirtation before it started.

He was taken. Still. Somehow, after everything, he was still taken.

"The hell have you been?" He asked after a while.

"Mary" had fallen into step beside him.

"Got fed up to the teeth with you so I took a break."

"Oh? Where do figments of my imagination go when they need a holiday?"

"Plenty of nice places to go in your head, John. Not that you'd know." She said before shoving her gloved hands into her coat pocket. "Go to a meeting today."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I am not remotely equipped for that."
"Because you're not clean?"

"No, because meetings are for people who have a sincere desire to get clean and I don't think that's where I am right now."

"That's not where you are right now?" She repeated derisively. "You are a tedious prick."

"Oh, ta."

"You're going to throw it all away. In less than a year you're going to throw it away. Do you want to be back where you were last Christmas? Half dead. Not caring. Alone. Off your tits."

"I just need some time to figure out what I'm going to do."

"You're talking like you have options." She scoffed. "There's clean and there's not clean. That's it. John, call Hanah. Or better yet, go back to treatment."

"Yeah, I can't exactly afford The Location on my own, can I? And I think the Mycroft Scholarship fund has dried up."

"Fuck The Location. Are you so posh now? Some regular facility isn't good enough for His Nibs? Check yourself into a residential place and get your shit sorted."

They'd been walking briskly through the park and he turned to glance at her, not breaking his stride. She was wearing that coat and hat he always liked. Her eyes were bright. Her nose was pink. And she was looking at him with that same unwavering intensity that had both attracted and frightened him when she was alive.

"I think all my progress was a lie, Mary. I think I've gotten so good at lying I don't even know when I'm telling the truth anymore."

"Oh, darling..." She said and he watched as her eyes welled up. "It doesn't have to be. And if you didn't know when you were lying anymore you wouldn't be so miserable right now. There's still time. There's still time but it's running out. I think you need help."

"I can't fail in front of him again."

"John, he already knows."

But John shook his head fervently.

"Maybe not." He lied outright. "If he knew he'd say something. I'm always really careful. It's not like the alcohol, you can't tell. He can't tell. He suspects. I'll give you that, he suspects."

"Mary" shook her head.

"You heard him. You heard him say it. He knows. He knows but he's too afraid to say anything. He turns it over and over in his mind day after day trying to figure out a way in and he can't come up with it and it is driving him mad. And do you know why he's afraid? Because of what Hanah said about not policing you. At first, he wasn't sure. He was giving you the benefit of the doubt but over the past few months, it's become quite clear. What you're doing and how much you're doing. He's terrified of you leaving him. But he is rapidly drawing near the point where he would rather have you hate him and be safe than love him and descend so far into this no one can get you out."

At this point, "Mary" stepped directly in front of him blocking his path. He came to a halt and she
pointed a finger at his chest and gestured poking him dead center.

"He knows. And do you know how I know he knows? I know because you know. If you want him to save you, he will. He will swoop in at the 11th hour and he will save you because he's a hero whether he admits it or not. And that's what heroes do. But mark my words; you will lose each other in the process. You will lose him and Rosie and everything that matters and he will lose himself. Ring Hanah and beg her to take you back. Go home, tell him what you've been doing and have him take you to a facility tonight."

Without saying a word he sidestepped to pass her and started a brisk pace. He didn't look back and she didn't follow him.

It wasn't that her words hadn't hit their target. She was good at that. But he was only able to handle life in small bites now and she was advising him that rip off a big chunk with his teeth.

He wasn't far from home. No more than a half hour walk which meant he was in a stones throw of at least two Tesco pharmacies and one Boots. Yes, there were closer chemists. But he had taken to visiting ones that were off his beaten path nowadays.

He could pretend for a while. Pretend this was a luxury, a treat and not what had become an imperative. But it was all a lie and deep down he knew it. Still, he tried to stay in that headspace while he could. Being clean had felt good. There was always a siren call from each pub he passed but he still felt a spike of pride each time he didn't drink and didn't give in. He remembered something someone had said at the last meeting he'd gone to. "Do you have one more day in you?" Step by step, one day at a time sounded so cliche until you were right in the middle of it and looking at a lifetime of not drinking. A year was 365 days. The lifespan of the average British man was 79 years. He was 44. That was 35 more years or 12,775 days. He could not, under any circumstances do 12 thousand + days. Or 12 hundred days. Or 12 days, for that matter. But he could do one day. He could commit to doing one day. And that was really all sobriety asked of you. "Do you have one more day in you?"

On that day, he did

But not anymore.

That optimism was fleeting and certain things always had a way of bringing him back to reality. Things like "Mary". Things like letters about the taxes he owed on the house. Things like the fact that Rosie would be starting reception in less than two years and they'd want to know her permanent address. Where would that be? Baker Street or with Harry? Where did he want it to be? Things like the tremor in his hand, the nausea, the shivering, the muscle aches that came when he missed a dose. In the early days he was more prone to missing doses and he'd start to wonder why he suddenly felt so bad. But that didn't happen anymore. He had it on a schedule or rather it had him on schedule.

*I once had a pill or should I say, it once had me.*

The Vicodin had started out as two every six hours right after the work on his tooth. After the first prescription ran out he'd been given another one but the assigned dosage was lower, just two a day. But he'd liked the 4 per day. The 4 per day had felt right.

Right was somewhat of an understatement. Right didn't even come close.

He could describe it as something that took his anxiety and sliced it in half, like a hot knife through butter. Cleanly. Efficiently.
He could describe it as something that took his mind off the clawing need for a drink. And that was true as well.

He could describe it as something that quieted the natural rage he always felt coupled with the furious rage of the Red Forest and that was true too.

But it wasn't all of it. It left out a certain flavor to the feeling.

It was the direct injection of the guitar signal into the mixing console and the fuzz pedal in The Beatles, Revolution. The Garnet Herzog in American Woman. The dead notes right before the chorus in Creep. The Bosstone on Spirit In The Sky. The POG on Icky Thump. This splatter of rough sound hitting asphalt, that scrape as it grinds across your ears and your brain.

That. That was the best way he knew to describe the feeling of the Vicodin. It was a lie to just pretend it was medicinal. It was so much more than that and it had escalated and he had escalated going faster and harder and higher. He didn't just keep the worries and the nerves and the depression at bay he glided above them, he was gliding, hard and fast smooth and untouchable. Soaring on guitar licks and dopamine. It was better than the alcohol had ever been because with the booze he'd still felt chained to his feelings. The only mercy was when he passed out. But this allowed him to put all those ugly, nagging, frightening emotions in a box. Oh, he still carried the box around with him, but it was tightly sealed and it stayed that way for a few good hours until everything started to wear off. At least, it was tightly sealed in the begining.

He took to the pills, God, did he take to them.

Early on he stopped telling Sherlock about any appointments he had and was sure to schedule them at a time that would arouse the least suspicion.

By late July he was persona non grata with the dentist. That had been a shameful phone call. Ringing to cancel an appointment but to ask for a script to be called in. The receptionist informed him quite coldly that the doctor would be unable to do that. Furthermore, he requested that 'Dr. Watson seek out another dentist as he was no longer welcome in this practice'.

After the awful shame, he felt the panic sink him. He was well in this, now, well fucking in and he couldn't just stop. Then it occurred to him. His shoulder. It was right there in his medical records and the scar was visible for anyone to see. Chronic pain.

But it was harder to find a willing doctor than he expected. Harder but not impossible. Everything on imported telly made it seem as though everybody up to and including your corner grocer was handing out meds like candy but it wasn't so. This wasn't the States. There wasn't a willing dodgy bloke with a white coat, stethoscope and prescription pad just eager to dole out what he so desperately needed. Hell, getting the pills in the first place had been a bit of miracle. They were a Class A drug that he had only prescribed once in his entire career.

He was able to get a few refills here and there but nothing steady and nothing like he needed. And that need had grown exponentially as his supply had grown thin.

He thought about stopping.

Though the memory of what he'd heard was something he tried desperately to block out, "Mary" was right. Sherlock knew. Sometimes John went back and forth on this, believing beyond a shadow of a doubt that he absolutely did know. But then falling back and settling with surety on the idea that he might not, not exactly, not really. But today he wanted to lie to himself so today, it was the latter. At most, he may have suspected but he didn't know. No one knew and that was a good thing.
Because, what if this was just a private relapse? What if he rallied, restarted his counter and began again, tried to do things right? What if he took up his meetings again? Attacked that pile of books Hanah had given him? What is he did everything he'd promised himself he'd do when he left The Location?

What if he made another grab for the life he wanted? It wasn't so far out of reach.

What if he sat down and told Sherlock the truth. He loved him. They loved each other. Maybe they could just talk. Things were after all, better now.

They'd gone through a strange patch where they weren't communicating very well at all but had come out of the other end, or at least he hoped so.

It had started and ended with sex. They had gotten so screwed up again...somehow. He wasn't even certain what had happened. But he suspected it stemmed from that one comment. That he thought everything could be solved by an orgasm. It had stung and it kept on stinging long after they got home and when he didn't want to think about it he had another pill to quell the rising emotions.

They still kissed and touched but John felt strange, exposed when he even considered initiating anything.

This would have been a fantastic moment in which to discuss things. To perhaps fulfill the promise they'd made to each other to be more honest on Father's Day. But that hadn't happened.

Instead, when they got into bed at night they'd kiss, exchange I love you's and John would turn on his side and go to sleep. Or at least try to sleep.

John knew Sherlock was frustrated, but perhaps more than that he was confused. Likely adding to this was the fact that John was still affectionate. They still touched and hugged and kissed but as for anything sexual, he had effectively retreated.

Just as he knew he would, one night in July, Sherlock broke.

"John?" He said just this side of sharp.

"Hmm?" They were in bed for the night and the lights were off. John was on his side facing away.

"Why aren't we having sex anymore?"

"I didn't think you wanted to." John replied. This was the response he'd been planning as he knew this conversation would happen. It felt good to get it out. Good to imagine the perplexed look on Sherlock's face. Negative things had started to feel good again.

"I'm concerned that you're not dealing with your anger." Hanah had said to him during one of their sessions...one of their last sessions.

She was right. He wasn't dealing with it. And nothing he seemed to bury ever stayed buried. Because in that moment, quite suddenly, he was angry.

"What gave you that idea?" Sherlock asked incredulously.

"Something about orgasms as problem solvers. I believe you were the one who said that."

"It was said in a moment of anger."

"But you never took it back. Had every opportunity. Never did."
"I see."

"Are you're taking it back now?"

"Turn over and look at me." Sherlock said quietly and John did as he was asked, expecting to be met with an entirely different sort of face that what greeted him. He thought he'd see apologetic-Sherlock. But this was just plain angry.

"You know, just as well as I do, that you use sex as a booby-hatch, a trap door that you drop through-"

"Alright, I've had enough," John said sitting up to get out of bed.

"...that you drop through when something arises you don't want to discuss. Permanent plans with Rosie. How work is going? How your meetings are going? How your life is going?"

John hastily grabbed a blanket and pillow as his partner spoke, afraid, actually afraid of hearing what he might say next.

"You think you can silence me with a blowjob, you think you can put all these questions on hold but you can't, John. No matter how hard and far you run they are still there and they want answering!"

By now Sherlock was just shouting after him as John beat a fast exit out of their bedroom. He made a beeline for the sofa and settled himself in for the night.

Sherlock stayed put.

The next morning he awakened with a jolt, the first reason being he'd forgotten where he was and the orientation of everything felt unfamiliar. This was followed fast on the heels of the sight of Sherlock looming above him, looking down.

"I want the two of us to speak with Hanah."

"What?" He said before rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"I think I spoke plainly."

"Yeah, I don't know if she'll go for that."

"I emailed her, she already agreed."

"You emailed my therapist without asking me first?" He said sitting up and scowling.

"Yes." He replied without a hint of apology. "The day we do it is up to you but please give me some notice to clear my schedule."

He was stuck yet again. He couldn't say no, and the truth was he'd put himself in this position, wedged in tight by being petulant and petty. The more he thought about it the more nervous he became...and itchy. He'd looked it up a while back and that was one of the weird side effects of Vicodin, it made you itch.

"Fine, tonight, if she's free and you're free. Let's just do it tonight and get it over with."

"That the spirit," Sherlock said dryly.

John usually had his sessions in their shared bedroom or his old bedroom, laptop balanced on his
thighs, earbuds firmly lodged. He never worried about Sherlock listening in, it just wasn't his nature. Still, their days of joint therapy, no matter how brief felt far behind them and for reasons he couldn't express at the moment, he was wary to repeat them.

His acquaintances at AA, the ones who were partnered up spoke highly of couples therapy and the feeling of breakthroughs and refreshed communication. It wasn't unfamiliar to him, he knew what they were getting out of it because he remembered the sensation. Hanah had even encouraged him to invite Sherlock in some time, the most recent time being after they returned following the Father's Day weekend.

"I mean his parents are fucking dreadful. Like, absolutely monstrous and I don't mean that in the way that people find the parents of their significant other monstrous. I truly mean it, they are awful people."

"How so?" Hanah had asked.

"They're clearly abusive. They manipulated their children, pitting them against each other, playing mind games, feeding them all the same lies and lines. Our first night there his mother basically rendered Sherlock speechless. I've never seen anything like it. He basically threw me over for her."

"How did that make you feel?"

"About two inches tall, honestly. I didn't handle it well. But things got better and we...we connected, we talked. In the end, it was good."

"What do you mean by 'things got better'? You're leaving out details."

"Well, I wasn't going to go over every moment. Every tedious fight."

"I don't find it tedious. I find it necessary. John, you know I'm not opposed to you having Sherlock join us. I think it would be good for the two of you. You need one-on-ones to be sure. But you would both benefit from sitting down as a couple and talking about things."

It wasn't the first time she'd said it and like all the other times he promised he'd mention it to Sherlock knowing full well he had no intention of doing so.

When there's a natural disaster, a hurricane or a house fire, the volunteers come. They poke about and say they're there to help. And you're so shellshocked and desperate that you agree, perhaps even gleefully. And they're there, right alongside you for a few days helping you to gather things together and sort through the debris. But after a while, they return home to leave you in peace to try and reshape the mess that your life has become. You don't invite them back. Not during the weeks and months that follow as you're still trying to clean up and recover and repair. It would feel strange, odd, voyeuristic. That was how John felt. Inviting Sherlock into his session now when he was trying to quietly reshape and rebuild the ruin that was his life seemed like a bad idea.

"Sherlock is not a volunteer in your life." She'd said when he'd told her that. "He isn't an onlooker or someone who just stopped by to gape at what was once your home. It's his home too. He lives there. He's by your side."

"I know that." He'd said. "I do."

Hanah had looked at him with concern from the screen. There were times when both of them together and separately felt the limitation of not being in the same room together as they were at The Location. This was one of the times where, if his memory served, she seemed to feel it keenly.
"I'm worried, John. I'm worried that you're losing ground. I'm worried this isn't enough. I want you to go see the therapist I recommended. I want you to go to more meetings. I want you to start journaling again. These things helped you. They opened doors that I feel as though you are blithely closing again."

"I'm not." He had protested and he wished he'd been able to summon more strength to back up his words.

"Are you committed to your sobriety?"

"Yes," He lied. "Of course, yes."

"When we first met I asked you if you were going to be an adult and do the work. Is that still in the cards?"

"Yes, it is."

She had nodded but not said anything else to that point. They'd continued on with that session and when it had ended he'd gone into the bathroom, crushed the pills under a spoon and snorted them up his nose. He'd never, in his life, snorted anything up his nose before. He wasn't even sure where the impulse had come from. But it was worth it. The high was nearly immediate, not the slow, all over body sensation of swallowing the meds. This was fast and hard and explosive and he was just leveling off when Sherlock came home with Chinese food.

Now he found himself sitting at the desk in the living room area of Baker Street. He'd locked the front door, because God knows they didn't want any visitors or clients in the middle of this, and dragged a chair in from the kitchen. He'd then seated himself next to Sherlock, closer than he wanted to be at the moment but it was the only way for them to both fit in the frame.

"Hello John, Hello Sherlock. It's nice to see you both together again."

"Hello, Hanah." Sherlock replied.

John nodded quickly and added a short; "Hi Hanah."

"Well, John you look like a man who would rather be anywhere else right now."

"Well he sprung this on me, didn't he? Didn't even tell me he was contacting you."

"And you feel betrayed by this?" She asked.

"Yeah, I guess I am. Rather than try and talk about it-"

"You don't want to talk about it," Sherlock said. "If you wanted to talk about it we wouldn't be here now."

"You don't want to talk." John snapped. "You want to explain to me all the ways that I'm not living up to your expectations."

'Alright! Alright!' Hanah said holding up a hand. "Before this goes any further, this is not a street fight that you will conduct while I watch. You know me, and you know how this goes. I understand it will likely get emotional but when you both stop hearing each other we have a serious problem and you're not hearing one another now."

I'm sorry." They both said in unison.
"There were reasons we recommend abstinence for at least the first six months. Reasons exactly like this. But that's in the past and it does not good to go over it. I only bring it up to stress the fact that there are reasons behind what I advise. It's not arbitrary and it never has been. First of all, I want to set up some clear limitations to the scope of this discussion. Sherlock reached out to me about wanting to talk about sex. Now, it isn't that I don't think this issue has roots in other things, very deep roots, in fact, but one mountain at a time. He expressed concern that your relationship was fracturing and this was the first crack in the ice. The point of strike."

"Is that your word or his? Fracturing?" John asked unable to keep the alarm from his voice.

"Mine." Sherlock said.

"You think we're fracturing? Because we had a row?"

"Initially, talk to me, then to each other." Hanah interrupted. "I want to talk about goals. John, but first, how do you feel your relationship is going?"

"It's good. I mean, we have our ups and downs. But we love each other."

"Sherlock, would you like to respond to that?"

"Of course, I love him. But John has a tendency to not want to address problems until they have grown so exponentially large they cannot be ignored."

John sighed loudly through his nose and shifted his body in the chair.

"Ok, John, goal-wise, what do you want from a sexual relationship with Sherlock."

"I want him to stop needling me about when and where I request it. I want him to stop confusing sexual addiction with a normal libido. I want him to stop trying to tie this in with everything else going on in my life. I want him to accept that I just want to please him and I'm happy with that...even if that was all that there ever turned out to be."

Sherlock looked at him in surprise at this latest bombshell.

"What? Since when have you given up on- You never mentioned that to me."

But he had given up. At least a part of him. Since May he'd been feeling better, lighter, more agile, more capable. He'd kept up the diet of good food and a lot less takeaway. He started biking to work and just biking about in general. He'd even gotten a ridiculous little basket he'd fitted the front to carry groceries and such. One of the perks of the particular practice he'd joined was a membership in the health club adjacent to the building and he got back into his Location habit of jogging. He was doing everything he was supposed to do to take care of his body and still his stupid fucking, flaccid fucking, limp, pointless cock was doing nothing in return. No progress made. So yes, a part of him was trying to come to terms with the idea that this might just be life.

"It's just something I've been thinking about it."

"Do you mention anything to me anymore?" Sherlock asked and the hurt in his voice was clear.

"Alright, both of you. Stop." Hanah said, never raising her voice but adding the commanding element to her tone. "What have you been thinking, John?"

"We're all talking about this as though it were temporary when it could very well be chronic. This could be a permanent condition and I think we need to accept that as a reality."
"A possible reality." She replied.

"Look, it doesn't give me any pleasure to say it. And when he shoots me down it makes me feel even worse."

"You talking about Father's Day. That is ancient history!"

"Not to me, it isn't!" He said emphasizing each word.

"What happened on Father's Day?" She asked.

"He told me that I try and solve every problem we have by making him come."

"Ok, backtracking a little here. Sherlock, same question I posed to John, what do you want from a sexual relationship?"

"I want us to give each other pleasure in bed. I want him to enjoy himself and not focus so much on me. I want him to be present. I want him to not give up on the idea of overcoming his erectile dysfunction. I want him to want to have sex because he wants to have sex, not because he knows it will shut me up."

"John, would you say that you're present?"

"Of course I am. How can you not be present in bed but still be giving the other person your full attention? That doesn't make sense." He snapped.

"You have orgasmed a total of once this entire time we've been together." Sherlock said derisively.

"I'm sorry, are you unclear as to what impotence is?"

"Orgasm begins and ends in the brain. You told me that. Not that I didn't already know but it seems you're the one who needs a refresher. Do you really think the simple act of friction is all that's involved? Your ability to come has more to do with your spinal cord than your cock. And it's not just that, it's all the things you won't discuss. Do you think your depression doesn't factor in?"

"I am not depressed!" John protested and Sherlock only shook his head in disbelief.

"John, let me ask you something," Hanah said, again trying to calm things down. "When you're in bed together who usually takes the lead?"

"I do. It's the least I can do."

"So you're sort of in charge of the touching, the kissing, the disrobing, you set the pace."

"Yes, I'd agree."

"When does Sherlock reciprocate?"

John paused at the question.

"Well, it's not as if I'm kissing myself. He's reciprocating."

"The way you touch him, do you let him do the same to you?"

"No, he doesn't. He pushes my hand away." Sherlock said immediately before he could reply.
"What is the point in stroking something that doesn't work. Did it ever occur to either of you that I might find that incredibly embarrassing?"

"Ok, what if he avoided penile stimulation?" She asked.

"Then what's the point?"

"Is that your only point with him? Do you limit yourself to his genitals?"

"Of course not." John said quietly.

"I have no issue with his technique," Sherlock interjected. "He's very generous, very attentive and doting. While I admit my comparisons are limited I think he is an excellent lover."

Those were the first kind words that had passed between them since this started.

"Thank you." John said, his anger ebbing briefly as he took a deep breath. "And he...he's generous as well. He does please me. I don't feel isolated or detached during the experience just because I don't want him to..." He trailed off feeling as though it were impossible to properly explain.

"John, do you think any of this has anything to do with your sex addiction?"

"No, I don't. Because I am not cheating on him." He turned to face Sherlock, say these words directly to him, to meet his eyes. "I have never and would never cheat on you."

Sherlock nodded and didn't seem to need to be convinced of that fact which left John singularly relieved.

He turned back to Hanah and continued.

"And if I'm not fucking everything that moves I don't see how it factors into the addiction. That's what I've been telling him. I feel like I'm being scrutinized for being attracted to him."

Hanah looked at him for a moment before speaking.

"Do you think what you said was entirely honest?"

"Yes, on the whole. Yes."

"OK, Sherlock, are you turned off by John's enthusiasm for sex?"

"No."

"Are you concerned about his engagement during sex?"

"Yes."

John threw up his hands in frustration.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what that means."

"Ok, John...you and I have talked about this both together and with Sherlock. You are displaying classic signs of intimacy avoidance. Textbook even. Now, I'm not trying to gang up on you. But we've always spoken to each other frankly. Tell me that when you objectively look at your behavior you can see you are pulling farther away from your partner as opposed to drawing closer."
But he wasn't remotely ready to admit that yet. Not by a long shot.

"You're uncomfortable with him touching you in bed." She continued. "Your focus during sex is lopsided, uneven, lasered in wholly on pleasing him. You have difficulty focusing when you're not in charge. I guessed at that one, but feel free to tell me I'm wrong."

She wasn't. So he didn't.

"And you've just informed us that you've given up on the idea of ever being able to achieve an erection. Only on the surface is this so different from the behavior you were engaged in prior to Mary and post Duck. It's just that now, instead of doing it with a string of women, it's the same behavior with one man. A person that you love and that I have no doubt you don't want to do this to."

Damn Hanah for being right. For always being right.

"Do you want to talk about why you're having difficulty connecting?" She asked him.

"I would if...if I knew. I don't understand myself."

He thought about coming clean then. It was a sudden overwhelming impulse to tell them about the pills. About how it was slowly creeping out of control. About how that feeling of the walls of his life closing in on him again was starting to return. About how he hadn't been to a meeting in a while...a good while.

But he didn't.

"What pulls you away?" And the question didn't come from Hanah but from Sherlock.

"A hundred things a thousand things. It's hard to explain. I feel like I have to make up for everything that I'm not doing for you, everything I can't or haven't done. Or did do. Worries, frustrations with myself, feeling...inadequate, stresses about the day. Anxious. I just feel anxious. You know, that sensation of when you're just about to fall asleep, you're right on the edge and suddenly you jerk back into consciousness? You don't know why it happens but...it's terrifying and you spend the next 20 minutes just trying to calm your heart rate and try again. I used to know the name of it...we talked about it ages ago in med school."

"Hypnic jerk." Sherlock supplied.

"Yeah! That's it. Hypnic jerk, I feel like just as I'm starting to relax a hypnic jerk occurs. And the only way to fight it off is to focus on you and not me."

"That's quite a lot to drag to bed." Hanah said.

"You told me, not long ago, that I should drop my armor in our flat but especially in our bedroom. Don't you think you should as well?" Sherlock asked.

"I know, I should. I'm sorry. I..."

"John, I'm not going to pretend that these are isolated issues. But for now, we're going to try a different tact. I think the next course of action is to allow a night where Sherlock returns some of what you've given and you open yourself up to receive it."

"I don't have a problem with that...I mean, it sounds nice." He chanced a look at Sherlock, unsure of where he was emotionally at that moment. He face was placid but John noted the slightly knitted brow.
"Though sex counseling is not my field I have an exercise that I want you both to do. I want you to choose a night and I want it understood that this is a night of connection. Have either of you heard of sensate focusing?"

They both shook their heads no.

"Alright, I'm going to email some guidelines in a moment, but simply put, this is an exercise about mindful touch. One person agrees to be the giver, the other the receiver. As the receiver, your only job is to focus on the sensations the active partner is giving you. You'll then switch places and roles. It's important to know at this stage you're avoiding touching genitals. Stage two is much the same except genitals are no longer off limits. Stage three is mutual touching. But the thing to remember is that orgasm is not the goal here and neither is intercourse. This isn't foreplay. The goal is to reacquaint yourself with your own body and your partners. The goal is the experience. This is to anchor yourselves to each other. Understand?"

They nodded. It didn't sound quite so different from what they'd done before and the prospect didn't make him want to run for it.

John raised his hand slightly and put it atop Sherlocks. He was rewarded with a squeeze.

"So are you both game?"

Again they nodded.

"Ok, I'm hoping this might have far-reaching results but let's focus on the issue at hand before we zoom out. I don't want to oversimplify things but this should be about remembering who you are to and with each other."

John thought back to their first night together at The Location. Those gentle kisses. Touching. Being touched. Not worrying about it leading anywhere. He wondered how they'd gotten so lost. He'd love to find a way to get that back.

In the larger scheme of things, that was all he was looking for right now anyway, a way back.

Much to his surprise, he was excited to attempt this new technique. Both he and Sherlock had been willing to try it the following night but life had gotten in the way. And not just for that evening. A case came in that more complex and time consuming and intriguing than they'd had in a long time. It took weeks. Questions and chases and legwork, but he loved it. Loved the immersion. Loved juggling work with The Work, as Sherlock always called it. Busy felt good. Busy felt great. And the fact that they had a plan for the bedroom eased tensions considerably, even if they couldn't act on it just yet.

When they'd finally cracked it and it was all over but the arrests they both agreed they missed Rosie terribly. They arranged a weekend with her and spent two and a half delightful days trying to keep her from eating Play-Doh, wiping off her perpetually spaghetti stained face, taking her to the park to push her on the swings, giving her a bubble bath at night's end and listening to Sherlock refer to himself in 3rd person as Dada. "Dada's right here." "Dada asked you not to throw the Lego."

It wasn't all bad, these times, this life.

In fact, sometimes his life felt so bright, so happy, so ready to burst at the seams he didn't think it could get better.

Because it was the worst of times and it was the best of times.
"Got a movie for us to watch tonight if you're game." John said one evening as he plunked down on the sofa.

"Of course. Let me clear away the dishes. You get it set up."

"It's very *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. You liked that one, right?"

"The one with Kevin McCarthy or Donald Sutherland?"

"You always remember the names of the older guys but never the younger one."

"I don't think that's true."

"Name even one person without gray hair in *Interstellar*." He challenged him about the movie they'd most recently seen.

"I'm making popcorn." Sherlock said in reply.

"One actor. Just one."

"Michael Caine." He said from the kitchen.

"Michael Caine is in his 80's, you daft man." John laughed and he was sure he heard Sherlock snicker as well.

"I don't see how any of this matters." Sherlock replied affecting a haughty tone that John could see or rather hear right through.

"In any case, the movie, well mini-series, we're going to see tonight is called *Day of the Triffids*. It has [John Duttine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Duttine)."

Sherlock emerged with a bowl of popcorn and a frown.

"I don't know who that is."

"You don't? Well, he's old. I thought you knew every actor over 50. I thought there was a bylaw."

At that Sherlock burst out laughing and John joined him. The man he'd met years ago in the morgue at Barts hadn't seemed like the type that would enjoy being teased. But the Sherlock before him actually enjoyed when John took the piss. In that moment his partner snuggled next to him, setting the popcorn on his lap and whispered; "Start this silly movie, would you?"

And John did. And they even made it through three parts before he excused himself briefly to take his next dose.

It was a good night. There were lots of good nights, honestly.

On good nights he thought about stopping just before sleep overtook him and he drifted off either clinging to Sherlock or with Sherlock clinging to him.

On bad nights he barely slept at all, and just lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

When he was a boy, living in that house with his sister and their terrible father there had been this leak in the living room. Right in the corner was this brownish spot. It was coming from one of the pipes that ran to the tub and his father, who wasn't in the least bit handy was forced to "mend" it every now and then. Mending it basically involved banging on the pipe for a bit and then wrapping it
with plumbers tape. But of course, the leak always came back. There was no set schedule, no way to predict it. It was just one day you realized that that dry brown spot looked more vibrant because it wasn't dry anymore, it was wet. Really wet. And on top of that, the spot looked bigger. And on top of that, the arm of the chair that sat below the spot was damp because it had been leaking tap-tap-tap right down onto it. And you realized you'd heard the tap-tap-tap for awhile but you'd ignored it. And now you worried just how much unseen damage it had done and how much longer you could have ignored it and whether it's too late and everything you knew is going to cave in on top of you. Or...whether it can be passably patched and jury-rigged and you could go on pretending there was no longer a problem. For awhile, at least.

That was how he thought of his depression. Something that seemed to appear out of nowhere but was still old and familiar. Something slow and creeping that on one hand, he was good at ignoring. While on the other hand, he knew it was omnipresent, despite having shouted at Sherlock that he was not depressed. Much like his dad, he didn't know how to fix this. All he ever seemed to manage was patch job after patch job and he worried that soon that wouldn't be nearly enough. He wasn't sure he could withstand yet another roof collapse.

By late August he dropped the gym routine. He dropped biking to work. He'd dropped caring all that much about what he shoveled into his mouth.

Life seemed to slow down, except when he was with Sherlock.

He started to slow down.

The weekend that Sherlock headed off to Paris to chase down a lead was the weekend John toyed with the idea of going cold turkey.

He didn't call it cold turkey. He never let the words even enter his mind because to do so would admit this was something he needed to stop. Instead, it was a break. He could take a break. He was allowed to take a bloody break.

Depression was an intruder that tried every door, every window, every lock, every single day of his life. He'd come into the kitchen and it was there, sitting at the table. He'd enter the loo and feel this crushing weight on his chest. He'd walk into their bedroom and suddenly barely have the energy to crawl into bed.

When he was younger the moans and groans from one conquest after another had beaten it back. Years after that he hurled empty bottle after empty bottle toward it. Of course, it learned how to duck. Nowadays he threw his pills and for awhile they worked. But it still tried to get in. He'd see long fingers prying open windows, creeping under door frames but for the most part, he kept it at bay. But it also meant his world was limited to the environment he could control. He could control Baker Street, for the most part, but outside that door, it glommed onto him and he couldn't shake it. And sometimes, when he came home, it came in with him until he could banish it with another dose, or a case or a call from Rosie or an embrace from Sherlock.

And sometimes even that didn't work.

But he had high hopes for the weekend.

He didn't toss the pills. He wasn't crazy, he just put them away and out of sight. Normally he would have accompanied Sherlock to France but his cover was very specific, so he said. The story just didn't make sense with two people. Though not eager to spend the weekend alone John understood and tried to look upon it as an opportunity to set things back on course.
He wouldn't be bored, he determined. He wouldn't allow himself to be bored. He had plenty to do. And first order of business was to get back to writing. First the journal. It was strange, out of all the things he'd dropped, that hadn't been one of them.

Journal of John Watson

I miss the meetings. I know, that doesn't make much sense. If I miss them so badly why don't I just go back? They'd likely be happy to see me again, I have no reason to think they'd do anything but welcome me. Hell, they'd probably even offer me some sort of forgiveness or absolution. The problem is I can't forgive myself.

I came home to raised voices about a week ago. As I was making my way up the stairs I could hear Sherlock shouting at Mycroft and Mycroft shouting back. That wasn't unusual in and of itself. They fight, they always have. But it was the tone. Even at their most furious times, there was a banter, a wit, heavily laden with old grudges and buried emotions but it never went as far as an outsider might think it did. The brothers have a way of interacting, dysfunctional as it is, it works for them.

This wasn't the same. This was naked anger and aggression and I knew, I just knew it was about me.

"YES! Of course, I know! I have known this whole time! What do you think of me?" Sherlock shouted.

"When do you plan on doing something about it!?"

"You wouldn't understand. Look at you, you'd probably wake a sleepwalker?"

"If they were marching toward a cliff and I had the misfortune of caring for them, yes, yes I would."

"These things have to be handled delicately. Not with your usual iron-fisted manner. Some situations call for a rapier not a cudgel."

"Are you trying to tell me how to handle an addict? Me? I believe I have a touch more experience than you could possibly imagine."

"I don't know what he told you or what you told him. I have no idea what you made him promise but I know it was something. It ends now. Do you hear me? Whatever deal you two made behind my back with the theory of protecting me, I call a stop to it."

"What have I told you? Time and time again. Nobody deceives like an addict. For the sake of this one argument, Sherlock, this once and never again I will agree with your scale that you are a user and not an addict. The same cannot be said for Dr. John Watson."

"I will handle this in my own way and in my own time. If you have surveillance on him, it ends. If you are personally following him, it ends. Oh and this discussion, it ends, right now."

"No, it most certainly does not."

I'd wanted to put a stop to it right then. I couldn't hear anymore, I couldn't listen. I was so ashamed. So embarrassed and ashamed and angry with myself. Luckily, my saving grace arrived in the form of Mrs. Hudson struggling with several grocery bags. Mrs. Hudson!" just slightly louder than needed. "Let me take those for you."

"Oh thank you, John."
"You're welcome. And I'll take your key so you don't have to fumble."

The voices upstairs had quieted immediately but I still heard the occasional 'hssss' denoting angry whispering.

The whole thing made me feel sick. Mycroft attacking. Sherlock defending. I opened Mrs. Hudson's door and carried in her groceries. I dawdled just long enough for her to put the kettle on. While she was telling me about her day and getting out two mugs for us both I popped the bottle open in my pocket, took two pills out, tossed them into my mouth and started to chew. Right in front of her. I pretended it was candy. I even offered her a "sweetie" knowing she hates little minty things and she'd absolutely say no. I've no idea what I would have done if she'd said yes. I've been switching things up between swallowing, snorting and chewing. Taking it up my nose is fast and dirty but the runny, burning feeling afterward and all the stupid coughing sometimes puts me off. But chewing maximizes the effects and limits any other irritating reactions. All I need is something to wash it down with and the tea would suit me just fine. After that the words became just a pleasant sort of buzz. I smiled and nodded which was all she wanted. In the early days the whole blessed process took about 3 hours. Pop a dose, 30 minutes later it starts to take effect, I'd get a good hour and a half of...peace before starting to come down again. It's harder now. My tolerance is up there and the bursts of relief get shorter and shorter and shorter. So I need to take more and more and more.

If I heard Mcroft descend the stairs and leave I don't remember. I don't even really remember hearing Sherlock enter Mrs. Hudson's flat I just know one minute he wasn't there and then he was. I don't know who else knows what I'm doing. I don't know if anyone knows. When I get my dose I feel like I put on a John-Mask and a very convincing one at that. When I first got out of rehab everyone had this awful habit of touching my elbow and asking me in this hushed tone; "So, how are you doing?" They don't do that anymore. They think they can see how I'm doing and apparently I'm presenting as fine. The John-Mask is sticking. I can run through my life and I can run through the red forest and nobody sees me. No one except him. If I just started screaming no one would look except him.

I greeted him like normal and anything I was feeling I stamped it down and out. I wasn't cross with him but I wouldn't even let him see it in my eyes that I had heard them. That I'd heard how he had to stand up for me, yet again. I was mortified and ashamed and I rose from Mrs. Hudson's kitchen table and I hugged him. Almost immediately he hugged me in return. Mrs. Hudson "Aww"-ed" and "Isn't that lovely"-ed. We sat down and had tea and biscuits and once we were alone back in our flat we never talked about it. It was like it never happened.

Somedays I want him to talk about it. Somedays I want him to call me out. But most of the time I think we're both more comfortable like this. Maybe the idea of being able to live together in honesty was a pipe dream. Maybe the truth is we are two men who are far more comfortable with lies.

John didn't necessarily feel better once he'd gotten all that out but he did feel emptier and these days that was just as good. A lack of feelings was starting to feel better than an overabundance. Journaling was good for that and it was easier for him right now than it had ever been.

In fact, one of the other things that was going well, shockingly well, was his writing.

He had finished "The Case of the Agony Column". It was complete. And this was not a lengthy blog entry...this was, dare he say it, a book. A novel. Typed out in his spare time, on lunch breaks, in the empty hours of the dark early morning when he was too anxious to sleep. As soon as he was finished he started to read it, ready to pick it apart. And he did. He eviscerated it and rewrote and reshaped and started again and made his way all the way to the last page as devoid of emotion and sentiment for his own writing as he could be. And then he started over again, ready to re-read it. He waited to
hate it. He waited to start laughing with embarrassment at what he'd done, what he'd put in this file. He was ready to laugh at his own presumption and ego and silliness. He was ready to delete the entire shameful mess. But he liked it. He really liked it and it didn't just sound good, at least to him, it felt good. Could I do this? He wondered. Could I really do this? Certainly, the subject matter was endless. And with the exception of spending time with Rosie and being with Sherlock, this was the most at peace he'd felt in God knew how long. The forest was still there threatening to encroach but not then. Not as long as his fingers moved over the keyboard and his imagination raced and he constructed the two of them, he and Sherlock, disassembling them in real life to rebuild them on the page. As long as he did that, for those few hours he could fight the forest and win.

Of course, once it was done he didn't know what to do next. So he just sat on it. It was just another file on his computer like a hundred others. He still hadn't told anyone.

But the pull to...to try it again was incredibly strong and it felt a lot like the itch for alcohol or the pills...but cleaner. And so, he started on a second one. For that, he chose an adventure he hadn't joined Sherlock on, one that had occurred years before they'd met. The first working title was; "The Generous Garrotter; The Tale of Billy Kincaid". But eventually, he settled on something that he felt fit far better. "The Tale of Two Williams".

"I have not been fortunate enough to accompany my friend on all his adventures but he has been kind enough to relay to me some of those I missed by having not yet made his acquaintance. One of those stories was told to me when I asked a simple question about the skull that had sat upon our mantelpiece for as long as I could remember.

"Sherlock what, or rather, who, is that?" I said one Sunday afternoon when neither of our inboxes or the website was yielding anything promising.

"Billy." He answered succinctly. "A friend of mine from, oh, ages and ages ago."

"So, it's a real skull?"

"Of course it's a real skull."

"You have your friends skull?"

He frowned and looked confused.

"Well, I wouldn't have my enemy's skull. I'm not a trophy hunter."

"So...your friend died and willed you his skull"

"No, I killed him and took his skull as we'd previously agreed upon."

My friend said this in a tone that I felt he had mastered above all others. One that said, 'This is all so painfully obvious and I have no idea why you need me to spell it out.'

"Alright, Sherlock, seeing as we've nothing better to do today, why don't you tell me the story."

And so William Sherlock Scott Holmes told me the story of William Kincaid.

And now I'll tell you the tale of two Williams."

Sherlock had asked him if medicine made him happy. And the truth was, not like this. Writing about the two of them and their adventures had never been as hard as writing about himself alone. Though even that was going better nowadays. This experience was one of the few things he could take pride
in anymore. He was even going so far as to engage in silly schoolboy fantasies. He imagined sending
the first book (and God knew he had an issue even calling it a "book" as well as implying it would
be the "first" of many) off to a publisher. He imagined it being remarkably well received. He
imagined that that could be his life. No more patients, no more medicine, just clueing for looks with
Sherlock and writing it up.

But to do any of that he'd need to get clean and this weekend was a perfect dry run.

He'd done his research and he knew what to expect.

The stomach cramps arrived right on time late that evening; first twinges and then all out pain that felt
like kicks to his abdomen. But what of it? He could handle it. He'd be fine. He tried to go to bed a
little after midnight but was up within the hour as waves of nausea started to roil. The rest of the
night was spent either sitting on or crouching over the toilet. Around 5am he resigned himself to his
new life to be lead exclusively in the loo and grabbing a blanket and pillow curled up on the floor
and tried to sleep. He bypassed the morning completely and didn't open his eyes with the intent of
keeping them open until after noon. Once he was fully awake he noticed he was shivering, freezing
in fact. This too was normal. He had expected problems with temperature regulation. One moment
he felt like pulling the blanket tightly around him and the next he wanted to kick the trifling thing
away. Still, as awful as he felt it was just a matter of getting the hang of it, he kept telling himself. At
the end of the day it was like a bad flu coupled with a skosh of food poisoning. And the pills were
just a few steps away. That was all. He could make this stop anytime he wanted to which meant
every second he didn't was a victory. It wasn't cold turkey. It was a break. And even though he felt
lower that shit the break was going splendidly.

In the end, the physical stuff wasn't what brought him down. He'd detoxed before at this point, more
than once and it had a stomach-churning familiarity to it but a familiarity just the same.

Instead, it was the feeling of hopelessness, so thick, so solid it was impossible to separate one thought
from many, from all.

Everything felt as though it were piling on top of him, swamping him, sinking him. He tried to
escape it by sleeping but was met with the most horrible dreams. Back in the forest, always back in
the forest running from assailants unknown, running from the trees themselves. And every time he
saw what seemed like a break in the dense woods, a scrape of lights, it closed up. The closer he got
the more quickly it vanished. And when he turned around everything had rearranged itself and he
was even more lost than before. The trees howled and moaned and whenever he had his back to
them he was certain he heard them creaking with broken movements, slouching toward him. The
ground was loose in some places, eager to give way beneath his steps. But it was viscous in others,
and when he tried to lift his foot the mud and the grass and the leaves and the weeds would cling like
molasses or porridge. He grew exhausted. He fell, again and again, bruising his face, slicing open his
hands on the sharp, dead land. He lost his balance one last time, slamming down hard over a petrified
tree, the bulk of it hitting him in the stomach, knocking the breath from his lungs. He lay there
helpless and started to feel the trickle of heretofore unseen water dampening his fingers, his jumper,
his pants. The water started coming faster graduating from a trickle to a stream. His face was resting
in a pile of earthen debris leaves and muddied ground as he felt the water strike his face. It tasted
bitter, alkaline on his tongue, it burned his nostrils and his lips started to tingle. Soil full of
radionuclides and strontium, cesium, and plutonium, thick and heavy and polluting and deadly. He
tried to raise his head but couldn't. He didn't have the strength. He tried to roll away, to at least get on
his back, but he couldn't do that. He was helpless. Utterly helpless and all he could do was lie
there and sputter as the water rose and rose and he eventually started to drown. His last thought be he
lost consciousness in the dream and returned to consciousness in real life was that no one would ever
find him. The Red Forest would reclaim his body and swallow him up. He would decompose,
slowly mummified, petrified, calcified, forever frozen in his own personal nuclear winter. He woke up gasping for breath, clawing at his own throat, (clawing so deeply as it turned out that he left three large scratches on either side), half of Sherlock's name on his lips.

The hours passed like that, the sickness of his body no match for the sickness that his mind seemed eager to churn out. Everything hurt, every sound and creak of the flat made him jump.

He wasn't sure what day it was or how much time had passed until Mrs. Hudson came up and into the flat. She was holding the Sunday morning paper and she jolted when she saw him. He was curled up in his chair, frowning vaguely and sort of staring into space.

"John! I thought you'd gone!"

"Been here all weekend." He said listlessly.

"It was so quiet. Never heard a sound." She stepped closer and peered at him. "John, you look awful!"

"I've got a touch of the flu. You'd best stay away. I don't want you getting ill."

"I've had my jabs, remember. At your suggestion." She said dismissively. "Have you eaten at all? Let me make you something. A nice English breakfast will do you right up."

He had to suppress his gag reflex as he thought of a plate swimming with greasy sausage and bacon, watery beans and wobbly fried eggs. He'd have rather died right then and there than spend one more moment imagining her setting a fry up in front of him.

"Mrs. Hudson, I'm feeling really ropey. I think I'm just going to crawl back in bed if it's all the same to you." He said rising on unsteady legs to his feet.

"Of course, dear. Sherlock will be back soon, right? He can take of you then."

"Yeah, he should be back this afternoon." He replied trying not to sound as pitiful as he felt.

"Are those scratch marks on your neck?" She asked with alarm as he passed her.

Without stopping he nodded.

"Yeah, I seem to have a rash too. Can't stop pawing at it."

He was less than two days in. He'd have to go at least another three before he could rightly call himself detoxed.

As high as the high's were, as euphoric as he felt in the midst of it all, this low was something he'd never quite experienced. He wasn't sure if it was just the temporary lack of pills or a combination of his natural chemistry. Hanah would likely say both. But this, this was unbearable. Another 24 hours of this and he felt he'd be a hairsbreadth away from where he was on Christmas Eve. He felt that frightened, that undone and despondent, that beyond help.

He gave in. He retrieved the pills from their hiding place and declared the break both over and a failure. He downed four, dry and climbed into bed pulling the blanket over his head.

He awoke, God only knew how many hours later to find Sherlock pressed tightly behind, spooning him.

"How was the trip?" He croaked out. "Did you get what you needed?"
"You're ill." Sherlock said softly, tenderly.

"Flu. Must have picked it up somewhere. Everyone at the shop was sniffling and coughing when I bought groceries. Also got a weird rash." he said heading off that question before it could be asked. "Last time I decide to be daring and change shaving creams."

"I'm sorry." He replied and it was laden with more anguish than John could stand to acknowledge. "Can I please help you? Please?"

Yes.

Yes, I think I need real help. Again.

Yes, please, because I think I'm going to die like this.

Yes, because I'm worried this growing part of me wants to die like this.

Yes, please, Sherlock. Please.

"You are helping me. Just...keep doing this ok?" He asked pulling his partner's arm tighter around his body, sleep already starting to reclaim him.

"Always." Sherlock said quietly.

That was toward the end of August.

By the first week of September, he'd unceremoniously cut ties with Hanah, he had stopped going to meetings and he was up to 15 pills per day.

It was the worst of times.

Authors Note: As you can no doubt tell we're approaching the climax of the story and I consider this chapter to be the penultimate to the fall of John Watson. There's like 2 chapters left to write. Maaaaayybe 3. I'm not sure. I'm never sure until I get into it. :) I put a few hot links in this one. I wanted there to be this particular sort of feeling for John when he gets high. This feeling of everything being blotted out, of sound being dampened. You know how your ears feel all ring-y and like you're trying to hear through cotton balls stuffed in your ears after a really loud concert. I love distortion in music. I love heavy fuzz and vocal filters and if you're in the mood you can click and hear what I feel like it's like for him.

I also included one of my favorite outtakes from the DVD's. Martin and Ben having a bizarre and delightful conversation about the actor John Duttine and how old he is.

Finally, being a silly American I naturally assumed that Vicodin was available in the UK like it is here. You know, like candy. Apparently, that's incorrect. Really incorrect. It's listed as a Class A drug over there and depending on what I read it's impossible to get legally, or nearly impossible. I even saw message boards where people were concerned about traveling from here to there with it in their bags. In fact, I couldn't really get a straight answer but I did find an article from The Guardian from 2001 that said you can get it if you have a "fancy, private doctor". So, I'm crossing my fingers and going to go with that. :) 

Ok, hope you enjoyed this. More is on the way!
Chapter 67

0 Days Clean

0 Days Clean

0 Days Clean

Relieved at having left "Mary" behind in the park he entered the store and walked right up to the queue for the pharmacist with confidence.

There were two people in front of him; a man was talking to a sleepy-eyed looking chemist while the woman directly in before him was nervously shifting from foot to foot.

The young man on the other side of the counter seemed in no hurry to do much of anything as he asked the customer; "Picking up or dropping off?"

Knowing this would likely take awhile, John took out his phone and texted his boyfriend.

Sherlock, love...care to "sensate" tonight?

Sensate isn't a verb, John. But yes, I'd like that very much.

I was just about to give you shit about you giving me shit about it not being a verb. :) The quotation marks were to denote that I knew that. But since you said yes, I'll let it pass.

Are you nearly home?

Yeah, just one more stop. Want anything? Snacks? Dinner?

Only you.

When Sherlock had come home from Paris they seemed to forget about the sensate things. Once that horrible detox sickness was gone, hungry and lonely and missing each other they'd jumped into bed. But it had gone badly, as it tended to in those days and they'd wound up on either side of the bed, a cavernous divide between them.

Still, they didn't give up. For better or worse.

Days later he'd been lying against Sherlock while both of them were gazing listlessly at the tv. It was impossible not to notice his boyfriend had rather busy hands.

"John?"

"Hmmm?"

"This film is dross."

"Mmmhmm." He replied quietly as Sherlock kissed just behind his ear.
"You know, we never actually went over what Hanah sent us."

John wordlessly reached for the remote and turned off the telly.

"We should at least give it a once-over, you're right. Read it out loud now."

Sherlock took out his phone and brought up his email.

"Sensate focus should ultimately be a way for a couple to develop a new intimacy and understanding of both their own body as well as their partners. Sensate focusing progresses in three stages.

Stage one has the partners taking turns touching each other. The job of the touch-er is to explore his partner's body as he wishes. While avoiding the genitals, he is to caress the touch-ee when and where he likes taking his own pleasure, not with the focus on pleasing his partner. The goal is to explore while keeping in mind temperature, texture and/or pressure. Notice the change in body temperature as he touches his lover's skin. Notice the difference in texture from the cheek to shoulder to neck to chest to hip to knee to foot. Notice where you like to apply firmer or softer pressure.

To wit, the toucher is touching their partner to extract their own pleasure, not to please.

The goal of this exercise is to take the pressure off the need to have sex. To shift the focus back to the root of intimacy which is neither penetration or oral copulation, but rather the connection that exists within as well as outside those actions. There is no pressure to feel arousal, the only goal is to feel.

This first stage of the exercise should last 10 to 15 minutes after which the partners switch roles. Bear in mind, this may feel awkward at first, you may feel your mind start to wander. You may feel nervous, uncomfortable, you may start to giggle or wonder if you're "doing it right". This is natural and normal and one of the purposes of this exercise is to confront and surmount those feelings. To realize the only thing that matters in this moment is you and your partner.

Finally, no post-mortem. You're not to analyze or discuss in detail what occurred during the exercise once the 20-30 minutes are over. This only leads to rating and grading and obsession. Instead, write it down to share in your next therapy session.

Ok, you're ready to begin. Don't overthink it, just do it."

John cleared his throat.

"I think that made sense, don't you?"

Sherlock swallowed and shifted behind him. John could feel his erection, firm against the small of his back.

"Yes. Complete sense."

"I'd like to go first if that's alright?" John asked.

"I'd guessed as much." Sherlock chuckled.

"No, not for the reasons you think. I don't want to give myself an out."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...I know me. And I think there's a chance that if you go first I may be focusing on it being my turn. I don't want to disconnect from this or have any reason to, you know? I want to do it right."
Sherlock squeezed him in a hug from behind and John knew the offer meant something to him.

"Yes, alright, yes, I'd like that. So, you'll be the toucher and-

"You'll be the touched." he supplied.

Ten minutes later they were naked in bed, both lying on their sides, kissing gently. John was nervous and had been since Hanah had suggested this but he'd also been champing at the bit to try.

"Ready?" Sherlock mouthed against his lips.

"Ready." John agreed, his words followed by the small beep as Sherlock set the alarm on his mobile. They were to set aside a total of 30 minutes for the entire exercise, 15 minutes a piece. As talking was generally discouraged, those were to be the last two words they spoke to each other for a half hour.

John pulled back and let out a ragged breath, trying to recall what Sherlock had read. This was about their own pleasure; John touching his partner where he wanted and Sherlock taking pleasure in the touching. No one was to worry about reciprocating, not just yet.

Sherlock rolled over onto his back, a smile on his face, his body open to him.

John had had no idea where to begin and he suspected that was the point. He liked to wind Sherlock up. To work him into a frenzy. To hear him beg. But this wasn't about that. This was about where John wanted to be and what he wanted to take just for himself.

What do I want?

What do I want?

What do I want?

The idea came suddenly and was so ridiculously obvious he was surprised it had taken so long.

If nothing else, he had a starting point.

He began at his neck, the only place he'd ever been able to glance at, if not outright stare at from afar without Sherlock noticing. Or, maybe he had noticed all those years but he'd never said anything. It was believable as John had never admitted it to himself until relatively recently. The skin there was smooth, not a hint of stubble. All that was there were the light, wispy, reddish-blonde hairs that John could only feel when he pulled back and grazed his lips over them.

From there he ran his fingers and his lips all over his lover's body, getting to know the smooth planes and the rough rises and falls. Scars he didn't know existed, some healed some new, revealed themselves and the topographical map in John's head expanded. The 15 minutes went by quickly and as the alarm was sounding he was arriving at Sherlock's old track mark scars. It had occurred to him that despite the fact of his lover usually, until recently, wearing a t-shirt to bed, his arms had always been bare. He'd ignored it. Subconsciously, sure, but still purposefully. And he didn't want to ignore any part of Sherlock. Every inch of him deserved to be loved. Especially the angry marks that told of collapsed veins, binges, need and pain.

Sherlock sat up slowly, extending that same arm to pull John into a kiss.

"My turn." He whispered and John nodded.
They switched positions and he laid back on the bed for what he assumed might be the hard part. Hanah had judged correctly and to his irritation that pleasing Sherlock wasn't this strictly altruistic notion. It was a perfect way to shift the focus and gaze off of him. But now, it was squarely on him and he cleared his throat nervously.

Sherlock started much lower than John had and it only occurred to him then that his partner likely coveted a place on him as much as he craved his lover's neck.

At first he felt self-conscious of the hands on his stomach. He'd come home to Sherlock as thin as a rake but he'd fattened up ever so slightly in the beginning and then far more than he needed to as time went on. There was now only a slight roundness to his belly. Nothing that necessitated needing to size up his clothes or add an extra hole to his belt. But still, he'd looked at the small protrusion in the bathroom mirror with a scowl whenever he saw it. But Sherlock seemed to have no such negative feelings.

Sherlock's touch was feather light and...adoring and at least some of John's apprehensions drifted away. It wasn't just his lips that were pleasant. His boyfriend was due for a haircut and currently his curls were brushing back and forth across his skin. It tickled in the best way, the most distracting way.

*You're a liar, John Watson. You don't deserve this. Do you think you've earned it? To be the subject of his worship? Everything you do is false.*

His body went stiff and suddenly he was propelled a million miles away back to every dark thought and action. Away from his attention and affection. Perhaps occupying his mind with only feeling what Sherlock was doing to him, for him, wasn't enough. Maybe it would never be enough.

When he felt teeth sink not-so-lightly into the fleshy part of his inner thigh he yelped and looked down to see Sherlock looking back up at him, eyes glinting darkly.

"You will stay with me, damn it. You will stay right here, in this moment, with me." He growled low and it was just jarring and unexpected enough to shock John right back into the present.

"Yes, Sherlock." He answered apologetically.

His boyfriend went back to kissing his legs and thighs and it did feel good. Everywhere Sherlock touched him always felt good. Damned if the bite hadn't rooted him more firmly in the moment.

"You bit me." John said breathlessly as he lost himself, finally, in a good way.

"I did indeed." Sherlock replied.

"You sank your bloody teeth into my skin." John chastised with no weight behind it.

"An unorthodox approach, I grant you. But your skin remains intact." His partner raised his head again to meet his eyes. "When I draw blood, you'll know it."

"Shit..." That was all John could reply.

Sexy Sherlock.

In-control Sherlock, even in the old days, even in a completely non-sexual way made him feel like he'd touched a live wire. Ok...perhaps it was always a little sexual, but still. And now, hearing him saying that while being so close to his cock and knowing he wouldn't so much as touch it right now was enough to drive him a bit mad. Not thinking about what he'd like to do to him, but what he'd like
to have done. But instead of saying all of that or any of that, he'd only let his head thunk back to the pillow and said "Shit."

"John?"

"Hmm?" He asked, staring up at the ceiling.

"Shut up."

All in all, it worked. By the end of it John was squirming slightly on the sheets, completely focused on what he wanted and when he wanted it. He was sweating a little and panting a lot and hadn't been averse to moving Sherlock's mouth or hands where he wanted them.

The timer sounded again and the 15 minutes were up. They were done for the night and Sherlock made his way back up the bed and they shared a kiss.

"So, we shouldn't talk about it?"

"No, she said not to," John replied. "We need to write it down and talk about it with her next time."

"I don't really need to write it down." Sherlock huffed. "I'll remember-"

"Write it down, genius," John said handing him a pen and notebook.

"You have a way of making genius sound like an insult." He grumbled good-naturedly as he took the instruments.

They scribbled for awhile. John writing down his initial struggles but mostly the page was filled with good feelings. They finished around the same time and set their work aside.

"John?"

"Yes, love?"

"Um...I know we weren't supposed to..." He cleared his throat. "But, shall I go to the loo and take care of this." He pointed to the obvious tent in the sheet that John wasn't sure how he could have possibly missed.

"Couldn't I take care of that for you? I mean, we're not on the clock anymore." He said cheekily.

"You do have a point. I mean...we can always ask her about specifics next time. But, only do this if you want to."

"Oh, I want to." John assured him, pulling back the sheet and planting himself between Sherlock's legs. "And if you manage to get some pleasure out of this so much the better."

With that said, he'd grinned before taking him in his mouth with a filthy moan.

It was a pleasant memory and it still made John's cheeks flush even now as he waited inside Boots.

They'd actually done as they were asked and waited to discuss it with Hanah. John was thankful that their observations and notes and overall rating of the experience matched in that they were similarly positive and similarly high. Hanah had also been pleased and God, but did that feel good. He could sense he'd been letting her down lately. He knew that she knew something was going on. She wasn't waiting to ambush him with it, no, it was far worse than that. She was waiting for him to say it, to admit it like a man. But they both knew he wouldn't do that, so they were stuck. But he didn't feel
stuck with when it was the three of them and that was indeed nice.

They were instructed to try it two more times, but to go a bit longer each session. Each time John was able to center himself and remain in the experience.

The second phase of sensate meant they could touch everywhere including the genitals and that was when John discovered he enjoyed nibbling on Sherlock's nipples and that Sherlock was pretty fond of it himself. It was also when they discovered that for all the attention Sherlock liked to lavish on John's balls, it wasn't even close to how much attention he wanted to show them. John came for the second time since they'd gotten together, limp but satisfying.

He was surprised and a little frightened by how emotional it made him, seeing that shy pride in Sherlock's eyes. It was true that the majority of their time in bed together no matter how close to one another they'd been, there was this separation. Lines of demarcation, almost wholly set up by him that Sherlock had not been allowed to cross. Here there be dragons.

But when they allowed one another across those boundaries, it was intense and romantic and everything he wanted for the both of them. When the alarm had sounded bringing an end to their session John had pulled Sherlock up and directly atop his chest. His boyfriend was still painfully hard and after coating his hand with lube he'd wrapped it around his cock.

John had started to kiss him, passionately and with no encouragement needed Sherlock began to thrust into his hand. It felt perfect, the simulated movement, the feeling of having his lover atop him, hips working, thighs moving. Almost...almost.

They didn't speak. Not because they couldn't because, again, they were off the clock. But because it wasn't necessary. They kissed and kissed and kissed and as Sherlock neared the moments of no return John tightened his grip, making his boyfriend whimper. When he came it was breathy, nearly silent and everything John wanted to hear.

Once they disentangled from one another they went to their notebooks to catalogue the experience. John couldn't help but gush when they talked about it with Hanah a few days later. He wished they'd found it earlier. He wished they'd explored what they wanted for themselves and each other ages ago. He wished he hadn't made things so hard. He held Sherlock's hand throughout the discussion except when he was gesturing excitedly. It was a good day. A good day in a series of good days and though he knew his mood was going to crash, as it always did, he tried to push it back as long as he could.

Once the meetings was over he hurried to the bathroom, downed a few of the pills he'd been craving and returned to his partner, ignoring the slight frown he gave him.

Here in the present, the chemist was asking the woman standing in front of John in line if she had any questions about her meds.

"Um, yes." John heard her say quietly. "Not about the Clonazepam but the Seroxat. I was wondering..."

John pulled away as it felt rude to listen. But it did take him back to what had turned out to be his last conversation with Hanah.

"I mentioned we'd circle back around it this and I think now is the time. I'm going to state quite plainly that I think you're deteriorating, John. I think you're actively using something, likely a opioid of some sort. For some people, it makes them sleepy but it's having a stimulant effect on you. That
can happen, everyone is different. So what is it? Oxycontin? Percocet? Percodan? Vicodin? Demerol? You can't get through one session with me without scratching furiously and demonstrate the obvious signs of acute urticaria. You've lost weight, you're not sleeping, you're agitated and anxious and short tempered. You need to be back in treatment immediately and you need to be downing something that can actually help you."

"I'm not getting on some bloody pills." That had been his response. He couldn't argue anything else she said. He knew it was true and he felt pathetic.

"What exactly is your aversion to medication? You certainly aren't presenting any issues with self-medicating at the moment."

"It would be giving in to all this. It would be having it all on record." He said clenching his jaw. "I would be admitting this was who I am and who I would always be. I don't want to be a slave to that."

"And you're not a slave to this?"

"Now wait a goddamn minute-" He snapped.

"No! You wait a minute. Now I agreed to this because you agreed to take it seriously. To put as much effort into it on the outside as you did on the inside at The Location. But you haven't done that. You haven't even remotely held up your end of the bargain. You have lied to me and the people around you and yourself. You're clearly abusing a substance perhaps substances. You've stopped going to meetings. You haven't sought out a therapist, you haven't delved into the reading material. You haven't been doing the work. You're not moving forward and you haven't even been trying. I have been doing this as a favor to you. And perhaps because I let personal feelings cloud professional judgment. I like you, John. I think you have the potential to be a very good man. But I'm ending this session now because I want you to think about what you want and need from this, from me, from yourself. You need to be honest with yourself, you need to admit that you need help, again. You need to admit that you are in the 50% - 90% of people who relapse. You need to enter a program, preferably residential, you need intensive therapy, you need to be open to medication and you need to deal with every unanswered issue that populates that Red Forest."

That happened on September 23rd.

On September 24th, stung ashamed, weary, unable and unwilling to swallow his pride he wrote her a brief email.

Dear Hanah,

You're right. This isn't working. I thank you for everything you've done. However, I believe our time is over.

Take care of yourself and best of luck with the book.

- John

It was a cowardly, small, shitty thing to do and he felt nauseous as he pressed 'Send'. But he did it anyway.

Sherlock had been furious when he'd found out. They'd had what had to be one of their loudest and angriest fights.

"She was doing you a favour! She was doing the both of us a favour! And this is how you repay
"Funny thing about favours they don't have to be repaid. They're not debts."

"You're going to fix this. Now." He said gesturing to his laptop.

"Oh, I don't take orders from you, Sherlock. I don't take orders from anybody."

"No, no one can ever tell the great Captain Watson what to do, can they? Even when he's pissing his life away, yet again. This ends now."

"What?" He'd demanded. "What ends?"

"What you're taking, ends now. You're going to get some help."

"No, now see you're coming dangerously close to policing my addiction and Hanah said not to do that, remember." John had replied with a sneer.

"No, John. She said not to police your recovery which at this point is non-existent."

"Don't you sit there and glibly lecture me. You have no idea what this is like!"

"Oh no, how on earth would I know. I've only spent the majority of my life either with a needle shoved up my arm or wishing there was one. What the hell would I know, John? You know, I have been called all manner of names over the course of my life. Cruel, mean, thoughtless, withdrawn, cold, unfeeling. And I have owned up to everyone, every accurate reading. But never, in my days, have I met a more reticent, recalcitrant, misanthropic and closed off man. You have no idea how to allow someone to get close to you. And I cannot believe these words are leaving my mouth. Mine. You would think we'd be a fine pair. You would think you would be the one chasing after me for some scrap of affection or attention or acknowledgment. But no, somehow, against all given odds, it's me. I have always been able to trust what I see before me, I have always been able to rely on the facts presented and act accordingly. But you have thrown all that out of the window. I thought...I thought you knew how to do this." He said gesturing futilely between them.

John felt a pang of discomfiting pain but didn't allow it to affect his tone or his anger.

"Seriously? You took a look at the state of my marriage and my love life in general and you thought I could be...what? Your romantic sherpa?"

"I thought you would be my partner!" He shouted.

"What do you want from me, Sherlock!" They'd been having this conversation which had quickly bridged into an argument while planted in their chairs, staring the other down. But now John stood quickly to his feet, fists balled at his sides.

"I wanted you to not be me!" He roared back. "I wanted you to not be a manifestation of every ugly, secretive habit I have ever cultivated."

"I am not a reflection of you, Sherlock. I am my own person. I exist whether you do or not, in fact, I managed to exist for two straight years without you. Fancy that."

"Ah yes, and you passed your time by drinking and fucking everything that looked at you sideways. Oh, sorry, every woman."

Sherlock was coming at him with all manner of things and he didn't have the slightest idea how to
defend against them. He was the closed off one? The one who kept his partner at arm's length? He was the one with the secrets? The silence? When did that happen? When had they switched places? Being called out on all of this even as it dawned on him as being correct, filled him with that white-hot rage that was still so familiar.

Sherlock noticed immediately it seemed and his eyes quickly swept his body. "Look at you, muscles tight, fists clenched, jaw set. Do you want to hit something? Do you want to hit me?"

At that moment he had been thinking about slamming his fist into the mantle or doing something equally stupid as punching the wall or kicking the table. But he had not, under any circumstances been considering hitting his partner. His Sherlock. Not now. Not ever, ever again.

All the bluster and tension which had been holding him upright vanished and he slumped noticeably before eventually sitting back down with a thud.

"No, Sherlock. I'm...I'm not going to hit you. But I understand why you'd..." He trailed off.

Sherlock's anger it seemed had cooled in that moment as well and he slowly got up, crossed the distance between them and sank to his knees between John's legs. They embraced each other in what seemed like the same moment.

"You're drowning," Sherlock said, the words mostly muffled against John's neck.

He didn't say anything in reply.

"I've detoxed myself before. It isn't pretty but I've done it. If you don't want to go somewhere, at least not right away we can bar the door. I know Thomas's Recipe by heart. I will walk you through it. I'll be with you every step of the way. Once you're on steady ground again we can check you in somewhere clean and clear-headed."

It sounded both good and terrifying. Detox alone was awful. Detox with Sherlock wouldn't be nearly as lonely or frightening. But he really didn't want him to see him like that. A crying, shitting, puking mess. Half of a man. Not even a man, but a blubbering, weeping pathetic child.

"Please, darling, can we talk about this tomorrow. Please?" He begged in a voice that didn't sound like his own. "I'm so tired.

"Of course you're tired. You never sleep, you never eat, you never rest. You spend your days downing those pills, working at the office and then running about with me. You're exhausted."

"I just need to crawl in bed. With you, if you'll come." He asked hopefully.

"Of course, I'll come."

John pulled back red-faced but too tired to cry and looked at Sherlock.

He, apparently, wasn't too tired to cry.

"John, would you like to get out of London for a bit? I know a little place no more than an hour away. Just you and I. If it's here, if it's Baker Street, that's part of the problem we can leave for awhile."

To stop his lips and to stop the kind words that he didn't deserve he kissed him.

"I love you, Sherlock. I'm sorry for the things I said." He murmured before kissing him again.
"Please, no more tonight."

Sherlock had agreed to no more that night. And of course, they hadn't returned to it the next day. And of course, he hadn't reached out to Hanah. Whether Sherlock was still in contact with her he had no idea though he suspected he might be.

This had only happened a few weeks prior, barely a fortnight and they were just starting to do their odd mending thing where they pretended everything was fine while madness still lurked beneath the surface.

The woman ahead of him in line had more than a few questions as it turned out and John was starting to regret this trip.

He was trying to change things up. Experiment with everything so that he never felt an avenue was closed. The first had been writing his own prescription which had worked so far. The second, he attempted recently; ordering the pills online. He'd gone to a dodgy website, entered the information for a brand new bank account that it wouldn't destroy him financially if he were to wake up and find it drained and placed his order. The pills had arrived at his door overnight looking every bit as legitimate as any he'd gotten from Boots. When he'd turned them over to see the name printed on the back he'd blinked and then burst out laughing.

WATSON

Watson, bright as day, was carved into the little pills. He couldn't make heads or tails of it until he looked it up online and saw that the American manufacturer was Watson Pharmaceuticals. Meds made especially for him. It was too funny.

With that trial surmounted the next thing to do was to write his own script. The first time he'd done it he'd been terrified. It was unethical and more important it was illegal. If caught, it meant an automatic disciplinary hearing. He'd likely lose both his job and worse yet, his license. He could talk his way out of many situations but likely not that one. The best way to avoid getting caught was to find the perfect chemist; too old and he ran the risk of winding up with someone who was, yes, bored with their job, but looking for something just interesting enough like reporting an opioid-addicted self-prescribing doc to enliven their day. Too young and you might get a kid fresh off their studies and in Defender of the Faith NHS crusader mode. No, he needed someone just in-between. Right in the middle. That sweet spot where they spent most of their shift daydreaming about chucking it all in the bin and walking out never to return. Someone who was still good enough to do their job on autopilot, not someone who'd ever dispense the wrong medicine. Just someone who wouldn't even blink if he requested horse tranquillizers dusted with mescaline. He found this special someone on the first try. A bored looking girl, likely just about to turn 30, who looked at the script, confirmed his information and told him it would be about a 30-minute wait. He'd decided that drowsy and or bored was a key. It always helped if they seemed as though they could barely keep their eyes open.

He'd done it 5 times so far and each time the fear lessened just a little bit more.

By now, John was pretty sure he had it down. There were 20 chemist's within a 20-minute drive of Baker Street. Boots, John Walker, Lloyd's Pharmacy, Bliss; he had his choice. If he was willing to go 15 minutes farther than that his choices doubled.

The third avenue he'd yet to attempt. That was buying directly from someone off the street. It would always be a last resort but he had to know, in a jam, in a rush, that he could do this. Still, he was putting it off.
The woman in front of him was finally done and he stepped to the front of the queue.

"May I help you?" The bored and sleepy young man asked.

Bored and sleepy. Just like he liked them. Perfect.

"Yes, just dropping this off. I'll wait if that's ok?"

"Yeah, sure, fine." Came the reply and John suppressed a smile.

There. It was easy. He liked it when things were easy.

Sherlock hated hopping into bed with him when he was high so John held off on taking anything before he got home.

This was the new normal. They didn't talk about things. They didn't discuss them ad nauseam. They didn't acknowledge the quicksand beneath their feet.

As he lay there in bed later that night with Sherlock spooning behind him tight, tighter than normal, he decided that when he was high enough he could just about believe things were ok.

It was hard though... staying that high.

"John...I think you know why you're here." Patrick said.

Doctor John Watson found himself sitting in the office of his boss 4 days after the whole staff had been randomly drug tested. He hadn't even had time to go to his area of the surgery, rather the moment he'd stepped off the lift, Patrick had been waiting for him. He should have known from the way people looked at him without *directly* looking at him as he was walked down the hall. Well, really he did know. And even though he knew why it was happening he was still surprised.

"Actually, I'm a bit confused, Patrick." He lied while flashing what passed these days for his charming smile. "Is something wrong?"

Patrick looked uncomfortable and John knew immediately this wasn't something he was used to doing.

"As you know the NHS requires us to randomly test. We all had to, not just you. We all took the same piss test but...your results came back rather irregular." He paused before going on. "And alarming."

"Alarming how?"

Patrick cleared his throat and John tried not to hold his breath. He affected an easy, confused posture. Concerned but confident. After all, what could someone like the man sitting before Patrick in this moment have to fear? They were equals. They were colleagues.

Of course, it was all an act.

He really wasn't as cocky as he seemed and he'd spent the previous 4 days vacillating between things were going to be fine and things were royally fucked. Not that he'd had a choice in the matter, but there had been science behind his agreeing to take the test. He was, after all, quite familiar with the practice. The standard test only looked for pot, coke, speed, benzo's and opiates...*not* opioids. He was no chemist but he knew enough to know that Vicodin was synthetic and opiates meant morphine. Hydrocodone didn't metabolize as morphine unlike other sweeties like codeine or heroin.
Therefore he should get a false result. Undeserved but false nonetheless.

Except clearly, he hadn't.

His first thought was maybe there was a way to get out in front of this.

"Is this about the hydrocodone?" He asked with a laugh.

Patrick nodded but didn't smile.

"Oh God, look, um, I've had some dental work done recently. I mean, truly, it's a mess in there. Those were the dentist's actual words and I admit I've been a bit of a baby about it. All those tweaked nerves and such and he gave me a few scripts for Vicodin. I only take it when it's acting up a bit. And I recall I was really feeling the pain on the day I tested so...that's likely it. The good news is I'm almost done. I swear, at this point, it feels like he's replaced ever tooth in my mouth."

He tried to sound genial and light but even he heard the manic tone of it all.

Christ, was he sweating?

"John, I'm afraid this was more than just a few pills to get you to sleep after a few cavities. Your levels were...off the charts. They show what I imagine is a consistent use of hydrocodone. It's dangerous and shocking."

John cleared his throat and shifted in his seat.

"So, what are you saying?"

"Mike put his neck out for you. He talked you up and he said you'd put all that trouble behind you. But it doesn't seem as though that's true. We can't have you seeing patients in this condition, mate. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go."

"You're firing me?" He asked a bit aghast. "No probation, no monitoring? No-" He figured he'd have more time. He figured he could bargain, promise, charm his way out of this. But it wasn't working. None of it was working anymore.

"No, John. I'm sorry, I truly am. We have a zero-tolerance policy and this is it."

John felt shaky and gripped the arm of the chair in hopes of steadying himself.

"Ok...well...I'll, um...go pack up my office."

"Already done," Patrick said rising. "Everything has been boxed and is sitting at the main reception desk. If there's anything you need right now you can take it out and back home with you. We can ship the rest. No sense in having to lug that into a cab."

John got to his feet as well and extended his hand.

"I suppose I don't really know what to say." He voiced doing his best not to sound pathetic.

"I am sorry about this, John," Patrick said again as they shook hand.

"No, no I'm sorry." He sincerely. "This won't reflect badly on Mike, will it?"

"I'll see that it doesn't." He answered. "You're a good doctor. The patients liked you. Get yourself some help and get back on your feet."
"Yeah, yeah, right, cheers. I think I'll do that," he said forcing a smile. "Thanks for giving me a chance. I'll um, I'll see myself out."

He swiftly exited the office and nearly dashed into the lift without a word.

Once on the ground floor, he hurried out of the building without so much as a glance at the receptionist. They could post his things to him or toss them in the Thames as far as he was concerned. It didn't matter.

Once he was outside he took a deep, shuddering breath. Well. That was that then. All very neat. Very orderly. Very British. He was sacked.

He'd never been fired before. He'd seen it happen to other people and thought; "Oh, look at that poor sod. Having to do that terrible walk of shame. Down the hallway, all his little embarrassing office belongings shoved into a box that was used to ship in bulk toilet tissue. Stained coffee mug, half dead plant and unused ruler, balancing precariously in that cardboard container with Andrex printed on the side. That poor fool. That poor, stupid, unlucky fool. There but for the grace of God go I."

But grace, it seemed, was in short supply, because now he was the poor stupid fool and it was all his own fault. He was humiliated but the last thing he wanted to do was just hang around outside the building of his former employer looking confused, angry and just a little weepy. He hailed a taxi, got in and asked him to take him to the nearest Nando's.

But of course, Nando's was closed because it was only 9 in the bleeding morning so he went to the coffee house across the road instead. He ordered a drink and a breakfast sandwich that he knew he wouldn't eat and sat down in a far corner.

In the past, he'd described depression as a wave and sometimes it did feel like that. But lately and more often than not, he'd describe it more like a mudslide or better yet quicksand. Thick, heavy, wet, fastmoving, eager to overtake, bring down, suffocate, smother. That was what he felt at the moment, like he was suffocating. He undid the first button on his shirt so his collar felt a little less like it was strangling him and with a shaky hand, he reached for his coffee. He didn't really want it but drinking coffee was a normal action. An action he could break down into parts. Reach out. Grip cup. Raise cup slowly to mouth adjusting for volume inside cup. Sip. Hold. Sip. Extend arm and replace cup on table.

Parts.

Segments.

That was the most he could handle right now. He felt both that sticky, thick sadness and the slick sweat of a panic attack as it beaded on his forehead. Christ he didn't want to do this in public. Fumbling in his pocket he removed the pill bottle and started to chew on a handful, mashing them into a bitter paste on his tongue.

"Work. Work. Please work." He muttered softly to himself and closed his eyes.

The thing he'd noticed about the anxiety attacks as of late is that they were getting worse; longer, more intense and harder to come back from. They used to be something that he pushed through. He'd come out the other end, cool down, wash his face, brush his teeth and continue onward. But nowadays he just felt stuck, trapped in an endless sort of circle of stress and worry. The only thing that helped to break him out of it was the pills and even now their influence had been waning. That frightened him. It properly scared him. He'd been thinking about where to go from here. He had been thinking about Oxy's.
It took him awhile before he heard the noise coming from directly across from where he sat. And even longer to identify it as the snick-snick snick-snick snack of someone wiggling a sugar packet between their fingers, trying to get it all to settle before they tore open the paper. Of course, when he brought his hand down from where they shielded his eyes it was "Mary".

"Yeah, back again. Some part of you just keeps calling me. I'd be happy to just rest in your memory but you keep dredging me up, don't you? To pull you back? To stop you?"

He didn't say anything so she went on.

"You are rapidly approaching the point where you cannot pull out of this."

She looked so pretty in this light, he thought and she chuckled with surprise as though she'd heard him. Which he supposed made sense. She was all in his head.

"You paint with the broad and generous brush of loving memory." She teased him. "You never even knew me looking this young, you knob."

"This is how you always looked to me." He replied.

She smiled kindly before continuing.

"Did you hear what I said, John? You need to reverse course. Now. You need to pull up."

"What if I don't want to?"

"What?" she asked in disbelief.

"What if I just want to crash once and for all? What if all this...the thoughts and the pain and the restlessness and the anger, what if it's all too much? I can go to a facility and learn how to stop drinking and I can probably go to a place and learn to stop taking these. And I can go through the motions and pretend for awhile but...but I don't know how to open up this..." He said pointing to his chest, thumping just above his heart, hard enough to hurt "And I don't know how to unlock this." He said hitting his temple "Without all this ugliness inside of them both spilling out. What if there is nothing good inside me, Mary? What if I have nothing to give but nightmares? Nightmares I can't live with anymore. Does he deserve that? Does Rosie? Did you?"

"He deserves a life with you. And you deserve a life better than this."

"Says who? What does he deserve? Me taking two steps forward and eight steps back until we're old men? God, I was right the first time. I would have done it if not for that bloody seizure."

"John, listen to me. Listen and look at me. Look me in the eye." She said calmly using what they had both called her "nurse voice". "You're crashing, right now, love. Your body chemistry is so out of whack it doesn't know up from down and you are crashing very hard. That's why these feelings are so strong right now. You know about the effects of hydrocodone and how it can nudge suicidal ideation, you know that. These feelings are not to be trusted. Do you hear me?"

"I think they were always there. I don't think they ever left. If it's me. If this is just me then it's not the pills."

"Mary" continued speaking but he couldn't hear her anymore. All he could hear was the slow beating of his own heart, the hum of the fluorescent light above his head, the dull rush of the conversations around him.
There was that telltale feeling of the walls closing in around him and rather than run the risk of fainting in public which would surely make it online he stood, abruptly, stopping "Mary" mid-sentence and walked out to get some fresh air.

The same air he had decided not that long ago to come in from.

"Do you want to pass out, right here?" "Mary" asked as she walked in step with him. "Because you are moments away. You took too much and now your blood pressure has dropped and your heart rate has slowed down and that's not even including this panic attack. Confusion is going to set in and then fear and disorientation. If you don't sit, right now you are going to hit the ground and hit it hard and everyone will get a picture of your overdose. Including Sherlock." She paused and he could tell without looking that her eyes had gotten wide.

"Oh, I see."

"See what?" He asked.

"That may be what you want. For him to see and come down here."

"Bullshit."

"No, I'm in your head and that means I wouldn't bring it up if some part of you wasn't already thinking it."

He was starting to see spots in front of his eyes and reluctantly took her advice and sat down on a bench.

"That's the ironic thing which I know you know. You start taking it to quell your anxiety and after awhile it starts to increase it by leaps and bounds. So you take more and get more and more anxious."

He nodded but didn't reply.

"So help me, John, if this is all about your dick not working-"

"You know me better than that!"

"Do I? I used to. I thought I did."

"You know about the Red Forest, right?" He asked as he turned to face her. "You know, it's just this stupid metaphor my mind latched onto."

"Yeah, I know. I've seen it. I've been there."

"Right. Then you know that it used to be this small place that I was pulled to, pulled into when things got frightening or anxious. When I had a nightmare. When I got too close to him."

"Mary" gestured for him to continue.

"It's not small anymore. It's everywhere. It's around every corner. I see it every time I close my eyes. It doesn't even have to chase me because everywhere I go, there it is. Mary, it is going to swallow me whole. I don't want Sherlock or Rosie to tumble in after me. I think this is darker and bigger than I ever imagined and I...I don't think I can beat it. I think, in the end, it wins. Maybe I just need to try and minimize the collateral damage."

"You don't believe that. Not completely."
"How can you possibly say that?"

"Because if you did I wouldn't still be here. I'm that little voice in your head and you just decided to make me her because she was taken from you so abruptly, so cruelly. Because you never got a chance to say goodbye, properly. Because like I said so many months ago, in spite of it all, she's one of the few people you ever trusted. I'm your failsafe, John. I exist right here, right now, in this form, because you still want to exist."

John wasn't quite sure about that but a part of him still hoped, still wanted to believe.

And so they went on like that. Round and round for hours as they walked round and round the city. He didn't even allow himself that little twinge that indicated he was coming down. Instead, he just took another dose when he felt it might be approaching. As for how many pills it ended up being, well, he lost count. But he realized, as the day drew to a close and their shadows, or rather, his shadow grew longer, he had so few left he'd best get some more. Especially while his script pad was still good.

"I won't be a part of this." "Mary" said and stood petulantly outside the pharmacy refusing to go in. He left her there, stepped inside and navigated his way to the counter. He hadn't been in this particular store before but it was a chain and they were all built the same. Same lighting, same products, same uniforms, same people. There was no one in front of him, no queue at all, so he stepped right up and passed the slip of paper he'd hastily scribbled minutes before across to the waiting man.

"Drop off," he said curtly, not even waiting to be greeted. "And I'd like to wait."

The man behind the counter nodded, took the small piece of paper and retreated behind his computer.

John was barely paying attention. He felt so out of sorts it was too hard to pay attention. And he didn't even realize the chemist was trying to speak to him until what was likely his third try.

"Mr. Watson, I'm not comfortable filling this prescription, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Doctor Watson and come again?" John said with a shake of his head.

"I said I'm not comfortable filling this prescription sir, and I'm sorry, sir."

"You're not comfortable?" John asked narrowing his eyes and emphasizing the last word.

"No, sir I'm not. And what's more."

"I'd like to speak to your manager. Now." John insisted, quickly cutting him off.

"I am the manager sir," The young man said clearly gaining confidence as he spoke. "And what's more, I'm afraid I'm going to have to report this."

John stood there blinking, too stunned to move. That would be it. With his history, his very public history, a fairly recent Section on his records, a stint in rehab and losing his job only hours ago because of a failed drug test that would most certainly be it. He'd lose his license. He would no longer be a doctor. And whether he was absolutely in love with practicing medicine or not he realized, in that moment, being a doctor did mean something to him. It actually meant quite a lot.

"Wait...before you do anything hasty-"
"It's not hasty, sir, it's protocol. I was trained to report any instances of self-prescribing to the General Medical Council."

"Look, you don't have to do this!" John said his voice quickly raising beyond his control.

"Don't shout at me sir, I'm only doing my job."

"You're blowing this completely out of proportion." John insisted and now people in the shop were turning round to stare. He knew he looked a fright; pale, dope sick, exhausted but he couldn't let things end like this. "If you'll just give it back to me I won't darken your door again."

He tried to make a swipe for the prescription still in the man's hand and knew immediately it was a mistake. Now the man was afraid of him. His eyes went wide and John saw the exact moment he changed his mind about calling the GMC and instead shifted to calling the police.

"Sir, step back." He commanded in a voice John knew he had to summon from deep within.

"Ok, ok..." John said holding up his hands, palms out, trying to look as non-threatening as possible. "If you just hand it back to me I'll leave. Alright."

"I can't do that."

"Look, do you really want to ruin my life over this? Do you? Do you think they'll give you some sort of bloody promotion? They won't. They won't fucking care! It won't matter to them! The only person it will matter to is ME!"

"Alright, why don't we all just calm down here-" Came a voice from behind John.

"Why don't you just mind your own FUCKING BUSINESS!" He spat as he wheeled around suddenly to confront the fucking do-gooder. Instead of a stranger, he came face to face with not only Greg but Molly as well.

"Sir, I don't think you should get too close he might be dangerous." The chemist said.

"No, he's not dangerous," Greg said his eyes boring holes into him before adding under his breath. "He's just high."

John didn't know what to say except that everyone's eyes on him, especially those of his friends felt incredibly shameful at this moment.

He scratched the rash on his neck.

Greg nudged past him and John heard the customer service smile in his voice as he addressed the chemist.

"Look, I'm sorry about all this. He's a mate of mine and he's going through a bit of a hard time." John didn't have to look to see what happened next. He heard the snap of the leather as Greg opened the holder to reveal his badge. He didn't even have to say it, he just flashed it and that was enough.

John, unable to watch turned and faced Molly.

"We were on a date...finally." Molly said as though he'd asked. "We just finished dinner but I wanted some crisps so we came in and... John, what happened."

The plaintive tone, the hurt in her voice made him feel lower than dirt and he shifted uneasily.
"It's not as big a deal as it looks." He replied, avoiding her gaze.

"Oh isn't it?" Greg said as he walked up. "He was just about to call the police. Still going to call the GMC. I don't know what that is but it sounds serious."

"The GMC?" Molly asked. "Why would he...?" She trailed off and John watched as she put it together.

"Molly, do you have your badge? Anything?" John asked. "You could talk to him. Maybe you could vouch for me or something."

"Why would I do that?" She asked pressing her lips together. "Why would I help you keep doing of this?"

"I won't. I'll stop, I'll promise. But if he makes that call, I lose my license. I won't ever get it back. Not ever. Please, Molly, please, I am begging you. I'm begging you."

She eyed him. For a good long while she eyed him and during that whole time, John tried to keep his face open and honest and truthful. He breathed a sigh of relief when she too edged by him to talk to the man. He didn't know what she said, all he could think of was what he might do in that situation. Approach him congenially, apologize for the commotion. Talk to him as a brother in arms of Asclepius or some other such nonsense. It would be a careful balance of camaraderie but also pulling rank. More friendly talk, respectfully request the prescription, laugh quietly about the bureaucracy and nonsense of the NHS and then-

"Alright, let's go." She said and started out ahead of both men. She was wearing a pretty blue dress and she had her hair up. She looked nice.

They followed her out of the store and into the crisp, evening air.

It was getting dark so early these days.

"He's not going to call anyone about this. He's letting it go. But you can’t ever come in there again. Not ever." Molly said over her shoulder. Her posture was rigid and her steps were tight. It was obvious she was angry. John looked around for “Mary” who he imagined was quite angry too, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Still, the news that this was over allowed relief to wash over him.

"Ok, yeah, I won't. Absolutely not. Thank you, Molly. And Greg, you too, thank you both." He hurried to catch up with her as did Greg who slid an arm around her waist.

John noticed that but it barely held his interest. He was more focused on the prescription in her hand and trying not to make it obvious how bad he wanted it in his.

"You think you're getting this back?" She scoffed as she noticed where he was looking. "You think there are all these chances, don't you? With this? With him? With us? But there aren't. There's a limit to everything, John. Everything has its breaking point and its end."

"I know," he said quietly. "I know it does."

"Right, well come on then," Greg said. "Let's get you home."

"I can manage," John replied quickly, not at all liking where this was heading.
Greg moved away from Molly and stepped in front of him, physically blocking his path and by instinct, John squared off his shoulders.

"You're coming with me back to Baker Street or else."

"Or else what?" John challenged.

"Or else I'll arrest you. Public intoxication. And don't think I won't."

"John...please." Molly said softly.

He knew Greg wasn't bluffing. The DI wouldn't blink at the idea of throwing him in jail for the night and it was the last thing he wanted. Wordlessly he set off toward Baker Street and they flanked him on either side.

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**A/N**

So, this was originally one enormous chapter that at last count totaled 59 pages in my Google Doc. But I decided to split it into two. So you're getting this part now (about 27 pages) and the rest sometime later this week. :)

This took an extraordinarily long time to write. In fact, I started it and then wound up trashing most of it and starting over again. But I think that was the right choice. I think, ultimately this is better than where I was originally going. Funny how that happens.

I hope you guys like it and thanks so much for sticking with me. Not much longer to go now. I would love to get this all done before 2018 starts...but we'll see.

Ok, that's all I got for now. I'll be posting again in a few days! ...as soon as I finish writing it. :)

-Maribor
Chapter 68

The climb up the stairs seemed to get more difficult with each step he took. He'd hoped they'd just leave him at the front door, maybe allow him a modicum of dignity but both Molly and Greg insisted on escorting him to the flat.

The smile Sherlock gave him when he stepped through the entryway nearly broke his heart. He could tell he'd tidied up, or rather, tidied it in the way only his boyfriend could. He'd stepped out of the kitchen blowing on a match which meant he'd likely just lit a candle as he heard the footsteps. He must have been distracted to not notice it was more than one pair.

"Hi." John said in a small voice as their two friends entered behind him.

"Hello, John. Molly, Lestrade, what on earth would make you interrupt your third date to visit us. You were clearly on your way back to Molly's flat, even made a stop to get condoms."

John knew Sherlock was expecting, needing to get a rise out of Greg. He always did that when he was surprised by something. He didn't like to be taken off guard. It made him feel unsteady and this was his way of reclaiming his space.

"Can I talk to you? Privately." Greg asked.

John watched the alarm rise momentarily in Sherlock's eyes before he got hold of it. Surprisingly he offered no argument and gestured to the bedroom.

"You'll stay here?" Molly asked clearly wanting to join them. "You won't go anywhere?"

John shrugged with exhaustion.

"I'm not going anywhere." He said before gesturing to the mail piled by the door near where he was still standing. "I'll sit down like a good boy and opened my letters."

Molly nodded, likely realizing that even if she were there, if he wanted to leave she couldn't stop him.

So, they left him alone, like a humiliated child at a school meeting where the teachers urgently need to speak to the dad about his troubled kid.

He hadn't really left the doorway and crouching down he lifted the stack of letters and the one package and took them to the sofa.

The package was for him though he didn't recognize it at first. Mostly because he didn't remember placing the order. A gentle shake revealed the relaxing sound of pills rattling in a bottle and he released a soft chuckle.

Well, thank God for that.

He tore into the box and then into the bottle swallowing a few of them dry. He'd once read an article about an athlete who took up to 50 pain pills a day, every day. John had lost count of how many he'd had. But it couldn't be anywhere near that many. Could it...?

He shoved the pill bottle in his jacket pocket and the box beneath the sofa for later retrieval before going back to the mail.
Bills. People, writing in for help on their cases the old-fashioned way. More bills.

And a letter from Mazarin Press.

His let it drop to his lap and just stared. John had been purposefully, actively trying not to think about it. He couldn't think about it because if he did thinking would turn into obsession.

After as much hemming and hawing as he could stand he'd sent off "The Case of the Agony Column". Just two copies, to two different publishers. If he kept his dream and hopes small it wouldn't hurt quite so much when he was rejected, he'd reasoned.

Now here was a moment of truth and rather than let the sealed envelope mock him a second longer, he started to open it.

Dear Doctor Watson,

We would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to consider your novel.

However...

He stopped reading at the "However".

It was childish of course, he knew that, to assume that he'd be lauded. That they'd roll out the red carpet for what, he now imagined, was a lackluster, boring, silly waste of time and paper. But still...still perhaps it wouldn't have hurt quite so much on a different day. Perhaps a day where absolutely everything was turning to dust in his hands.

John folded the letter in half, stuffed it in his other pocket and leaned his head back to rest it on the wall. He couldn't hear what they were saying in the other room and frankly, he didn't want to. There were few things quite so awful as being forced to listen to yourself being discussed with worried tones and furrowed brows. Glancing around he noticed that Sherlock had his music stand out. That meant he had been planning to play something for them tonight. He could also smell food that didn't seem to be their usual take away fare.

This night was going to be special. Of course, they would have bantered about cases and excitedly chosen their next one. But still, it was going to be quiet and intimate and soft. In a strange way, the cases were part of their closeness. It was something they and they alone shared. Sherlock would have played his violin and maybe later they would have danced a bit, swaying in each other's arms. And then they would have retired to bed and made love or at least come as close to it as his broken equipment and broken heart and broken soul would have allowed.

It would have been a good night...until John ruined it.

How many of Sherlock's nights had he ruined at this point?

The buzzing of his phone startled him and still, in his haze, it took him a second to navigate it out of his pocket to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hello?" Replied a woman voice. "Hello, is this John?"

"Yeah, yeah this is John, who is this?" He said trying not to slur.

"This is Nell. Nell Wickham, I'm James' wife."
John pulled the phone away briefly and stared at the screen. It only said "James" which was of little help.

"Hello...Nell." He cleared his throat and tried to clear his head. "I'm sorry, I-

"We met once, you at me, at Family Day. In the cafeteria."


James his mate from rehab. James who he hadn't ever even bothered to call once he'd gotten out. James, who on his much more lucid days did cross his mind. James who he'd been eager to talk to in those first few months. James, who he'd be ashamed to speak with now.

"Yes, Nell, of course. I remember you. How are you? How are you both?" He asked sitting up a little straighter.

"Um..." She began.

John heard the waver in her voice and he knew.

"What happened?"

"He died...about a month ago now. It was his heart it just...did he tell you about his surgery?"

John inhaled deeply and thought about James' smile and the jokes he used to tell.

"Yes, yes he did. He said he had a valve replacement due to an infection. Bacterial endocarditis, if I remember."

"Yes, that's it. We were at breakfast and he just...he just went pale and he said he couldn't breathe and that his chest...his chest..."

She broke down in sobs and John felt the tears start to sting his own eyes. He didn't know what to say exactly. The part of him that was still a doctor wanted to ask questions she likely couldn't answer. He wanted to look at his chart to know what had gone wrong.

Nell coughed a little and sniffled before continuing.

"Anyway, I was going through some of his stuff and found out that he'd written a few things for me in case this happened. He wrote something for you but he didn't finish it. I'm going to send it along to you if you'll give me your address. It's not much but I know it was important. Would you like to hear a bit now?"

"Ummm, yes, yes, please."

"Alright. He wrote; John, what I know about you is you like answers. Definitive answers. But sometimes there aren't any and that's ok. Remember that night we spent outside? Both going crazy. And what did we do? We just sat out there and looked at the stars because they were pretty. You need to do more of that, mate. We both do. Just look up." She blew her nose before continuing. "Sounds like a nice night."

"Yeah, yeah it was."

"He caught a bad cold a few months back and it scared him. Because of his line of work he didn't have many friends, you understand."
"Yeah, yeah, I understand." He nodded. He was bent forward now, one hand on his forehead shielding his eyes while his elbow rested on his knee.

"Anyway, he wanted me to make sure that if something ever happened to him people knew that his sobriety was intact."

"It was?" John said happily, hopefully.

"Oh yes." She said. "He was as straight as an arrow. I was so proud of him. I am so proud of him. We'd just had our vows renewed, a lovely little ceremony and everything. You know, I'm sure how this can put a strain on a relationship."

John looked up just as Sherlock re-entered the room followed by their two friends.

"Yeah, yeah, I really do."

"I'm glad we had that. I miss him so much but..." Her voice wavered again but she pressed on. "But since he came back from The Location it was like I had my husband back. Like when we were first married. When everything is shiny and new and everything makes you blush."

John thought back to that first meeting at Barts. Sherlock, handsome, arrogant, lovely, brilliant. The warmth he felt at being so thoroughly seen by another human being. Until that moment he hadn't realized just how invisible he'd felt. And later that night in his bedsit as he'd been skeptically scouring The Science Of Deduction website thinking about that face, that voice and that wink, he had blushed.

Molly and Greg each said something to Sherlock that John couldn't hear before nodding at him and making their exit. Sherlock was studying him, no doubt curious as to who he was speaking to on the phone and why his cheeks were wet.

"I'm so very sorry, Nell. So, sorry but I'm glad the two of you had that. I really am. He spoke so well of you. He wanted so badly for the two of you to be like you were. He was so excited to see you on Family Weekend. He loved you very much. I'm sure that ceremony just meant absolutely everything to him. And I'm sorry that I never called. I always meant to and I just didn't..."

The last sentence came out just as terrible as he imagined it would but she was nothing but gracious.

"It's alright, John. He knew and he understood. I'm sorry, I've kept you so long just weeping on the phone. The last thing you need is some mad woman talking your ear off." She laughed sadly. It sounded wet and thick.

"Not at all. I can give you my address if you're ready?"

He passed along his address and bid her goodbye. After ending the call he set his phone on the sofa next to him and scrubbed roughly at his face with his palms.

"What did Greg and Molly say?" He asked and it came out muffled, blocked by his hands.

"They were expressing their concern for your health, physical and otherwise. They said they caught you-"

"Caught me." He said derisively.

"Yes, caught you trying to fill a prescription you'd written for yourself."
John dropped his hands and leaned back again against the sofa. Sherlock was standing in the center of the room, arms behind his back, gazing at him almost as if he'd never seen him before.

"I'm not going to deny it," John said wearily. "It would pretty stupid at this point."

"You're on hydrocodone and have been since you came back from the dentist. Your habit has been increasing exponentially. Out of fear of offending you or angering you or losing you I have avoided the subject but no more. How many have you had today?"

"I don't know." He said with a shrug.

"John-"

"I said I don't know. I'm not lying, I lost count. I take them when I need them and let's just say I have needed quite a few today."

"There is no way you can do your job safely while this intoxicated."

"Funny thing that. We won't have to worry about it anymore. I got sacked." He made a dismissive gesture with his hand and ended things with a shrug.

"W-When?"

"Today. This morning. I have been unemployed for..." He looked at the time on his phone. "A little over nine hours."

"What have you been doing since then? Why didn't you come home?"

"I've been walking around the city, talking to "Mary", getting high...trying to think of what I was going to tell you."

Up until then, Sherlock had been standing at a distance. He now approached the sofa, slowly. "And what did you decide?"

"Figured I'd play it by ear once I got upstairs. Maybe not tell you at all."

Sherlock's advance toward him stopped and John saw him attempt to harden his features... and fail. His partner stood there in silence for nearly a solid minute. It was a silence John was loathed to break. He wanted to get up and embrace him, apologize, make promises he might even be willing to keep. But instead, he simply sat there, too frightened to move.

Eventually, Sherlock turned and headed toward the window, pulling the curtain aside to stare blindly out.

"You know...unhappiness is an ugly emotion. It tends to drive people to extremes, I've found. It makes them do ghastly things. When these sorts of incidents wind up in my lap...our lap, it's usually to do with murder, at least that's how it's ended. Of course, it doesn't always end that way."

Sherlock was speaking but he wasn't looking at him.

Sherlock wouldn't look at him.

"You know...if you're unhappy with me," He went on. "I would really rather you just say so. I have a distaste for passive aggression. I daresay we've also reached the point where what might have once been called subconscious actions are quite conscious."
John's mouth felt dry and he started to speak but his boyfriend continued robotically...except for the slightest of slight catches in his voice.

"If you want to sever our romantic relationship I do wish you would say so. I don't want to be the cause of any more of your unhappiness."

"Sherlock-...no..." He didn't want that. He didn't want that at all. He sat forward with the intention to stand but even that slight movement made him dizzy.

"Who were you talking to on the phone just now?"

Even if he hadn't been blasted out of his mind John suspected the abrupt change in subject would have thrown him for a loop.

"I...it was Nell, James' wife. James from The Location."

"I recall who James was."

"He died."

"I gathered. I'm sorry. Overdose?"

"No, no actually. He was sober."

"Good for him."

"It was a bad heart valve. Those things happen rather quickly so I don't believe he suffered." Sherlock nodded but didn't say anything. "At least I hope he didn't."

"You mentioned a ceremony."

"Yeah, they had a recommitment ceremony, apparently. Renewed their wedding vows."

John saw his partner's shoulders rise and fall as he took a deep breath.

"I never imagined I would be the one to say this. But for a very long time, I have found myself questioning how...committed you are to what we could have been."

"Could have been?" John asked half sure and half afraid he'd heard him correctly.

"John...why do you still wear your wedding ring?" Sherlock asked. And now he had turned to face him, tall and stern, his face a mask of anger and pain. So much hurt and pain that he never let show.

"I just haven't..." He trailed off knowing no real answer was forthcoming.

"Every day, I see that." He said gesturing at his left hand. "Every time I hold your hand, I feel it. Every time you touch me, it's there. This has nothing to do with Mary. I loved Mary. I grieved Mary. She was one of the few people I counted as a friend and a dear one at that. I still rend myself apart for my fault in her death. But I have tried to move forward, with you, always forward. But every time I take your hand that is between us."

John now wobbly got to his feet. He opened his mouth to speak but Sherlock interrupted him. It seemed he had been planning this speech for a long time.

"You still keep a room upstairs. Your clothing, your photos, your shoes, your cologne, it's all just up there. Your house remains unsold. Despite my offers of help to put it on the market, to have my
lawyer take over, you refuse and there it sits. You even go there sometimes, presumably to be away from me."

John faced no doubt betrayed his surprise and Sherlock flashed him a disgusted look.

"Oh please. You think I don't know? You think I'm unaware that you go inside and sit there for hours on end?" He inhaled deeply. "You seem content to leave the permanent status of your daughter up in the air. And every one of these examples has a common thread; commitment. You are unwilling or unable to commit to anything nowadays. Almost as though you're not planning on staying. I know I am not ideal, John. I know. I know I am likely not so tender or attentive or demonstrably loving as your previous partners were...as your wife was."

John shook his head rapidly and again tried to break in but Sherlock held up his hand. He watched as his jaw worked, as he swallowed hard and pressed his lips together.

"But I have tried. I have tried harder at this than I have ever tried at anything before. I'm not arrogant enough to believe I am a cure-all for depression or the antidote to your addiction. But I am here. I exist. I had hoped that you might glean comfort from that but I'm not certain that you do. You seem to have one foot in this life and one in the other. I consider myself to be a capable man but even I cannot fight a ghost."

"You're not!" John managed. "You're not, you're not fighting against Mary or her memory, I swear it!"

"Oh, John." He said and he looked so interminably sad John thought his heart might break just there. "Mary isn't the ghost. You are. You're the one that's existing between worlds, never really in one or the other."

They were standing at a distance and when John tried to approach Sherlock visibly retreated. Not so much in terms of steps but in...availability. He retreated further into himself and further away from John.

They weren't touching, they hadn't touched and it was killing him.

"You have...wrecked me, John. For years Mycroft told me that caring was not an advantage and I believed him. I believed him because I was frightened. Because I had seen people torn apart. Broken to pieces because of this. Because they open their hearts and their souls and their minds. Love is just...opening up everything, exposing your body like some dumb, domesticated animal. And you don't know if it will be a caress or a stab. You just have to wait. I just have to wait. And I don't..."

He trailed off and with a shaky hand removed a cigarette from his pocket.

So he was smoking again.

When did that start? John wondered. And how had he not noticed?

"But that makes it seem like you're the predator and you're not." Sherlock went on. "I don't fear you, John. I fear what you do to me."

John watched him, struggling, in pain in disarray. He'd persisted in the early days and for far too long at that that Sherlock was this cold, emotionless machine. He later learned that the opposite was true. He wore his heart on his sleeve which is why he fought so hard to keep people at a distance. Yes, of course, there was the natural abrasiveness. But any fool could see he'd cultivated it from a bud to a flower all in an effort to erect a strong enough shield to ward off danger.
Danger like me. John thought.

I'm his Red Forest. He's all tangled up and caught and bruised and lost and scared because of me.

Sherlock's face was a shifting mask, changing from anger, to fear to desolation, to hurt, to frustration and then circling back round to anger again. He was almost frantically patting himself down looking for a match or a lighter and of course unable to find one as he'd all but stopped smoking.

"Pardon me." He said quickly as he exited to their bedroom to continue the search.

John stood there, foolishly and frozen to the spot. There wasn't a word that fell from his partner's mouth that he could deny. It was all true. He was holding back and holding on to the wrong things. He was a ghost. Not here, not gone. Not any use to anybody.

His phone buzzed in rapid succession from where he'd left it on the sofa cushion. Walking over he picked it up and saw there were two missed messages.

He swiped his screen and saw the first one. It was a text from Mycroft.

Just nine words. That was all.

That was enough.

**Doctor Watson, are you a man of your word?**

Of course, Mycroft knew. John was aware he'd been tailing him this whole time, he remembered the fight he'd overheard between the brothers. He had been expecting, waiting for this moment. Witing for John's inevitable collapse because that was what people did. They folded like a house of cards and no one knew that better than Mycroft.

The elder Holmes who knew Sherlock better than anyone.

*When he cares he cares fiercely, recklessly. In that way, he hasn't changed much since he was a small boy. So very careless with his heart.*

*People only pretend to enjoy open, fragile, gentle things because they like to watch them shatter.*

*He is an open wound, raw and red and gaping and like a child...like a little boy he'd bandaged himself with an elastoplast and proclaimed himself "All better". He is not.*

*Morose, depressed, unfocused, unreachable...untethered. His thinking became scattered, careless.*

*He folded in on himself, collapsed like a star.*

"**Mycroft, if I feel myself slipping, if I start to fall, I won't grab onto him. You won't have a chance to get to me because I will make myself disappear. I will pack up and vanish from his life forever. I promise. Never again, hmm? Alright? Never again. You have my word.**"

John looked at the text again.

**Doctor Watson, are you a man of your word?**

It seemed that in this moment his word was all he had left.

John made his way into the kitchen and picked up the candle from the table before heading to the bedroom. Sherlock had turned on the bedside lamp but for the most part was searching, rather
violently, in the dark. John imagined he really just wanted something to do.

"Darling?" He said quietly and Sherlock turned to him a few mostly dried tear tracks on his face. John motioned to the candle which his boyfriend had completely forgotten about. Sherlock walked over slowly and putting the cigarette in his mouth he leaned over to light it. The glow of the flame illuminated his face and highlighted every plane of beauty.

It would be a nice way to remember him.

Once it was lit John set the candle down and slowly brought his partner in for a kiss. Thankfully if not surprisingly he came willingly. Their lips touched, the taste a mix of fresh tobacco, smoke, and tears.

"Sherlock, I have to go out now." He said softly as he pulled away.

"What?" he asked jerking backward.

"I know, it's abrupt but it won't be for long. Just a bit and I'll be right back. I promise." He lied.

"You're leaving right now? After everything I just said, you're leaving. For what? To go get high?" Sherlock removed himself from John's loose embrace and stalked out of the bedroom, a cloud of smoke billowing angrily behind him.

John followed behind him and watched as he strode over to his violin, picked it up and began playing keeping his back to him.

He'd become much more familiar with classical music over the years he'd spent with Sherlock. He didn't know the name of this piece but he remembered it and he could feel the chill and the anger and lament.

John silently made his way over to the door and lingered just to watch, just to drink him in for a last time.

"I love you, Sherlock Holmes," he said quietly. "You're going to come to doubt a lot of things but I hope you never doubt that."

He felt certain he hadn't heard him over the music and with that John slipped out, down the stairs and out of Baker Street for what he imagined was for good.

As he walked down the street he texted quickly to Mycroft.

I'm gone. Take care of him.

The response was almost immediate.

I always have.

John didn't have a plan. All he did know for sure was that the clock had started ticking. It was still relatively early, not even 7 pm. Sherlock would likely stew for a few hours before engrossing himself in a case to take his mind off things. He wouldn't expect John to return home until sometime after midnight if not early the next morning.

Then, when that didn't happen, he'd start searching and searching for Sherlock always lead to finding. By the time he set off John would need to be gone, one way or another. But even if he
vanished to another country or all the way to the States it wouldn't take long for Sherlock to find him so any escape was temporary.

Not to mention the obvious. He didn't want to just pull up stakes and start anew somewhere else. He was tired. It had been too many long years fighting the past and fighting the inevitable. Just a few inches over and that bullet that went relatively harmlessly through his shoulder would have hit the brachial artery. He would have gone unconscious in seconds and died in minutes. That would have been that. An unremarkable death for an unremarkable man. No Sherlock. No Mary. No Rosie. No one. At this moment, that sounded nice. At this moment he wished for a different past that would have saved them all this misery.

Yes. Yes, he was fairly sure he didn't want to live anymore.

As that thought occurred to him he looked around for "Mary" his self-proclaimed failsafe. The one who kept appearing because some scrap of him was hanging on to his tattered life. But she was nowhere to be found. Emboldened he upped his stride. If she was gone once and for all that meant he was indeed committed to this idea. That meant that it was the right and proper thing to do. It was what a man would do when he was carrying out his word.

He wasn't good for people. That was almost certain. He'd known it last year but in a far more murky way. This felt so much clearer. This left no room for doubt. There was nothing he would do if he lingered except hurt Sherlock and Rosie as well. Knowing that and knowing it without question made it so much easier for him to go.

He walked down Baker Street heading north and having no real destination other than away.

Again his phone buzzed persistently. He removed it from his pocket and saw it wasn't a new message but rather the other one that had come in just moments after Mycroft's. He'd completely forgotten about it.

John, I happen to have found myself in London and was wondering if you were about if you might like to get a drink. It's been too long.

-Duck

Well. If that didn't beat all. The night he and Sherlock had had their blow up at his parent's house John had started to reply to his mate's email. Started but never finished, at least not then. Mostly, he'd just wanted to make Sherlock jealous.

He'd answered the next day to say he was sorry but he wasn't going to be able to make it but hopefully next time round. Duck had been understanding and as it turned out hadn't been able to make it then himself. His trip had gotten pushed back...to this evening it seemed.

Perfect. This would do just fine.

Love to, mate. How about right now?

When he'd described Duck as a recluse to Mary he was, in fact, underplaying things. The friend he'd spent so much of his time with all those years ago loved to go out, loved to have the telly on, and mates over and was always busy juggling phone calls from multiple women at nearly the same time.

The loss of those new recruits, those boys and the ensuing investigation coupled with the endless barrage of grief and anger and hate from the families and the press broke him. Or maybe, he was a little broken before he even joined the army. In any case, his once gregarious, riotous mate had
become a virtual hermit. He lived God knows where with just the barest of essentials, he had no television, no internet. He collected his mail from the post office and John had no idea of his real address. He never had so much as a newspaper delivered and sent others to buy food or whatever else he might need. He was rooted in his own self-flagellation routine and it showed no signs of stopping. The guilt he felt was obviously eating him alive from the inside. It's only competition was the self-inflicted emotional mortification of the flesh. How he'd met a woman John had no idea, but if she could brighten his life a bit he hoped it stuck.

He didn't talk to Duck much. They exchanged letters now and then but John found a way to write about anything but himself. His friend was the same way. And so, over the years, they exchanged sheets of paper with word after word that said absolutely nothing.

Beyond Mary's murder Duck knew nothing about the annus horribilis that was 2015. He knew nothing about the suicide attempt. He knew nothing about the alcoholism. He knew nothing about his relationship with Sherlock.

It seemed silly, maybe even macabre to do this now. To have a friendly chat...a friendly last chat. But he missed Duck. Somewhere along the way, things had gone wrong with them and now was just as good a time as any to set them right.

Plus someone always had to be the last, didn't they? The last to see someone else alive.

He needed to sit and think. He needed to shake off the weight and the anguish that had settled over him at the idea of breaking Sherlock's heart one last time. He needed to forget the look on his face as he poured out his disenchanted heart. He needed to let that go to do this right.

John entered the pub...the first pub he'd been inside in ages and scanned the room for his mate. He was exactly where he expected him to be; at a small table, in a corner, half in the dark. With a wide smile that he truly meant he hurried over and sat down.

"Good to see you, sir." John said. He always felt more formal when they were face to face as opposed to writing.

"Please, John, I think James will do."

John felt a sharp twinge as he thought of his other friend named James, dead and gone and having left a brokenhearted spouse behind. Broken and lost.

"Or Duck." His friend continued perhaps reacting to the look on John's face. "Though you're the only one left who would know to call me that these days."

"Duck it is. That's how I always think of you."

Duck smiled and gave him a small nod.

"Well, I got a bottle of whiskey for the table. I seem to remember that being your poison. Am I right?"

"Oh, it's all my poison." John replied. "Yeah, let's have a glass."

Nothing in recent memory tasted as good as that first shot and he tried not to groan as it smoldered in his mouth and then ignited a fire on the way down his throat. He could pretend. He could chant the mantras. He could carry around the Big Book. But he missed this. By God, he missed how every ritualistic moment of this felt and before the first one was really gone he was pouring himself another one.
John relaxed in his seat as he and his friend began their pleasantries.


Duck and the woman he'd been seeing had split. That came out after a long while. Something surprisingly real, personal.

"I'm sorry to hear that." John said sympathetically.

"Yes, well. These sorts of things happen. I can't say that I blame her. I mean, this and all." He said gesturing to his face.

They hadn't talked about his scars as his friend never wanted to. The man before him was quiet, soft-spoken, packing just as many words into a sentence as the sentence needed, no more, no less. The Duck he remembered from his teenage years had been a mouthy, chatty bastard. A funny, filthy, loyal, handsome lothario rarely without a bird on his arm or a clever comment on his lips. The Duck he'd served with, Major James Sholto, Sir, had been a similar man but tempered. The army had calmed him down but it hadn't dampened his spirits or the mischievous twinkle in his eye. He was different but the same. He had grown up, simply put and John had done his best to emulate him. He'd tried to grow up to. He'd wanted to find his way by following Duck as he'd done once before. This man sitting across from him though, was a third man and not at all like the first two.

Not that John blamed him for the transformation.

It was a story like so many others. A daisy chain of IE's rigged to go off one after another after another. One set fire to the fuel tank melting flesh on the left side of Duck's body. Every other man died except him and he had the terrible memories and the guilt and the pain and scars from 3rd-degree burns and the Victoria Cross all to remind him. The skin had healed as well as it could. He'd refused skin grafts, John knew that much. And God knew it could have been worse. He was lucky to still have his limbs, his mind, his eye, though John imagined he didn't feel very lucky.

"You think she left because of your scars? Did she say that?"

Duck frowned and looked down before shaking his head.

"No. I tell a lie, it wasn't that. She never minded that if you can believe it. She said I was too much. She said; James, this is all too much."

"What was too much?" John asked with interest as he sipped, not downed his next drink.

"How I lived. How I never left the house. How I didn't need or want to know what was going on outside my front door. I tried to provide her with every comfort, every amenity but that hardly stands up in the face of night terrors and days of nothing but dumb silence. I can't blame her. What kind of a bloke is that?"

"Yeah, I um...I guess I know what you mean."

"How did you handle it? Coming home after your shoulder?"

"Badly. Couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. Nightmares, all the time, just constantly. Reliving it over and over. My therapist kept trying to tell me that it was natural to be frightened, that I was scarred by it all. And she was right except...I was scarred because I feared it and missed it. It took someone else to help me realize that."
"I miss it too." Duck replied. "I left too much of me over there. Too many pieces scattered. I think I thought somehow they might allow me back to reclaim them, make amends as best I could. I can't bring those boys back but I can do my penance for their lives, for their souls. Instead, I'm here. Not really home and not really away but caught up somewhere in between. It's a shite way to live."

The waitress came over and they ordered from the limited menu of pub food before Duck continued.

"I suppose Mary helped you with that?"

"Umm...yes, but I wouldn't meet her for three and half nearly four years after I got back to London. No, the one who helped me initially was Sherlock."

"Ah, Sherlock, your odd and brilliant friend."

"Yes, that he is."

"John Watson does not make friends easily."

John chuckled.

"You say that as though it were an adage."

"It was pretty well known back home. Guess that's why I always felt rather honoured."

"You felt honoured? I was the one who got the attention of the coolest kid in class."

Duck laughed and John realized only then how long it had been since he'd heard that sound.

"I just talked a lot of nonsense and I talked it the loudest, that's all."

"Well, it suited me fine."

"It's not exactly right, is it? Me sitting here complaining about a girlfriend who left me to a man who lost his wife." Duck said before clearing his throat. "I was a terrible mate to you, John. I didn't call. I didn't write. I have no idea how you coped in that year without her. I don't know how you're coping now. I think I thought...I don't know what I thought. Probably something similar to what was going through my mind when I scarpered the first time."

John frowned and grabbed at the greasy chips that had been set down before him.

"What exactly were you thinking then?" He asked testily.

"Oh." Duck said meeting his eyes. "Have we come round to that conversation at last?"

"Now is as good a time as any."

And he did feel that way. It was after all his last chance. He knew firsthand that feeling of calm that came over him once he decided to just do it. He'd felt it the days prior to meeting Sherlock, he felt it last Christmas and he felt it now. A sort of numbed peace that was only being helped along by the alcohol filling his belly. The only time the sadness broke down the barricaded door was when his thoughts strayed to Sherlock or his daughter.

Despite his unwillingness to ever think of Mycroft as a friend, he was both brilliant and in this instance, correct.

He had promised if things got bad he would vanish. He had given his word which still had a scrap of
meaning to it.

A man of honour would withdraw before the Forest swallowed them all.

A man of honour would withdraw.

A man of honour would withdraw.

"Actually, better question. Are you the one that got me booted from the army? Hmm? Are the reason I got graded P8?"

Duck looked at him unblinking.

"Yes."

John felt all that old anger and rage power through him again. He knew it. He'd always know.

"You sonofabitch."

"You needed to get out you just didn't know it."

"And you knew?" He demanded.

"You're Goddamn right I did. Yes, I knew that. I don't know how you remember it, John but I know how it was. You were getting careless, manic. Not sleeping, not eating. I know the thousand yard stare when I see it and I know you!"

Duck's voice had risen and a few people turned to stare at them but not for long. It was a pub and arguments happened. That was nothing new and nothing of note.

"I was fine." John protested, downing the drink before him and pouring another.

"If I hadn't recommended your discharge I don't know what you might have done but it wouldn't be good. Do you remember the night you sat there on your bunk taking apart your weapon, putting it back together and taking it apart again? You were on the verge of cracking. A P8 after you've just been wounded is something no one questions. A P8 discharge without a quantifiable and recent injury and people start to talk and you know what they talk about. What kind of life would you have if they knew it was psych? On your record. Always on your record."

"Always thinking you know what's best for me," John said and it had just this side of a slur to it.

"Yes, I do. And I'm always right."

That same arrogance. Why had he never put that together before? Why was he attracted to that same almighty arrogance over and over again?

"Is that why you left?" He said scowling at him. "Because you knew what was best for me?"

"The story then? That's what you want? The story. Fine, here it is. You never asked a lot of questions and I liked that about you, John. You never really asked where I came from I assume because you didn't want me to delve too deeply into your life. I get that. Haven't you wondered how I could manage to have a cook and a live-in nurse and security on an army pension."

John blinked albeit a bit drunkenly.

"I...hadn't..."
"No, of course, you hadn't. John, I was playing at being the lower class petty criminal. The life suited me but it wasn't real. My home, my birthright, as my father called it was something that I ran far and wide from."

"You're rich?" John said with disbelief.

"When we first knew one another my father was. Now, I've inherited it and wound up needing it in a way I never imagined. It keeps me safe now, secure. I am grateful for the thing I tried to dodge for years. The only reason I'm in London is to tend to some business that cannot be conducted over the phone. But, back to the matter at hand. All those years ago you and I accidentally ran afoul of some very dangerous people. After they knocked you out with the butt of that gun I kicked you as hard as I could to get you to roll over. You were face down in a puddle and you would have drowned. They asked me why I did that. I explained and they said it didn't matter because they were going to kill us both anyway. I told them I had money, I told them I could get them whatever they wanted if they just let us go. Once I'd convinced them I wasn't lying we struck a deal. I told them I needed two weeks. Just two weeks to secure the cash. They agreed and they said if it took one day over a fortnight they'd take you and send pieces of you back to me bit by bit in the post."

"Jesus...fuck..." John said breathlessly.

"I worked with our boss so he'd stay in constant communication with them and I worked on my dad. Once I had everything settled I sent you out, did the drop-off and left. I knew if I stayed they'd try for more and I knew they'd hurt you in the process. So I had the word put out on the street that you'd served your purpose and I'd moved on. You were nothing to me. Just some starry-eyed pup who liked to follow me around. It was fun while it lasted but it was over."

"Yeah, I heard those rumors."

"I needed them to think I was gone and you were useless to me. I needed everyone to think you didn't matter."

"I've heard this song before if you can believe it." Duck looked confused at that but John didn't feel like elaborating. "Now's the point where I say, but you could have let me know. You could have covertly explained. Instead, you left me broken."

"John-

"For my own good. I know.

"I did what I thought was right. You may want an apology from me but I'm afraid I've none to give. What I did, I'd do again. And now you have your answer."

Duck concluded by sitting up in his chair ramrod straight. He was never more secure than when carrying out or explaining duty. John had always loved that actually. He was secure in his choices and his actions. All those years ago, after leaving the chaos of his father and that household, that security had been just what he'd craved and been so incredibly attracted to.

But he was also jealous of it and sometimes that security read as smugness and it made every bit of him clench up in anger.

"What about Sherlock?" Duck continued.

"What about him?"

"Are you back living with him? I imagine it must be difficult, the idea of staying in the house you
bought with Mary."

"I did stay in the house, for almost a year after she died. Nearly drank myself to death and tried to kill myself on Christmas Eve."

Duck looked stricken, his eyes going wide, his mouth falling open a bit.

"It's alright, I'd had practice with that plan. The suicide, I mean. I was going to kill myself awhile after I got back from Afghanistan."

"I didn't-"

"Yeah, I know, you didn't know. After that, I did a couple of months in rehab, talked a few things out. Talked about my dad and my sister and my daughter and you and Sherlock. Came to a couple realizations. Got out, tried to start my life over again. Failed miserably. Got hooked on pain pills and now I'm here."

"John...my God."

"Mmmm." John said in reply. "Want to know what we talked about? My therapist and me?"

He wasn't sure why he was saying these things, doing these things. He didn't know where all this anger had come from but at the moment it seemed endless. Then again, if memory served, alcohol had always made him sad and mean.

"Yes. Tell me."

"I was telling her how I felt after you left. How it just spun me into this depression. How I felt like I was in a hole and I couldn't crawl out of it and barely wanted to. We talked about how you were the most important relationship in my life up to that point."

John could see it dawn on Duck just as clearly as he could see him, a moment later, start to talk himself out of it.

"About the time I realized that I fancied Sherlock...was about the time I realized I'd fancied you."

And there it was. But strangely any satisfaction John thought he might get out of this moment; horror, guilt, anger to match his own, was nonexistent. It didn't feel good and he didn't feel better. As a matter of fact, he felt worse.

"I have no idea why I said that." He said running a finger around the rim of his glass.

"Is it true?"

"Yeah, it's true I just don't know why I said it. Anyway, Sherlock and I made a go of it. Well, we tried. Or rather he tried. And now I think we've broken up. Yeah, I think we broke up about an hour ago."

"John, I'm sorry. I'm at a loss for words."

"It's alright." he said with a shrug. "None of it is your doing. I loved Mary, by the way. That wasn't a lie. She wasn't a beard. I'm just...bisexual. And I think I started off telling you this because I wanted to hurt you because I was angry and I knew it would injure and shock. But now...I just want you to know because you meant something to me. And you mattered. And I don't know what your life is like anymore. I don't know how you feel on a daily basis. But I do know what it feels like to carry
that weight around, that guilt that you're responsible for a death. I know how that sits in a soul and a heart. I know what it feels like to want to hide, to disappear. And I know what it feels like to maybe, sometimes think the world might have been better off if you were never in it. That you didn't matter. That all you ever brought was pain. But I want you to know that you made my life better than I could have imagined. You came around at a time when I had nothing and even when you left you left me with so much. No regrets, mate. Just love."

John sniffled and gave his old friend a trembling sort of smile.

"I love you too, John. Always. I swore that back then and I mean it now."

"Thank you, Duck."

"Maybe you shouldn't drink anymore tonight." He said gently as though it were a new idea.

"Nah, it's alright. Doesn't matter anymore."

"Maybe I should give Sherlock a ring?" He said with a furrowed brow.

"No, no, no, no. I ruined that. He deserves a clean break, you know. That's the thing." He said with a tight laugh. "That's the thing of it, I get why people have to leave sometimes. I get it. I was pissed but I get it. Sometimes staying does more harm than good. Sometimes you just have to excise the cancer so the healthy body can go on. I'm the cancer."

"Alright, ok, yes, I understand." Duck said in that voice John recognized as the one people used to placate the drunken or the mad.

"I'm going to get some air." John said rising to his feet with unsteady speed.

"I'll go with you."

"No, you stay here. Save our place. But maybe after a while, we can go and get some proper food, eh? A nice sit-down restaurant? I could go for some Italian."

"Yes," Duck said the relief on his face evident. Plans were good. John knew that's what he was thinking. Plans still meant that the speaker had a bit of logic in them. Something you could reason with. He was probably imagining himself dragging a drunken army buddy back to Baker Street where he'd be cared for. Where slights and injuries could be mended. "I'd like that very much."

"Fantastic. Just let me collect myself and we'll go, ok?"

"Ok, John. I'll stay right here."

John gave him a friendly nod, turned and walked out of the building.

And kept walking.

Blocks away from the pub he stopped in a store to pick up a notebook and a pen. He could, of course, send a text but he wanted this on actual paper.

He was drunk. Absolutely fucking munted but if he was stumbling or slurring or veering he was hardly aware of it. He walked and spoke slowly but with purpose and figured he was hiding it all well enough. The truth was he didn't care. It didn't matter what they saw or didn't see. All that mattered was getting this over with and done right.
Plus, it felt good to be drunk.

He bought the paper and pen and another bottle of whiskey to keep what was already inside him company and he set out.

It took him a few tries to order an Uber but finally, he managed.

When the car arrived he got inside and the driver asked him to confirm his destination.

"Yes, Hampstead Cemetery, that's right."

How many hours, days had he spent at that place? How many tears had been shed there? Impossible to know, not that he really wanted to. He still didn't have a plan per se but he knew, right now, this was where he wanted to be. This place made sense.

After a 20 minute ride the cab dropped him off at the gate and he made his way through. Down the path. Through the arch. Past the chapel. And then a short walk over hard, lumpy, trodden grass and frozen mud.

There it stood, in a quiet corner all by itself, underneath an old tree whose leaves caught a breeze so nicely on a windy day.

He stood and stared at the grave for a moment. The polished black granite stone. So pristine. So reflective that just beyond the letters "SHERLOCK HOLMES" he could always see himself. Always see the slump of his shoulders. Always knew that had he looked it would have mirrored back his broken figured as he cried and pleaded and begged for this to all end.

It had started to snow a little after he left the pub and he brushed off the thin coating of flakes that were gathered on the grave.

He hadn't been back here since he'd come with Mary. He'd wanted her to see where he'd spent his hours. He'd wanted her to see his mourning place. And he'd wanted, in a way, to ask Sherlock's blessing. To let him know he'd decided to go on after all. After so many days and afternoons and nights of standing in this very spot and saying he wouldn't, he couldn't.

He'd noticed he'd already started crying but he didn't know for how long, as he seated himself on the ground, back pressed firmly against the cold stone.

He turned off the buzzer on his phone but turned on the screen for a bit of light.

5 missed calls from Duck.

No matter. Balancing his phone under his chin so the light shone on the notepad he started writing. His hand and handwriting were unsteady but the words were there. The same words he'd thought of the first time but now tinged with so much more love and understanding for what he'd had. What he'd been given. What he was losing. And what he hadn't given back. It wasn't poetry but it was truth. At least it felt true as he was writing it. He stopped periodically to scratch something out or rewrite it, to readjust the phone or pull his jacket tighter. Once he even stopped just to rest for a moment, to close his eyes, just for a bit. He wasn't sure how long he'd dozed for but when he opened his eyes he was drunkenly aware of approaching footsteps.

It was probably the groundskeeper. That had happened before more than once in those two years without Sherlock. The bloke had gotten to know him, even started to call him by name.

He wondered if it would be the same guy and if maybe he could talk or bribe him into letting him
stay, just for a while.

He straightened up and tried to look presentable and not like the pathetic drunk that he was.

"I thought I felt a chill. As though someone were walking over my grave." Came the voice out of the darkness. It tried to sound smooth but there was a rawness beneath that John recognized.

So he'd been found.

The light from the phone made it hard to see in the dark but he could make out Sherlock's silhouette. It looked as though he might have been carrying something in his hands but by the time he got close enough for John to see him properly, he knew that wasn't so.

"Hello, John."

John sighed heavily and squinted up at him.

"Hello, Sherlock. How on earth did you find me so fast?"

"It didn't feel very fast. May I?" He asked gesturing to the ground at John's side.

It was so formal John might have laughed if he'd had a laugh in him.

"Be my guest."

Sherlock sat down gracefully at his side as though they were on a picnic. As though any of this were normal. As though they weren't sitting on the ground above an empty grave meant for him.

"Did you pick this spot?" Sherlock asked after an extended silence.

"I'm sorry...what?"

"Did you pick this spot for me? Did you choose where I was to be buried?"

"Well, yes, it was left up to me." He said recalling that horrible day where he was forced to make heartbreaking decision after heartbreaking decision. "I chose where they'd place you. I chose what you'd wear. I chose the order of the service, the music. I chose it all."

They were both staring straight ahead into the darkness. The only light from the artificial flashlight on John's phone which was resting in his lap.

"I never thanked you for that. So...thank you."

"Least I could do." John replied.

The snow was falling more heavily now and the temperature had dropped considerably. He could tell that but the alcohol was keeping him warm.

"Your friend Sholto called me, several times. He said that he'd had a troubling conversation with you that left him worrying about your mental state. But prior to that it was Mycroft." Sherlock said in reply to John's first question. "He's half of the reason I knew you were gone for good. I got a hunch. I was trying to imagine what could make you leave so abruptly in that moment. It wasn't really your style. It was almost as if you'd been triggered like in that film we watched; The Manchurian Candidate."

John smiled softly and nodded.
"You'd be much more likely to try and smooth things over, ease the tension. And then once I was asleep you'd leave."

There was flint at the end of those words and John wondered if they'd spark into a fire.

"So, I called him and after far too much effort on my part he confessed to your little bargain. The same bargain I had already suspected existed and demanded he call off. Tell me, is there a particular reason you feel the need to treat me like a child? To create accord behind my back?"

"I wanted to do right by you." John offered.

"And this is what you came up with. Despite whatever inadequacies you may harbour about your intelligence and thereby foist on me let me assure you I never thought you were stupid until now."

"Your brother and I decided-"

"My brother decides nothing for me!" He cut in sharply. "And I certainly didn't conceive of the idea of my lover making a deal with devil while I looked the other way. But live and learn, right?"

"I'm sorry, Sherlock."

"No, you're not. You're not because here we are again. Just where we were before, a year ago. So I suppose that's the note." Sherlock said gesturing to the papers on his lap. I imagine it's filled with sentiments of love and understanding, regret and apology."

"Yes."

"I suppose you tell me how much you love me. How, in a different world under different circumstances, we might have made it through. I imagine you tell me that I deserve someone better, stronger, cleaner. I also suppose that this letter while initially, you imagine it will hurt, should in years to come serve as balm, a comforting reminder of our brief but powerful love. Have I deduced correctly?"

"Um...yes, right down to my use of the word balm."

"It's all bullshit. It's filled with pure egotism and it's meant to ease your grief, your guilt, not mine. I am sure that you have drunkenly, shoddily calculated this down to precisely how it should go. I'm sure it's quite scripted in your head but what you haven't considered is the outlier."

"Which is?"

"Me. Your entire scenario assumes nay depends on my sitting back placidly and letting you go. Well, I refuse. I wrongly interpreted Hanah's advice. I was to stay out of your addiction and not police your recovery. But once your recovery ended and this began. So, I give you an opportunity now to present your case."

They were both leaning against the gravestone and since Sherlock's arrival, neither of them had really made eye contact with the other. That all changed now when Sherlock shifted his position to set John in his sights.

"My case?" John asked with a frown.

"Yes, your case. Seeing as you appear to be hell-bent on removing yourself from my life at the slightest hint of trouble, give me your arguments."
"Sherlock..."

"If you cannot logically present your side then it would stand to reason your side has no logic behind it. So, off you go. If you can convince me that I would be better off without you then I'll let you go."

"No, you wouldn't." John said shaking his head. More of Sherlock's clever games. Clever clogs. But it didn't matter. John felt immune at this point. What he wasn't immune to was the man he deeply loved sitting so close but so far away. Why wouldn't he leave? Why wouldn't he just let him do this?

"I'm a man of my word too. If you can make me believe you would be better off dead then off you pop with my blessing."

"You're being an arse."

"I'm being honest. It was going to be the pills, right? That was how you were going to manage it? And right here on my grave no less. How poetic. How very gothic. How positively Shellian. Go on, Doctor. Defend your death!"

"Alright, fine. Fine! I have a problem with more than just alcohol. Obviously, I'm fond of opioids. You know the success rate of surmounting one addiction and I failed at that. And now I have two."

"Counterpoint; alcohol and hydrocodone effect the same part of the brain, namely the opiate receptors. Different chemical reaction if we're splitting hairs but certainly fruit of the same tree. So, I would state that you have the same problem just manifesting in a different way. Next."

"I'm hurting you. I'm affecting your work. I've ruined our friendship and our relationship. I make you so unhappy." John said simply as he tried to swallow over the lump in his throat. They were simple words but some of the most painful.

"Incorrect." Sherlock replied quickly. "Your behavior makes me unhappy and only your recent behavior at that. I abhor being lied to and dislike secrets. You've been dealing in both. The solution it would seem is simple, tell me the truth and a large chunk of our problems vanish. Next."

John huffed in anger at his weighty concerns being so easily dismissed. This was all so Sherlock. Thinking problems could be untangled like netting or Christmas lights. It wasn't that simple.

"I believe I might have...clinical depression."

"Oh, do you think?" Sherlock asked sarcastically before adding; "Sorry. Continue."

"I can't sleep, I can't eat, I'm exhausted all the time. I feel so far removed from just about everything. Like I'm moving further and further out of my own life. I feel...hopeless."

"Did you ever fully address these feelings with Hanah?"

"Not fully. I mean we touched on them."

"I understand she recommended a local therapist. Someone affiliated with The Location. Someone with whom you could be completely honest. Did you ever contact this person?"

"No, I didn't."

"She also sent you home with a great many books. Did you ever read them?"

"No."
"She wanted you to consider medication. To, perhaps, try a variety of combinations to find the one that might suit you and help with these feelings. Did you ever take her up on it."

"No."

"So, as I understand it, while trying to battle this on your own you never accepted any of the help offered. Is that right? And this refusal to accept help is what relegates you to The Red Forest."

John looked over at Sherlock. It was strange to hear those words outside of his own head.

"As I see it you have chosen stagnation over motion. And I know it's out of addiction and desperation and sadness and fear. But you have chosen it nonetheless. So, I propose, with the help laid out at your feet that you un-choose. Next."

"You...you can't just say next." He protested as he pulled his coat tighter around him. It was getting colder and both the lowering temp and the conversation were working to snap him out of that warm, slow, sad drunken state.

"I believe I can. That was the deal. You put forth your problems and if I can't propose practical solutions that are at the very least worth your effort and attention you can off yourself. So far, I have managed to argue every point you've put forward. I say again, next."

"I'm a failed soldier, a failed doctor, I'm most certainly not a consulting detective and to top things off, I'm apparently a shit writer. Oh, and like I told you, I...got sacked today. I failed a drug test."

"You're a decorated soldier who saved lives, a successful doctor despite the fact that you don't really enjoy practicing medicine in a controlled setting, I cannot do my work without you and I take it that letter I saw was a rejection reply from one publisher. One. So, you'll send off more then. As for getting sacked, you'll get clean and get a new job, if you want one. Next."

"You say that as though it were all just a snap of the fingers. Especially the last part; 'You'll get clean.'"

"I said it no such fashion." He replied furrowing his brow. "Don't behave as though I don't know what's involved; the struggle, the failure, the pain. I am quite familiar with it. But you did it once and you can do it again. And this time you can focus 100% on your recovery and not worry about anything else."

"You make it sound so simple."

"On paper, it is. You know that you love your daughter and you want to be in her life. You have accepted the fact that you have anger issues and unipolar depression. You understand the effect your troubled childhood had on your life and choices. You have intellectually, if not fully emotionally accepted the fact that you were not responsible for Mary's death. You have come to grips with your sexuality. You have admitted you love me and you don't have to worry about where I'll be when you get out. I'll be right by your side, in our home.

I was absolutely correct about love and affection. It is the grit in the sensitive instrument, it is the crack in the lens. It is a tremendous and cumbersome pressure and distraction. And I find I would have my life no other way. We have developed some less than charming habits in terms of how we deal with one another. Our tempers, our silences, our pettiness, our selfishness...we have a great deal to work on before we see the other side of this. But I am willing to do the work with you and for you. This will be our work, The Work, our great work; you and I together. The lens and the instrument hardly matter without you by my side. In light of all this, I have decided that you don't get
to leave me. I won't allow it. I want you to stay and ultimately I always wind up getting what I want. So, have you completed your arguments?"

Everything Sherlock was saying was everything he wanted to hear and he found that he was shaking all over, not from the cold or for want of some substance but because he was nearly full body sobbing.

"You said...at the flat...you said something about what we might have been. I thought you wanted this to be over."

"I was angry and foolish. I wanted to rouse you to anger or some sort of genuine emotion. It was childish and brutally short-sided considering. Forgive me?"

John nodded and Sherlock spoke again.

"Let me say plainly that I love you. Not so long ago, I thought there could be no greater honour than being your best mate. But that has easily been surpassed by being your partner. That is the position where I should like to remain. Now, have you completed your arguments?"

"Yes...I...I don't have anything more."

"Good. Petition to end your life denied."

"Sherlock, I keep....I keep trying to rebuild John Wason. Every time I collapse I try and gather up the rubble and put myself back together again and it keeps ending in some variation of this."

"Perhaps you should stop trying."

John wiped at his eyes with slightly cold-numbed hands.

"What?"

"When I left for those two years I had to leave everything behind, my home, my reputation, my connections...you. I had to abandon what I previously had and who I was. I was largely anonymous, unseen, hidden, quiet. And when it was time to return I needed to leave that man behind me as well. I knew I couldn't come back to London the same as when I had left. I had to be a new man, a different man with different habits and understandings. I had to be more careful, more conscious, more aware, more worthy. I had to rebuild. And when Rosamund, who you and I knew as Mary, left her life behind, scraped her past she had to become someone new as well. For her safety, yes, but also for her sanity. You cannot traverse this planet and carry every piece of baggage you acquire. You must, at some point, either integrate it within yourself or set it down. As a child, my father taught me that in chemistry dissolution was the process by which a solute passes into a solution. Table salt dissolves in water to form a saline solution. A dead plant or animal decomposes and its chemical constituents are released into the biosphere, which I believe is precisely what isn't happening in your Red Forest. A man vanishes for two years and reshapes himself into what he hopes was a better human being. A woman running as fast as she can from who she was, shedding the unnecessary along the way while keeping what's good and dear. Both of them hanging on to what they need and allowing the rest to dissolve away. John, my darling, you hang on to everything. It's time to let some of it go. Stop trying to rebuild on such shaky ground. Find something new and steady and solid beneath your feet. Perhaps you need to realize it is time to dissolve."

John let out a broken sob before grabbing Sherlock roughly and hugging him while weeping openly against his neck.

Sherlock held him tightly, fiercely and John soon felt a wetness upon his own neck.
"I love you so much, Sherlock. I'm a selfish arse and I'm so sorry."

"Yes, you are. And I forgive you."

They sat there, minute after minute, on the cold ground, holding and hugging each other and crying softly in the dark.

"You know what one of the best things is?" John asked after a long silence with a small smile in his voice.

"Hmmm?"

"You just quoted Tears for Fears and I don't think you even know it."

"What is Tears for Fears? Is that a film?"

John laughed softly.

"Doesn't matter." He said before pulling back slightly so he could kiss him.

Sherlock returned the gesture without hesitation. It was an odd place for a romantic moment, but they'd had odder.

"Hang on, a minute." John said softly. "How did you find me? Mycroft wouldn't have know and I didn't tell Duck."

"I can always find you, John. Where else would you be? This is the nexus of it all, isn't it? And actually, I have a gift for you." He said pulling away and getting to his feet. He walked a few paces from where they'd been sitting and in the darkness, John began to have trouble making him out. He did see him stoop to pick something up, two somethings, one in each hand and then slowly return.

John got to his feet as the objects in his hands came into view along with the man holding them.

"One for you and one for me." He said passing one off to him.

John took it in his hand, surprised that it was even heavier than he'd thought it would be.

"This shouldn't still be here." He said gesturing at the marker that bore his name. "It's an ugly oversight and an abhorrent reminder of something I'd like us both to move past. I can think of no better end for it than this. And no better people than us to send it on its way."

"Agreed." John said with a single nod.

"After you." Sherlock said as he gestured toward the gravestone.

John cleared his throat and stepped closer to the shiny black monument. Widening his stance he adjusted his grip on the handle. Once he found the proper balance he took a deep breath and brought the sledgehammer back over his shoulder before swinging it forward aiming right for the 'K' in SHERLOCK.

The instrument connected with a satisfying crunch as a chunk of the granite went flying. John had been expecting a zing up his arms given the force of the hit but the stone came away easily enough. He stood there in the darkened graveyard staring at the jagged top that had replaced the smooth rounded rock.
"If I may?" Sherlock said from behind him and John stepped away to give him room.

"Please, be my guest."

With just as much fury evident on his face as John had felt Sherlock swung. He seemed to have been heading for the 'S' at the start of his name and just as his partner had before him he took off a substantial piece.

"That felt remarkably good." Sherlock said as he took a deep breath.

"We're not half finished. And I believe it's my turn."

And so they continued on, swing after swing, strike after strike until they had decimated Sherlock's death stone to ragged bits of rubble.

When it was over they both stood there, chests heaving, arms burning, eyes riveted to the happy destruction.

It was snowing heavier now, coming down upon them and around them in soft, fat flakes.

Still, even with the cloud cover, there were places where John could look up and see strips of the sky. Black and quiet and full of stars.

So he looked up because it was pretty and because James had asked him to.

If there was such a thing as souls, he sent up a nearly forgotten prayer from childhood to honour that of his friend.

"Is there a place, a rehab for me to check into tonight, love?"

"I have a bag packed and a car ready to drive us there waiting just past the gate. It's all arranged."

He blindly reached out his hand and Sherlock immediately clasped it in his.

"Ok." John replied. "Let's go."

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A/N: Ok, we're nearly at the end.

Maybe two more chapters, maybe just one and a short epilogue. I'm not sure because it hasn't jelled in my brain yet. But I am really, really hoping to have this done by the 31st or sooner.

Hope you enjoyed it!

And I have to say, that sledgehammer scene has been in my head since I first started this story. It feels good to finally get it out.
Chapter 69

It was surreal to be in this position again.

Another office. Another nurse checking him in. Another string of questions.

But this time it was different for many reasons, not the least of which the fact that Sherlock was sitting by his side holding his hand.

"And what brings you here today, Dr. Watson?" She asked.

"I relapsed on alcohol tonight and I've recently developed an addiction to a painkiller, specifically hydrocodone."

"And how long has this addiction been going on?"

"Since June" He answered calmly.

"How many were you taking in a day?"

"I started with 4 to 6 and upped it from there. I think I averaged 20 - 25 per day but this past day. Or rather these past few days I believe I exceeded that."

"What would you estimate?"

"Ummm...perhaps 40, if I really try and add it up."

He was remarkably clear-headed for a reason he couldn't understand but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Sherlock made a small noise in his throat at the mention of 40+ pills per day and John squeezed his hand.

"It's alright, Sherlock. Sherlock? Look at me, love."

His partner obliged him but it was as if all the surety from the graveyard had left him. He hadn't been there for this part the first time round and he looked nervous and scared and protective.

"This is all normal, ok? This is a good thing. For me, for us, for Rosie, for everybody."

"Do you believe that you're a danger to yourself or others, Dr. Watson?"

"I believe...I believe I am actively suicidal. I'm not at a high risk of hurting myself at the moment, however, due to certain persistent, negative thoughts these feelings are likely to return." John cleared his throat.

"How recently were you feeling compelled to hurt yourself and possibly take your own life."

"As recently as an hour ago."

"How far had you gone in those plans?"

"I had the method by which I was going to do it. Um...oh, these pills actually." He said reaching into his pocket and removing the pill bottle to place it on the desk. "There was also whiskey but..."
"You left that at my grave," Sherlock said quietly.

"Yes, that's right. So, whiskey and hydrocodone overdose are what I had planned."

"Are you on any medication at the moment?"

"No, but um..."

"Yes?"

"I was seeing a therapist and then I stopped because I didn't want to do the work anymore. But, for months and months, she had been recommending that I get on antidepressants as well as anti-anxiety meds. I'd like to try that now. I seem to be prone to panic attacks and I believe I have quantifiable unipolar depression. I believe I've been suffering from both of these for a long time. The anxiety since my late teen years, I suppose and the depression since childhood. I railed against being put on anything to combat it but..." He looked over at Sherlock who was observing him closely. "I think I need to acknowledge that my perceptions of the world, my world are not...accurate."

"Go on." She encouraged.

"I didn't want to believe that I was a slave to chemicals, any chemicals. Not these," He said gesturing to the pills. "Not the booze. Not what goes on inside my own head. But I was and I am and I want to confront that now."

"You're requesting a psych evaluation?"

"Yes, please. And if the evaluation concurs with what my therapist previously recommended I'd like to be prescribed something as soon as possible. I would also assume I'm going to be placed on 24-hour monitoring given what I just divulged."

He noted the difference in his treatment now as opposed to The Location. Upon entering that facility he'd been angry, hostile and while clearly terrified ashamed to admit it. He'd bristled at the fact that no one was calling him doctor, no one was treating him with the respect he thought he'd earned and deserved. But he felt so different this time around and the intake nurse at least was treating him differently. Maybe he seemed calmer, more professional. But in any case, there were moments where it felt as if they were both discussing a patient, not him. That distance was for some reason helping him to speak.

"I'll make note of that. Alright, Dr. Watson, we're ready to admit you, if you're ready."

"I am."

"We're a 60-day inpatient facility. From what I've seen here and from what you've told me I'd recommend a medical detox to get you through the first few days. That should also, of course, be in tandem with a standard suicide watch."

"Of course. For what little my opinion is worth, I agree." He said with a nod.

"Ok, we're going to take you for a medical workup right now, so, if you'd like to say your goodbyes." She said gesturing to Sherlock.

A large man entered the room, looking nearly indistinguishable from the large man at The Location and began to open his bag.

"I packed that for him. There's nothing of a controversial nature in there." Sherlock protested.
"Darling, it's ok. They have to do that. It's fine and I don't mind." John assured him. He then turned to the intake nurse again. "Would it be alright if we stepped outside, just for some privacy? Here, here's my wallet, my phone, my keys, even my coat. I won't run and if I did I wouldn't get far without those. I just want to say goodbye to him."

"Go ahead, Dr. Watson."

"Thank you." He said and took Sherlock by the hand.

The walked the short hallway and out the front door. The temperature had dropped like a stone and the rush of cold air momentarily took his breath away.

"You going to be ok?" He asked Sherlock looking up at the face that seemed far more pained than it had an hour or so ago.

"Isn't that my line?"

"I'm going to be fine. Last time I was in a place like this...I thought you hated me. I thought there was a chance you'd never want to talk to me again." John cleared his throat again as the tears started to rise and burn. "I thought I'd lost the last person that..."

He stopped if only to exhale and perhaps catch his breath. He closed his eyes and a moment later felt Sherlock's bare hand on his cheek.

It gave him the strength to continue.

"I thought I'd lost the last, best person who loved me. I didn't know what I was getting clean for. I spent so many days wondering, what's the point? But I know now. I know now, ok? It's for us. For our family."

"Our family?" He asked softly. His mouth had been downturned at the corners but they raised slightly when he spoke.

"Yes, you and me and Rosie. That's the point. The point is getting to stand here and breath this air and look at you right here and right now. The point is capturing the loveliness. The point is looking up. The point is the way Rosie laughs. The point is being called Daddy and deserving it. The point is to watch how the snowflakes land on your eyelashes. The point is I want 10,000 days of that, 100,000."

"100,000 days is roughly 274 years." He said with a sad chuckle.

"That's not even halfway close to how long I want to spend with you." he said drawing him down for a kiss.

When they broke apart only slightly John spoke again.

"Wait for me? I swear, I'm going to do it right this time."

"I'm not going anywhere." He said opening his coat and wrapping it around John's body. They were pressed against one another now, Sherlock holding the coat closed about them both and in the process hugging him. "I'll wait for you. I'll always wait for you, John Watson."

"Dr. Watson, we're ready for you." The nurse called from the open door.

John kissed him passionately trying to imprint the moment on his flesh and his memory.
"Listen to me now; I love you. Take care of yourself, be nice to Mrs. Hudson, go and see Rosie, take on some cases and be sure to eat and sleep, alright?"

"Alright, John." He nodded. "Do as they ask, get better and come home to me." He replied.

"I will." John pulled away from the warmth of his coat and body and words. He cinched the Belstaff around Sherlock and straightened his scarf. Now, go home, get something to eat because I know you haven't and go to bed. Promise?"

"Promise." He said with a nod.

"Good boy. Go on then. I'll be alright, I swear."

"I love you." Sherlock said.

"I love you too."

He watched, shivering as Sherlock walked away and got into the waiting car. He didn't turn to go back to the facility until the brake lights faded into the darkness.

The ride to the rehab, Soames Heath as John was to find out it was called took a little under two hours. Sherlock had hired a car and they'd both piled into the back seat.

Sherlock gave the address and then rolled up the glass that divided them from the driver.

Almost immediately he opened his arms and John moved into them, turning his body so that he could rest his back against Sherlock's chest.

"Sherlock?"

"Hmm?"

"When...when did you start on heroin?"

"After Carl Powers died. Not directly after but...I knew I was onto something with his case. I was close. But I couldn't solve it. I couldn't make it work and it infuriated me. But there was something else. I was 13 and it was the first time in my life I could recall being stimulated by something. It was the first time I felt alive. I started scanning local newspapers, then national, then international, looking for cases, unsolved murders, mysterious disappearances. I kept a notebook to log all the information about the cases I could find and discern and those became my great experiments. They captivated me. I didn't think about the people. They didn't mean much to me but I was obsessed with the puzzles their lives presented. Sometimes I would try and call the police stations and tell them of my findings but they never listened. All they ever heard was a child on the other end of the line. One day Mycroft found my notebook. I was so worried he was going to proclaim it a waste of time or tell our parents but instead, he decided it was a good exercise. I so looked up to him that when he asked if he might serve as an adviser and proctor I leaped at the chance. My brother is...smarter than I could ever hope to be. But for God sakes don't tell him I said that. He was helpful in guiding me, in sharpening my methods, my thought processes, my observation and analytical abilities. "Narrow it down." He would say to me. "Narrow it down." Eventually, I did. Eventually, the two of us, both in our spare time, were solving cases all over the world, though no one knew. That was sufficient for more than a few years. But soon Mycroft went into government and no longer had time for me. Plus I was just about to enter Uni and that changed things as well."

"How so?"
"My studies took up more time than I had calculated. But worse than that I had to be around people. Other boys my age. It was awful. Back home I had to endure school but I could still manage to hide away a good deal of the time. Not so there. It was awkward and though I didn't want to admit it, lonely. And worst of all, it was boring and there was no time for my cases. I started to falter."

John had taken Sherlock's hand then and squeezed it before interlacing their fingers. His boyfriend squeezed in return before continuing on.

"I did find a minor diversion but it was unpredictable, ill-chosen and ultimately did not end as I had hoped."

"What was it?"

"Do you recall once when you asked me if I'd ever had a boyfriend. And I said that-"

"You said it was some bloke you used to study with. That you snogged on your bed and copped feels off one another. You liked him but it didn't go anywhere."

"Yes, that's right. And you recall Sebastian Wilkes?"

"Yeah, that prick at the bank who was so mean to you. You said everyone at university was a lot like him. I assumed that's what this almost boyfriend was like too."

"Indeed. Actually, the almost-boyfriend was Sebastian?"

John's mouth had dropped open at that revelation.

"What? It was him?"

"It was indeed. He got quite flirty as we were going over the chapter on Reactions on Aromatic Compounds. And by the time we reached Carboxylic Acid Derivatives he had his hand down my y-front."

"What did you do?" John had asked and Sherlock had chuckled in return.

"I pushed our books off the bed and yanked him on top of me. It was one of the few times in my life where I was so surprised that my mind was as clear and placid as a mill pond. I liked it and I went from not paying much attention to him at all to being quite fond of him. Quite fond. It was stupid. Nothing more than the chemicals of a horny-"

"Hey, you don't have to downplay it. Before I knew it was Sebastian, all that time ago, you told me you cared for him. And that he'd broken your heart."

"He didn't break my heart. He just...didn't let me down easy. He made sure to emphasize our distance whenever we were outside of our bedroom. He teased and bullied me quite mercilessly and used to whip the other boys up into a frenzy with it as well. They hated me and he lead the charge. But when we were alone together he was all kindness and gentleness. Kind words and caresses. And I was too confused to know what to do. He made it clear he wasn't interested in a boyfriend. He didn't even want to be mates. But I thought...I asked him, well, we're at least friends, aren't we? I stressed the word friends, at least trying to get him to admit that what we did in bed mattered. He shrugged and said "Yes, we're friends. But that's all we are." I confess, that's why I introduced you as such when we three met at the bank. I wanted him to know...even though it wasn't true. I wanted him to think it was. He caught my meaning. I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be silly. You certainly deserved revenge. Forgive me, but, how does this have to do with
"heroin?"

"He's the one that introduced me to it."

"That sonofabitch. He brought you into this?"

"John, I likely would have discovered it myself. He just made it more convenient. He wanted to try and it and he was too frightened to do it alone. And he didn't trust his other mates not to just hoist him into a skip if things went wrong. So he came up to my room, we frotted and came and then he took out the stuff, a spoon, a lighter and a needle. Since I was a child I'd been injecting myself with compounds, testing out different theories here and there. So a needle didn't scare me, but it terrified him. Sebastian had me go first

"What was it like?"

"Like a liquid orgasm. Like an extended liquid orgasm. Like pleasure dipped in honey; warm and lush and gooey and plowing through my veins. I feel back onto the bed and I moaned and I actually did orgasm with the needle still in my arm. I don't remember much after that. I know he took the needle from me and summoning up his courage which was a bit easier considering he was in the throes of envying me, he took a dose of his own. It was sex without sex. Peace without God. Joy without end. Except, of course, it did end. He was in such a pleasant mood when he came down that he stayed with me that night. We didn't have sex but we were close to one another, so close and happy and quiet and laughing and I thought, Well if this is life, I can do this. If this is love, I can manage. Perhaps I won't be so lost after all."

John had then brought the hand he was clasping up to his lips to kiss it before resting it on his chest, above his heart.

"You loved him?"

Sherlock sighed.

"I don't know. After all these years I really have no idea. If I measure it up against what I feel for you, it is dwarfed into insignificance. But then...I don't know. All I do know is that it didn't last. We lost interest in one another but the heroin kept us together after the affection burned out. He was shite at finding a vein and I'd do it for him. We lie on the bed in my room and take our own separate trips. I could sense the end coming though, and I ventured out on my own to make my own contact before he took away my supply. We broke up, I went back to being as solitary as before and sank further into my habit. Mycroft got wind of it after a few months and read me the riot act. My supplier mysteriously packed up and vanished from town and no one else would sell to me. When I was pleading for it, begging, cramped up and sweating my brother threw me into a rehab. All very hush-hush and posh, kept quite secret from our parents. He tempted me with the promise of cases when I came out and he delivered. He set up a police contact and I was funneled information that I focused on between classes. It kept me straight and it kept me busy. I also took up smoking and that helped a bit too. And so the die was cast and the pattern set. So long as I remained occupied I was able to stay clean. But when my stimulation would dip, I would return to the needle and all its lovely, liquid charms."

"Why does Mycroft insist you leave a note. No, I know why. What incident brought it about?"

"Aren't you tired, John. Don't you want to rest before we arrive?"

"I'm exhausted but I'm too anxious to sleep. Just, talk to me, love."
"Alright, well, what sparked it was a time where I went missing for a week. No one ever intends to go missing for a week, you know. You intend to go out and get your fix, whatever your fix is and then proceed with your day. But stuff happens."

"It does indeed."

"Precisely. So, stuff happened and I ended up gone for about seven days. Mycroft couldn't find me though he had all his feelers on the lookout. The problem with Mycroft, which was a great benefit to me then, was that he hates, as he puts it, the legwork. He would never bother to get contacts like my homeless network. I'm not bragging just stating a fact. It wouldn't occur to him and if it did, he wouldn't begin to know how. Had he been able to manage that, he would have found me in hours. But as it was, he stumbled into what was once a house in South London, where I and about eleven other people were getting high and coming down. Peeling walls, leaking loo, unidentifiable stains on the ceiling, splashes of blood from over-exuberant vein jabs on the wall. Feces, urine, fetid mattresses and a collection of sad, lonely people. And me among them, well, me one of them. I was overdosing, the problem was he didn't know on what. By that time my dalliances had extended beyond heroin. I'm told I had dried blood on my nose and mouth, a needle in my arm and foil papers at my side that indicated I may have recently been smoking methamphetamines. What to do? Perhaps if he'd had some distance from the subject he might have been able to logic it out, narrow it down. But what he revealed to me later was that he made a guess. Luckily for me, he guessed correctly. I was overdosing on heroin and he had taken to carrying naloxone with him. He saved my life. I was of course petulant and quite put out by the entire affair. On the surface at least. I felt bad enough to promise him that I would always leave a note."

"Mycroft told me that when they were bringing me into hospital in the ambulance that you were nearly hysterical."

"I imagine I was. I don't remember many of the finer details of that evening."

"I am so sorry for everything you went through long before we ever met. And I am so sorry for all the panic and pain I've caused you."

John had then felt Sherlock's lips on the crown of his head, planting a kiss there.

"John, you are an absolute menace and you have put me through the ringer. And there have been times where I have wanted to throttle you. But I'm going to tell you something I don't know if you've ever heard."

"What's that?"

"You're worth it. You're absolutely worth it."

Thinking back on it now as he sat in the infirmary with a blood pressure cuff seeming to slowly squeeze the life from his arm, John burst into exhausted tears.

"Your blood pressure is more than a little elevated, Dr. Watson, but I think that's understandable."

"Yes, thank you."

"It won't be much longer, then we'll get you to your room and you can rest."

"Yeah, thanks, thank you."

"Considering what you've listed as your behavior is there anything you'd like to report? Does anything hurt?"
"No, not really." He said using his sleeve to wipe at his eyes.

"Any pain or tenderness in your limbs, your back, near your kidneys or liver?"

"No, I feel alright."

"Headache, dizziness, lightheadedness, racing or erratic pulse?"

"No, I'm fine."

"And your heart? How is that?"

"My heart?" He asked with a small smile. "My heart is surprisingly ok."

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October 15th, 2016

12 Days Clean

Most Definitely Not the blog of John Watson

So here I am.

After 12 days I've been given the detox all clear. Or at least, the all clear in terms of needing medical supervision.

I think I can say now that detoxing from alcohol was a sunny stroll by the Thames compared to this. It's difficult to determine how long a person has withdrawal symptoms but, on average, it's 7-10 days for people who've abused hydrocodone. I still feel like I got backed over by a lorry but today is the first time I've felt not quite on death's doorstep. More like death's curb, death's walkway, death's flowerbed.

But...I'm 12 days clean. I haven't been clean since June, almost exactly 4 months ago. A 4-month slide that I have hopefully stopped. I can't say I feel better, exactly. Relieved, yes. But not better. I've got a therapist in here now and Sherlock must have gotten Hanah to send over some of her notes, likely edited or redacted, because he already has a good grasp of who I am and why I'm here. That's a relief. This is a regular place, by which I mean, no one walking these halls is a spy. But that's alright. I don't think Sherlock's 2-year absence or Moriarty or secret work we've done for the government is likely to come up this time around. I think I can be honest about the present and still sanitize my past for public consumption.

I appreciate Hanah's help. She's near the top of a very long list of people I need to apologize to. The more I think about it the longer the list grows.

I've also been on antidepressants for two days now. I hope they work.

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October 20th, 2016

17 Days Clean

Most Definitely Not the blog of John Watson
We talked about Mary today in therapy. Not much, but a bit. It was mostly about Sherlock. As it should be. My issues are with my current relationship, aren't they? I don't think I'm carrying as much shit around about Mary as I was. I think, maybe, I let some of it go over this past year and didn't even know it. We talked about that too. The therapist echoed something Hanah had told me. I have what he called a negative script in my head. I hyper focus on the worst situations, the worst possible outcome. It makes me retreat inside myself as I wait for the other shoe to drop. And when it does it fulfills my own prophecy. That way I'm never exactly wrong and just how wrong I figure things are going to go. That makes sense to me. That sounds like me.

All the people I'm angry with for "betraying" me...I'm not really angry with them anymore. Not Duck, not Mary, not Sherlock. I forgave them and I moved on and didn't even know.

"You've missed a lot, John." That's what my doctor said. "It's all been a bit of a waking dream from the way you describe it. These patterns you're stuck in, they don't even sound reflective of who you are anymore. It's as if you're playing a part. So maybe, now is the time to consider dropping the mask."

I guess I need to toss the script. Drop the mask. And all other things that I'd like to dismiss as euphemism though I know they aren't. I need to toss them in the bin except I don't know how. I guess that's what I'm here to learn.

October 25th, 2016

22 Days Clean

Most Definitely Not the blog of John Watson

I moved my wedding ring from my left to my right hand.

I remember reading once that was proper etiquette for a widower.

Which is what I am.

We talked about relationships in group today. Relationships and sabotage. Everyone in my group has been through rehab before and there's something comforting about that; being surrounded by second or third timers. We don't have to pull any punches with each other and I think maybe we're more aware of our mistakes and pitfalls this time around. We also don't have to shine things up for the newbies which is a load off everyones mind.

For the first time, publically, I began a sentence with; "My boyfriend". I've done it with people who knew Sherlock and I obviously did it in the LGBTQ group and I've done it with medical professionals but never just...people.

Some of them looked uncomfortable but I find that I don't care.

Begs the question, did I care before and just not admit it to myself?

November 2nd, 2016

30 Days Clean
Rehab is full of special people. I'm terribly special myself. These halls are full of people, like me, who figure the rules don't apply to them and they should be able to have a little sip of this and a little snort of that and pop just one or two of these. Because we are special. But we're not. I'm not. I have problems that are unique to me but problems that are in no way unique in and of themselves. I had a shitty childhood, people lied to me, I lied to people. I've failed in my relationships, I've been unfaithful. I have seriously contemplated suicide multiple times.

But I'm not special.

I think I would have balked at that at The Location. They helped me there, Hanah helped but I was still so far up my own arse I wouldn't let it stick the way it should.

It's sticking here. I don't know why but it is and I'm not in the mood to argue with it.

Which isn't to say that I'm coasting on clouds and rainbows. I'm sad. I am terribly worn down and sad and I had another outburst earlier today about taking these stupid bloody pills that aren't doing anything and that got me on toilet duty and that just pissed me off more.

I know these are famous last words. I know that even when someone is subconsciously planning on doing a runner, up until that very moment they're thinking "I can do it this time!"

I know all that, I do.

But I really think...alright, I really hope that maybe it is sticking and maybe I can do it this time.

Today I got my 30 days and my first NA chip. I don't know where my old chips are at this point but that hardly matters. New day, new goals, new chips. 30 days in the bag.

Now to make it 31.

November 5th, 2016

33 Days Clean

Today wasn't great.

I woke up angry. I went to group angry. I went to therapy angry. I said something short-tempered and cheeky and wound up on kitchen duty which only made me angrier.

At times like this I'm supposed to "do the work". Address and analyze my feelings and some other shit like that. But I really don't want to. I want a drink and I want to go unconscious.

Ok, so, it's a few hours later.
I am angry because I feel frustrated and trapped here.

I am angry because I miss Sherlock.

I am angry because I want to get high.

I am angry because while I know antidepressants take time to work I want them to work now.

I am angry because I feel incredibly sad.

Ok. There. I did the work.

Better late than never.

Whatever.

November 10th, 2016

38 Days Clean

Most Definitely Not the blog of John Watson

This place isn't like The Location. Not nearly as posh and that is more than ok. I have a roommate. There aren't delicious hot breakfasts every morning, or horseback riding lessons or a pool and exercise room. There are a few out of date treadmills with bent belts that trip you up when you try to jog. There are no personal therapists but the bloke I have...the bloke everyone has is pretty good and straightforward. Group, however, is just the same because group is the same everywhere. There's a uniformity to it, like Catholic Mass. No matter where you go the order of the service is the same. I like that and plus they say we need routine. And even if we don't like routine well we need to learn to like it.

I'm trying to think of what my routine will be when I get out of here. I'm not happy that I got fired or how I was fired but I am happy that I don't have to return. I'm not happy in medicine. Not anymore. At the very least I need a break from it. A trial separation if not an outright divorce.

I think, for a while at least, my days are going to be filled with meetings and appointments. It's going to be back to AA, then I'll need to find a local psychiatrist specific to addiction medicine. Then...I suppose we might actually need to go to couples counseling...I'm not sure how Sherlock would feel about that. I'm not sure he'd agree to it. But I think we might need it. I want this to work with him. I want us to be alright, now and always. I want us to be mad old men in Sussex. I want to be chasing him around when he's a mad old duffer still solving cases in his "retirement", keeping him out of trouble and getting into it with him as well. I just want to live my life with him, through the good and the bad and everything else in between, just with him.

For better or for worse.

November 13th, 2016

41 Days Clean
Most Definitely Not the blog of John Watson

I got to talk to Rosie today. She's still just a little thing and doesn't understand and I'm glad of that. Sherlock set up a Skype session for all of us and I spoke to her on my phone as I'd finally earned the privilege. It was lovely to see her. And good to see Harry and Clara as well. I told them I wanted to be on a more regular schedule with Rosie, if that was alright with them. I know, considering my behavior and current location I was in no position to ask but I wanted to feel them out anyway. Surprisingly they seemed amenable to the idea.

I also dropped a bit of a bomb that I likely should have run by Sherlock but thankfully he seemed good with it.

I told them, I don't think Rosie should live with us. If we're to continue on as Consulting Detective and Colleague then it's just too dangerous. Overnights, weekends, extended visits, school breaks, yes, obviously, of course. But it just wouldn't be fair; not to Rosie or to my sister and her wife. They are what Rosie knows and is familiar with. That's her home and I can't take her from it. Though Sherlock and I absolutely intend to make ourselves a nuisance dropping by and asking to have her for the night. I think my sister was surprised by the gesture. I think she had resigned herself to the moment when Rosie would be taken away. But as I told them all; Rosie has a Mummy and a Mama and a Daddy and a Dada. That's just the way it is. And we'll work it out and make do. And I think she'll be the better for it.

Once that conversation was done I got the chance to talk to Sherlock alone. It was lovely. I'd missed his voice and his face and I told him so. We both made the other provide a full body shot to make sure we'd been keeping our promises to eat and not get too thin. As it turns out we had.

He asked me how I was doing and I was able to truly report that I felt well. A little run down, a little sad and scared. But clean and honestly feeling the better for it.

He asked me how and I think it was a good question and it might help to write the answers down.

I don't feel sick all the time anymore. Well, I do, but it' a different kind of sick. It used to be this worried sick, desperation that would set in once my high wore off. I had this running count of how many pills I still had, in my head. Except once I really got into it my count got off. I didn't keep track. I couldn't keep track of how many I was taking so I always worried about the next time I went to the bottle it might be empty.

My heart isn't racing all the time anymore. I don't feel as paranoid anymore though the anxiety is still there. I'm no longer sleepy all the time or dizzy or unfocused. That burning, raw feeling in my nose from snorting has vanished. I'm not constantly nauseous and that bloody itch is finally gone as well. The remnants of the rash are essentially gone.

We both thought it was a pretty good list and something I should try and remember it in the days ahead. There are going to be days where the benefits aren't all that apparent. Maybe the clear-headed (or what passes for clear-headed) John Watson of today can help the bleary-eyed, craving ravaged John Wason of tomorrow.

Sherlock is looking forward to me coming home. And so am I. I miss him, I miss our bed and our chairs. I miss his touch and his smile. Though I did get to see his smile today.

We promised each other than when I come home we're going to start things fresh. I even floated the idea about counseling and he seemed to take to it.
I asked him if he's spoken to Hanah since I got in here and he said yes.

I'm glad and I hope she's helping him.

He mentioned that I should probably reach out to her, write her an email or something.

I might be too embarrassed to do anything more than sincerely apologize. I could understand if she didn't have any desire to accept.

November 22nd, 2016

50 Days Clean

Most Definitely Not the blog of John Watson

I've been away from my journal for awhile, I know, but with good reason. I've started writing again. There was a part of me that worried it was attached to the drugs. You know the old idea that all writers are secret or not-so-secret alcoholics or addicts of some sort. Thankfully, it doesn't seem to be true. I got an idea the other day not so long ago. We've solved a lot of cases, the two of us, but not all of them have an element that might catch a reader's attention. Some of them I never even bothered to write up on the blog. But other, others are just begging to be expanded upon.

Especially The Case Of The Client Who Wasn't There.

That's the tentative title at least.

I told Sherlock and he says it sounds sensational for sensations sake but he's glad to hear I'm putting pen to paper again.

So am I. I can't even describe the feeling of peace and fulfillment I feel when I write. I want to grab on to it and never let it go.

Speaking of grabbing on to things, my therapist believes I have a fear of abandonment. I told him truncated and sanitized versions of Duck and Sherlock and Mary and mostly the truth about my father. He speculates that I'm at my worst when I presenting behavior that I think might make people want to leave me. Then I a) attempt to prove my theory correct and do something even more egregious to force them away. Or b) consume something to strip myself of any feelings on the matter. Basically, make myself blank so as not to cause any more trouble. Or c) Leave, either emotionally or physically before they can leave me. He said that all three actions are rooted in low self-esteem and anger.

It looks like those are my driving forces. Low self-esteem and anger.

We're laying the groundwork here to build up the former and alleviate some of the latter but he'd like me to consider anger management once I'm out of here. So, add another session to my list, I suppose.

He says I don't think very much of myself.

He says that if anything is to change that has to change first.
I have to raze John Watson and rebuild him from the ground up.

Total renovation job.

Rather like Sherlock said, I suppose.

It is time to dissolve.

November 27th, 2016

55 Days Clean

Most Definitely Not the blog of John Watson

Five days from now I leave this place.

I'm both ready and not at all ready.

Doing it the second time around at least made things familiar but somehow it all seems unfinished.

I want to go home, I do. But I admit the insulated existence here has its pull. I can't just order something online and have it delivered or go to the nearest Boots and pick up a prescription. There are boundaries and rules and walls here and out there...nothing. It's going to be all up to me...again. And we see how well that worked the last time.

When I brought this up to Sherlock, who incidentally already has everything arranged to come and get me, he said something curious. He told me that, maybe that's the point.

Maybe the point is that it should still feel unfinished.

"Maybe you should feel unfinished because you are."

I've been thinking about that for awhile, even as I'm writing this.

I suppose I get his meaning. It's all well and good to say recovery is a continuing process. But it's a whole other thing to mean it and live it. I'm not sure I was doing that the last time. Alright, I know I wasn't.

My last few therapy sessions are going to be about making a real plan and then a backup plan and then a backup plan for that backup plan.

It sounds overwhelming but I like the idea of being over prepared. I pushed myself out into the world last time and carelessly didn't give myself a net. I'm going to try very hard not to repeat that this time.

December 5th

60 Days Clean

The two months of not seeing Sherlock somehow didn't fully hit him until the two months were officially up.
He happened to be on the floor of his room, half under his bed looking for a missing sock that simply had to be there when that voice sounded behind him.

"Hello, John."

He raised up and immediately hit his head on the bottom of the frame, swore, eased out like a salamander and turned to see the person he'd missed so much.

John got to his feet rubbing his head and grinned self-consciously.

"Are you alright?" Sherlock asked.

"Perfect," John replied not giving him an opportunity to say anything else as he engaged him in a kiss.

John vaguely heard the sound of his roommate clearing his throat. Some people were uncomfortable with how "open" he'd been in group but as the days went on he cared less and less. Open, of course, only meant he hadn't shied away from mentioning that he was part of a couple where the other person happened to be a man.

The kiss was short but so fulfilling and when they broke apart John noticed the colour the exercise had added to Sherlock's face. He was relieved to find that reaction was the same as when they'd parted.

"Can we go home now?" John asked.

"I'd like nothing better."

"No party this time, right?" John asked as they sat in the car, the rehab facility already just a small dot in the distance. "I don't really want or deserve one for that matter."

"No party. Only well wishes. Lot's of flowers have already been delivered and a few cards."

"Good. So just me and you then."

"If you like. I cleared my schedule for today. I am at your disposal."

"No cases? No frantic messages to Lestrade? No scaling buildings chasing criminals?"

"My sole case today is the Case Of Making John Watson Happy."

"Consider it solved because I am very happy right now."

"Absence has made us both, even more, saccharine, I fear," Sherlock said as he pulled him close.

"It's a cross to bear. But actually, I do have something I'd like to do today."

"What's that?"

"Decorate for Christmas."

Sherlock looked surprised.

"You do? Well, I imagine the lights are where we last left them. We can dig out the box."
"No, I don't want to just drape a few lights about the mirror and fireplace this year. I want to go all out. An explosion of Christmas. You must admit, our last few have been rather grim."

"I cannot argue there. So, what do you propose?"

"First, we order a tree," He said pulling out his phone.

"I've never had a Christmas tree."

John looked at him in surprise.

"You've never had a Christmas tree?"

"My parents thought it was impractical."

"That settles it. Let's have an incredibly impractical Christmas."

A mere 7 hours later they were sitting in the dreamy, soft glow of multi-coloured Christmas lights twinkling on a tree that was, admittedly, too big for the room. But John didn't care and after he agreed to move his chair to make way, Sherlock offered no further protests either.

On the contrary, John noted he seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. What had started as a simple trip to a shop to pick up a few extra lights to string round the tree had turned into an ornament and stocking extravaganza that kept them quite busy once the tree was delivered.

Mrs. Hudson who'd been gone for the day received the double surprise of John being home earlier than she expected and of 221B decorated as it had never been before.

John couldn't quite tell if the tears in her eyes when they hugged were for his return or the colorful, new, flat.

He suspected both.

And he wondered what she'd think when she went down to hers and saw that they'd decorated it as well.

The evening ended serenely, perfectly. Both of them sitting on the floor by the tree, fire lit, lights fading on and off, kissing passionately but slowly.

"We haven't really talked at all about your two months," Sherlock said.

"It's ok. Don't really want to. At least not tonight." John answered before moaning softly into his boyfriend's mouth.

"John..." Came the soft reply.

"Hmmm?"

"Does it? I mean, have you...?"

"No, still not working yet but I have...hope. Maybe we could go back to sensate after awhile. I liked that and I think you did too."

"I did indeed."

'Sorry, should we stop? Am I getting you all worked up?' He asked with concern.
"No and yes." Sherlock said before yanking him into his lap with surprising force.

After an enthusiastic grinding session that had Sherlock coming in his trousers,

_God...John...please..._ 

_Yes, love, yes...fuck, I wish you were inside me._ 

_Me too._ 

_I'll bet that big cock of yours would fill me up._ 

_John...you say the filthiest things._ 

_You want me to ride you?_ 

_Yes, John, yes._ 

_Want to fuck me against a wall?_ 

_Yes!_ 

_Want to bend me over, get me on all fours and shove your-_ 

_John...coming..._ 

After a shower.

_I'll wash your hair for you, John. Turn around._ 

And after climbing into bed together and pulling Sherlock securely into his arms 

_I've missed holding you._ 

_I've missed being held._ 

John quickly took out his phone.

"Everything ok?" Sherlock asked.

"Mmmhmm, it's just been awhile since I've been to a meeting. I want to make sure the times haven't changed from what I remember." 

"John?"

"Yes, love?"

"I'm proud of you." John opened his mouth to speak but Sherlock continued stopping him. "I know you want to add a caveat or a warning onto that. I know it's difficult for you to simply accept that. But I ask, as a favour to me and yourself, that you do. I am proud of you. Just sit with that for awhile. Or if you must say something, a simple thank you will suffice."

Sherlock was right of course, he did have all manner of protest and hedging just on the tip of his tongue.

But he bit them back.
He sat with it.

He kissed him.

And he said thank you.

**A/N:** Ok, not the end of the story, obviously. And while I promised only one more chapter or maybe two, I'm already up to over 17,000+ words and I'm not finished yet. So, I made an executive decision and decided it's just becoming too unwieldy to cram it into one chapter.

So, now I don't know how many there will be. But, in the end, it's still the same amount of content. I'm just chopping it up for easier consumption and my own sanity.

Still hoping to finish this by New Years but that only leaves me with three days and there's a lot to do...

We'll see! Your guess is as good as mine. LOL

Hope you all had or are still having Happy Holidays!

See you again soon.

Like...maybe later on today soon...I don't know. :)
"Hello, John. Welcome back, mate." Eric said and mercifully that was all he said.

John had entered St. Bridget's with both trepidation and determination. He was going to do this no matter how much it scared him. No excuses this time.

He didn't know what he was expecting. Some sort of public scolding or flogging. Maybe they'd make him give an apologetic speech for abandoning the group way back when. Maybe they wouldn't want him back at all. He didn't exactly want to face it but he knew he had to. But in the end, nothing more had happened than the aforementioned welcome back and then the meetings had begun.

He told Eric all of this after the group had dispersed and the man had laughed.

"No one here is going to put you through the ringer, John. People come and go, unfortunately, that's the nature of the game. Sometimes they find a meeting they like better. Sometimes they relapse. Sometimes they find religion. Sometimes they think they can do it by themselves and sometimes, mercifully they're right. Most times they're wrong. And sometimes they come back to us. I'm glad you came back to us, John."

"It was bad...Eric. I got bad." He said with a nervous and shamed chuckle.

"We all got bad. The good news is that until we die, we all have a new day to get better."

"Yeah, I think that's a message I can't quite get enough of."

"You'll get plenty of it here."

"I really liked being here. I liked how it felt. I tried a lot of meetings before this and avoided this particular one like the plague. And then I get here and...it was just what I needed. It still feels that way."

"I'm really glad to hear that and believe me, I know what you mean. It's not easy when our other problems are also tangled up in being in just stepping out of the closet."

"You're telling me." John said with a smile and then paused. "Ummm, I actually wound up getting hooked on Vicodin. Is it alright that I'm here? You wouldn't rather I be in NA?"

"Look, it's just my opinion but a drug is a drug and an addiction is an addiction. You're still an alcoholic in recovery. Now you're also a drug addict in recovery. I think you'll find the same message you need to hear in these meetings. But if you ever feel we're not satisfying you I absolutely encourage you to keep looking. It won't hurt my feelings. But keep coming while you look."

John gave a relieved sigh.
"I'd built this up in my head as a big discussion I was dreading."

"I can see that." Eric said with a smile. "I think you do that quite a lot, don't you?"

"Yeah, I think I do. Well, um, I've taken up enough of your time."

"No problem, John. Happy to help."

"And you did. But there was just one last thing. There was a mistake I made last time, out of pride or some other such nonsense. I don't want to make it again. So, in light of that...would you be my sponsor?"

"I'd be happy to," Eric said with a smile.

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**December 18th**

**72 Days Clean**

It was a few sessions in before they addressed the anger issues.

Every visit had been difficult. Each and ever one, first one included. Hanah had been kind enough to forward Dr. Gregory, his new therapist, her notes and since he was in the know, for lack of a better phrase those two things combined made it so John could speak freely.

Not that he was exactly eager to do so.

"What do you do when you get angry, John?"

"I shout, I seethe, I clench my fists. I..." He struggled as he tried to get a clear handle on what exactly he did do when upset.

"Do you black out? Do you remember your actions later?"

"Oh, yeah, I remember what I've done. I don't black out. I don't think it's that serious."

"Understood, but you don't have to blackout for it to be serious. Often adults whose childhood was subjected to traumatic abuses have anger issues, outbursts, intermittent explosive disorder. It's very common and very treatable. Are you violent when you're angry?"

"I have been in the past." He said after a long pause. "Not recently."

"Has there ever been any physical violence in a personal, romantic or intimate relationship?"

"I've never hit a woman. I never would. Not ever. I was the closest with Mary and I never, ever even considered doing something like that. Never."

Even thinking of the idea was abhorrent to him.

"I want to talk about what you just said. You said you were the closest with Mary and never considered doing something like that? Do you consider closeness and violence to be linked?"

"What? No! No, of course I don't?"

"There's no need to get upset, John."
"No, I think there is a bloody need if you're implying that I want to knock around the people I love."

"I'm implying the opposite. I'm saying you might need to consider that one of the reasons you have traditionally kept your distance from people is because you fear that. You fear that your anger will grow out of control."

"Alright, the last time you were angry, what did you take that anger out of?"

"I don't know. Some inanimate object, probably. The mantel at home gets put through its paces."

"But not Sherlock?"

"No. That won't ever happen again."

"Your drinking ramped up considerably after your wife's death and then again after the assault in the morgue. Except there was a changeover."

"A change over?"

"You went from externally destructive behavior, such as threatening the witness from the case you were on to internally; i.e. drinking yourself to death. But, it held a double benefit, it kept people away. It kept them at a safe distance."

"Trust me, I was drinking to get drunk, to forget...to die. I wasn't trying to keep people away."

"I beg to differ. You made yourself, so dangerous, so volatile, so explosive, so hellbent on self-destruction that most people, even those closest to you would know it was time to back away from the coming implosion. Addiction is never just about getting high, John. Would that it were that simple."

John thought back for a moment. Back to all the precise and clumsily imprecise ways that he sought to remove himself from people lives. The truth of the matter was no one wants to be around a drunk and no one wants to be around one who's spiraling toward their demise. Well...there was one person. One he just couldn't shake no matter what he did.

"When did you first start taking the hydrocodone more for pleasure and relief than your dental issue?"

"I don't know. It just sort of happened."

"Nothing just sort of happens, John. What was going on in your life at the time?"

"Things were actually going well. I'd was settling in at my job, Rosie had stayed with us and that had been wonderful and we were about to go meet Sherlock's parents."

"That's quite a bit going on. Quite a bit that's emotional."

John paused and thought.

"You're saying that...that the pills conveniently coincided with a point in my life where I was moving closer to people; my daughter, Sherlock, our friends, etc. And that I started up with them because I was trying to push myself away. Maybe make them push me away."

"That's exactly what I'm getting at, John. What do you think? Do you believe you push people away just when they're getting close?"
"Yes." he began hesitantly, not eager to admit but finding it hard to deny the truth. "I think...I think maybe I throw up roadblocks to they'll step back and stay back."

"Go on. Follow that thought through."

"It's most frightening with Sherlock because he is tenacious. Twice now, I've thought that he gave up on me. Twice I was wrong. He just keeps coming and coming. And I can't shake him."

"Do you want to shake him?"

"No...I love him. I love him so much. I'm just worried that this...that who I am is not stable enough to be what he needs."

"What does he need?"

"I...I don't know how to explain."

"Alright. Let's try a different tact. Why was Mary not someone for whom you threw up roadblocks?"

The answer came to his lips easier than he thought.

"Because I knew she was only sharing a part of who she was. So I only had to share a part of who I was. I loved her but some part of me knew that there were walls."

"How did that make you feel?"

"Lucky. Because I loved her but there were places she wouldn't let me go. Just like there were places I wouldn't let her go. It was an elegant solution. But after she told me everything, after we mended things it got harder. Because I was still hiding shit but she wasn't."

"Do you hide things from Sherlock?"

"Sometimes. Not all the time but I didn't tell him about my past in the beginning."

"And now?"

"He knows everything now, I think. Everything that matters."

"And when you told him how did you feel?"

"Nervous. Sick. Like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"John, what is the worst that can happen to people if you don't push people away? If you let them see you, warts and all?"

"They'll get hurt. Very, seriously hurt."

"By you?"

"By circumstances around me."

"And what's the worst that can happen to you if you don't push people away?"

"I let them get close and I hurt them and they leave."

"And what if they don't leave, John? What if you're wrong? What if the reason this isn't working is because time and time again you have built and rebuilt your life on a false premise. The premise
that people cut and run at the slightest bit of danger or inconvenience. What if you're wrong?"

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**December 22nd**

**76 Days Clean**

"But they only care about the reindeer once he's proven useful to them. One of the final lines is Then all the reindeer loved him. They don't love him. They know their lives depend on him so they employ obvious and rather disgusting flattery."

Rosie was sitting quietly in John's lap watching the telly with rapt attention. Sherlock was chattering softly in his ear while John was trying not to laugh.

"Will you shut up?" He begged as he tried to suppress a chuckle.

"Your deformity means you can now be of service to us so we won't just let you wander off for hunting season, reindeer child."

"They don't allow hunting at the North Pole." John tittered.

"They were hunting the Bumble."

John nearly choked at hearing Sherlock say "Bumble" so earnestly.

"They weren't hunting him. They were trying to escape."

"I think this Santa is an unsavoury character. Not sure I like Rosie watching him."

At that John burst out laughing and a frustrated Rosie, her patience at an end turned around and shushed them.

"My apologies, Honey Bee." Sherlock said affecting a serious tone.

They watched the remainder of the program in silence along with the Frosty The Snowman follow-up.

As they put Rosie into her pajamas John could swear she'd grown by leaps and bounds since he'd last seen her. He didn't want to ever go that long without seeing her again.

After he and Sherlock kissed her goodnight and set her in her cot they returned to the sofa to watch the lights on the tree, Sherlock rested his head in John's lap while the latter played with his hair.

"John, I was wondering if this year..."

John had an idea as to what was coming and he expected it would be his first big hurdle since getting back home. Sherlock was surely going to ask him if he wanted to spend Christmas with his parents. He'd rather do just about anything but. That said, he had resigned himself to accompany his boyfriend come hell or high water. He couldn't let him face them alone. And now at least since he knew what to expect it wouldn't come as a surprise. Surely that had to be half the battle.

"...would you mind if we spent Christmas at home, here at Baker Street? Just the two of us?"

John glanced down to look at him in surprise.

"Mind? No, not at all, that sounds lovely. Just you and me."
"And Rosie of course when her mothers can stop by. And Mrs. Hudson."

"Yeah, of course."

"My parents extended an invitation to us and Mycroft as well. I politely declined. I didn't think you'd mind. I have no desire to see Mycroft anytime soon."

"Still fighting then?"

"I am seriously considering severing our relationship completely."

"Sherlock- and I can't believe I'm about to say this but...he was only trying to protect you. He was trying to protect you from me."

"I don't need his help and I don't need his protection. And his thinking nearly resulted in your death. We can remain business associates and nothing more."

"Just give it some thought, alright? Put yourself in his place and give it some thought."

Sherlock's only response was a petulant downturn of his mouth.

"Are you alright with not seeing your parents?" John ventured after a bit. It was shaky ground but he wanted to know. He needed to know this if they were going to remain a couple.

"Don't think I'm ignorant of the oddity of my upbringing, John. The...neglect...the coldness. I was there. I experienced it. My parents and I have learned how to deal with one another. But I will say, no one ever challenges their facade. The first time you were too engaged with Mary and she with you to really notice who they are. There was no such distraction this time. It made clear certain things about them and myself that I likely would have been content to ignore. But I can no longer ignore them. I think it might be best that I maintain a polite distance from here on out."

"Sherlock...I don't want to be the reason you no longer have a relationship with your family."

"You aren't. You won't be." He said before clearing his throat. "So, just the two of us for Christmas. Perhaps we'll have a nice exciting case requiring us to dash from brightly lighted rooftop to brightly lighted rooftop, dodging plastic Santa's as we go."

"That's very merry of you." John said with a laugh before resting one hand in Sherlock's hair and the other on his chest. "Love?"

"Hmmm?"

"I've been thinking that I'd like to clean out my old room. Get rid of some things. Move my stuff down into our bedroom. Then we could fix it up as a room for Rosie like we always talked about."

Sherlock lifted John's hand from his chest and brought it to his lips to bestow a kiss.

"Whenever you're ready."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow then."

"You're not going to make me index my socks, are you?"

"I wouldn't trust you to do it. I'll index them for you."
Another visit to rehab and another Holmes brother footing the bill. The fact that again he hadn't paid his own way was not something John had forgotten. However, when he'd attempted to bring it up with Sherlock, his boyfriend had stopped him cold.

"If the words "pay you back" are about to leave your mouth I must warn you I will be quite insulted. As far as my ledgers are concerned there is nothing you owe me and therefore nothing for which you need to pay me back. Are we understood?"

"Yes, Sherlock."

"Good. Excellent. Now, you were saying?"

"You know, it seems to have slipped my mind."

"I thought it might."

That being said, John had decided early on to go all out in terms of Christmas gifts. He wanted to spoil his partner and his daughter. As a result, the pile of gifts started to grow day by day until it reached its crescendo on the 23rd.

Christmas morning was to be spent on the floor of Harry and Clara's place surrounded by toys and discarded wrapping paper. Christmas afternoon was slated for close friends at their flat. But for Christmas Eve, John wanted it to be just the two of them. He'd cooked dinner all by himself, though he couldn't exactly vouch for the quality. He'd made sure they'd spent the afternoon with Mrs. Hudson while politely hinting they'd be unavailable that night. And then, he pushed their chairs to the side and cleared the floor as much as he could.

"What's all this?" Sherlock asked when he entered the living room.

"This time last year I was...well, you saved my life. And I gave you the scare of yours. I ruined your Christmas and I know those memories aren't easily banished. But I want to try. I want to make so many new memories with you. And I want to give you wonderful Christmases to chase all the reminders of every awful one away. So, I thought I'd turn the lights down low, put on a little night music and you could dance with me." John said extending his hand. "I have it on very good authority that you love to dance."

Sherlock ducked his head as he smiled before taking John's hands and joining him on their makeshift dance floor.

The music played, the lights sparkled and John drew him close, taking the lead.

Years ago Sherlock had kindly volunteered to teach him a few steps when John had been fretting about the wedding.

That night could have gone a completely different way if either of them had made just one different move or gesture or said one forbidden word. But they didn't. Instead, they danced and laughed and drank wine and Sherlock taught him how to stand and hold his arms and move his feet and generally not look like a clod. It was wonderful and happy and just the two of them and for a second John recalled how he had forgotten why they were even doing it. Just for a moment. Just for a second, he had just lost himself in the music and the partner.

But now, he didn't have to forget and they didn't have to pretend. He danced with Sherlock as he always wanted to and in his arms was everything he needed in this world.
When the clock struck midnight, Christmas Day, Sherlock raised his chin and kissed him.

"Merry Christmas, John."

"Merry Christmas, Sherlock."

January 20, 2017

105 Days Clean

It wasn't until after they rang in 2017 that John was ready to talk to Hanah.

He'd been putting it off as long as possible but he worried his fear had let the situation already edge into rudeness. That wasn't even counting how rude he had been before sending that last email.

He'd decided to wait until after Sherlock and Rosie's birthdays, the former on the 6th and the latter on the 8th.** He normally didn't want to bother with celebrating it but once it was explained to Rosie that the dates were so close she wanted a joint party. Willing to do anything for his Honey Bee, Sherlock of course agreed. The picture of both of them in matching party hats was something John planned on getting framed as soon as time allowed. After the 8th, a case found them handcuffed and otherwise bound, though not in a fun way for several hours which lead to a chase that lasted a full week.

But by the 19th they'd solved it and were sitting at the flat nursing bruises but no worse for wear. All in all, a job well done.

He'd reached out to Hanah on the 1st to wish her a happy New Year and to ask if they might talk via Skype sometime soon.

She had agreed and now here he was, on January 20th, dialing her number and waiting nervously for her to pick up.

When her face appeared on his screen she was smiling and he, in relief, smiled in return.

"Hi, John, it's very good to see you."

"Hi, Hanah, it's good to see you too."

"How are you? You look good. Very good as a matter of fact."

"Thank you. I'm doing well, I think. I've got 105 days clean and sober."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks, I um...I really couldn't have done it without you. Things we talked about at The Location and things we discussed here. It all came back into focus when I was there."

"I'm very glad, John."

"And...there's something else. I truly need to apologize to you. Not just with how I left things but...

I've been thinking about stuff, specifically identity and rigidity. I realize now that it was convenient for me to have this crutch. It was convenient for me to use it as a camouflage for other, older things that were wrong. If people can see you're an alcoholic they leave you alone. Or if they don't leave you alone they figure your problem is the drinking and you just need to stop. Usually by agreeing
you can get them off your back. It's apparently all part of me keeping people away. Bu of course, it didn't phase you, it wouldn't. Toward the end there, I was trying to keep you away but you wouldn't budge and that stupidly, made me angry. And as for the rigidity, I...like a schedule, I like things to run on time, happen on time. And even though the addiction became part of the rigidity, it worked for me. There was something comforting in knowing just when that need would pop up and everything you wanted me to do disrupted that rigidity. It prevented me from focusing on the one thing I thought I could handle and manage. What am I saying...I guess I'm saying I'm so sorry for treating you like the hired help. I'm sorry for letting my habits push one of the few people who was trying to help me, out of my life. I'm sorry for raising my voice and I'm sorry for ending things with such a curt, impersonal letter. I am sorry, Hanah. You have been in my corner since day one and I haven't forgotten that and I am sorry."

She paused for a few moments after he was done and appeared to be collecting herself.

John didn't know what she might say. He wouldn't blame her one bit if she told him 'Thanks, now go fuck yourself'. Not very professional but then he had been so much less than professional with her.

"You've been reading the books." She said when she finally did speak.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"The books I sent you home with. I know exactly what book that chapter on identity and rigidity is in."

"Oh, yeah. Finally, I decided to tear into them like I should have in the beginning. I'm sorry it took me so long."

"It's alright. The thing is, John, I'm not surprised. This is after all my job. I know the success rate and I know the signs of relapse. I'd hoped you wouldn't but I had a bad feeling a few weeks prior that you would. It was only natural that you'd then want to get as far away from me as possible. I understand. So, if you're asking for forgiveness, consider it given."

"I don't know that I deserve it."

"Well, you have it anyway. So, you're going to meetings?"

"Meetings, therapy and I'm on anti-depressants and anti-anxiety meds."

"All of that is music to my ears."

"And mine. Hanah, I don't suppose that it might be possible for us to take up our sessions again."

"It doesn't sound as though you need me anymore, John. You sound well shored up."

"I know it may sound like that but I do think I need you. I think Sherlock and I need you. If you don't want to see me alone what about the two of us together. It would be murder trying to get him to go to another doctor. He respects you and his respect is in short supply. I don't expect you to do this for free of course."

"Alright, we'll take it on a trial basis and see how we do. Sound good?"

"That sounds better than good." He said with a happy chuckle. "Thank you, Hanah."

"I really am glad you're doing well. The last time I saw you I...well, I was worried. Sherlock and I had remained in contact and I didn't know what the next message from him might say."
"I'm sorry I worried you. I wound up worrying a lot of people. I felt pretty touch and go there for awhile myself but right now, the ground I'm standing on feels kind of solid."

"And the Red Forest?"

"The Red Forest..." He said with a sigh. "I'm still trying to find my way out. But I suppose the point is I'm still trying."

February 7th, 2017

123 Days Clean

"Sherlock make sure she washes her hands before she has the ice cream! They're filthy." John called out from their bedroom.

His partner and his daughter were giggling in the other room still tickled nearly to tears that he'd dropped his ice cream all over his shirt. They'd been leaving the zoo on an absurdly warm February day and a simple pebble in the road caused him to lose his step. He'd righted himself before falling but the ice cream, sadly, was no more. Once they'd gotten to Baker Street he'd made a beeline for their bedroom to change shirts and wash up.

He ran a bit of water in the basin of the sink, removed his shirt and dropped it in here to soak. He next pulled off his undershirt and lathered up to soap and rinse the sticky mess off his skin.

It didn't take long at all and after a quick change, he was giving himself a once-over in the mirror when something drew his eye.

The glint of his wedding band had caught the sun and now he stood before his reflection just staring. Blindly he reached for the soap again, purposefully getting the suds on the ring finger of his right hand.

Then he slipped it off.

John held it in his hand for a moment, considering it. He thought back to the day he'd chosen both hers and his with the jeweler's help. The day she'd placed it on his slightly shaky hand at St Mary's. The day it had almost gone down the drain because he'd had it off to do the dishes and she'd accidentally knocked it into the sink and he was so relieved because he didn't have the foggiest idea how to take apart a pipe like they did on telly. The day after the autopsy when it had been returned to him in a container with her other belongings; her necklace, her earrings, that silly little hair clip she always complained about because it would tug and pull but she never just threw the damn thing away and... The day he'd put them back in a box in his dresser because he couldn't bear to look at them but he always needed to know where they were.

He rinsed his hands clean of the soap and walked back to the bedroom. Standing before the dresser he shared with Sherlock he opened the first drawer. There was a space set aside, a little wooden tray for their watches and cufflinks and various bibs and bobs. There was also the box with Mary's rings. He slowly took it out, opened it and gazed in. They were there, of course, where they belonged. He remembered his excitement and surety in choosing them. He remembered how she looked at the ring and then at him after he finally got the chance to propose. He remembered how their left hands looked together.

He remembered.
Maybe that was enough now.

John Watson whispered a nearly silent "Thank you." and placed his wedding ring in the box, and the box in the drawer before closing it.

He looked at his bare hands once before leaving the bedroom.

"Sherlock, you're splitting your ice cream with me, it's only fair!"

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A/N

**Sherlock’s birthday is canonically January 6th.**

Mary was already pregnant when she and John married on May 18th. And she was already tasting things funny. Now, I couldn't find an exact time as to when this symptom crops up in pregnancy but everything I saw implied it happens early, really early. So early in fact that weird tastes can be used as a signal that you are pregnant along with a missed period. So, they likely conceived in April. Now, April + 9 months = January. Which fits with when The Six Thatchers aired. However, John doesn't mention Sherlock's birthday until The Lying Detective. The math of that just doesn't work. Especially given the fact that Rosie had to be like, what, already a month old when she throws the rattle at Sherlock's face? Moffat has always played fast and loose with time and seasons but I'm drawing a line and saying that Rosie and Sherlock share very close birthdays.

Unrelated...I don't think I'm going to get this finished in 2017 as I'd hoped unless I write like the wind.

But we'll see.

Hope you guys are still enjoying it!
The truth of it was John hadn't paid much attention to the sponsor relationship when it had been explained at The Location. He wasn't interested and he didn't think he needed it. So when Eric told him that typically it would be best if they talked every day he was more than a little taken aback and his resolve started to sag under the weight of that potential commitment. But he decided it was the Old John who would have balked at that. New John needed to approach it with enthusiasm. And if it wasn't initially sincere, then he'd adopt a fake it til you make it philosophy.

It turned out to be one of the best decisions he'd made in a while. He hadn't been aware of just how much flotsam and jetsam were floating through his head, how much garbage about medication and mad-midnight cravings and knowing when you're burdening your partner and knowing your own triggers and warning signs there was until he started talking. It was different than therapy, it was different than conversations with Hanah. It was different than meetings. Talking to Eric was something altogether unique and he was shocked that it was helping.

They'd chosen a time early in the morning because Eric liked to go for a run and John liked to get a coffee, a paper, and bagel. So, on their mobiles in completely different parts of London, they'd set out and walk or run the streets and just talk. It helped. It helped immensely. It helped on those days he woke up feeling remarkably good and it helped on those days when he woke up feeling lower than shit.

By March it was an ingrained habit and it even seemed to be taking some of the invisible pressure off his relationship with Sherlock. They could talk about anything and everything. But he never wanted to go back to burdening him the way he had done before. It wasn't right or fair.

There were still dark days which naively surprised him. There was the day he found a rogue half-filled bottle of pills and went through a mini-crisis because by GOD he wanted to take them. Eric talked him down and off the ledge and after a long while, with sweaty hands he unscrewed the top and dumped them into the toilet.

He only thought about diving in after them for a moment...or two.

There were other times where that wave of depression seemed to rear up out of nowhere. He thought, at least, the meds were meant to keep him level. Not happy but certainly not dipping as far below the baseline as he imagined. But he awakened one morning feeling nothing but clouds surrounding him. A long walk, an enormous cup of coffee and lengthy discussion with Eric didn't break his mood, but it helped him understand it and little by little over the course of a day and a half he did his best to climb out of it.

It was, in fact, walking with Eric that John, while opening his mail, received one of two letters that would change his life.

But he didn't tell Eric. He wanted Sherlock to be the first one to hear it.

Dear John,

First off, an apology for taking me so long.
I loved “The Case of the Agony Column”. Not just loved, devoured. You've taken the rather elusive figure of Sherlock Holmes and humanized him all while providing your own distinctly unique voice and presence in the story. I sought out your blog, essentially, your proto-work and I'm intrigued. I think I can sell this. I've got an editor I'd like you to contact to just tighten up some chapters. I think you've got something here and I hope you're working on more.

I've got your contact information and I'll be in touch.

John looked up from reading to letter to meet Sherlock's eyes.

"It's from a publisher. An actual publisher. They want it. They like it and they want it. And I know you think I don't do a proper write up of our cases. I know you've thought that since day one. I remember after A Study In Pink you commented on my blog; "You've made the whole experience seem like some kind of romantic adventure. You should have focussed on my analytical reasoning and nothing more."

"You remember that?"

"It's not like I have it memorized or anything," John said slightly defensively.

"No?" Sherlock asked with a twinkle in his eye. "It's just that you seem to know it by rote."

"I mean, it's not like it's stuck in my head."

John watched as the corners of Sherlock's mouth pulled upward ever so slightly in an almost smile.

"No, of course not. While I admit I would prefer something with a bit more bare-boned fact and less posey, your writings have garnered us many of our cases as well as an audience. And I expect you to get even more of an audience with your book. Congratulations, John."

"Really?"

"Really. I am incredibly proud of you. And honestly, I enjoy your stories of us, if I've never said. You paint me as much more clever than I really am. Which isn't easy because I am shockingly clever. You tend to undersell yourself though. You should work on that."

"Are you giving me notes?"

"Oh, I never have a shortage of opinions and am always happy to share more." He said cheekily. "In fact, would you allow me to take you out for dinner tonight?"

"I've got a meeting tonight at 8. You ok with it being around 9:30-ish."

"Suits me just fine."

But as so often happened with their plans there was an interruption. It began with reports of a jumper on Tower Bridge of which John's cabbie informed him of it as they sat in traffic on his way back to Baker Street that evening. Every car was moving along at a crawl and John reluctantly took his phone out to text Sherlock that he was going to be late. He immediately got a text in reply.

Where are you?

Tooley Street. Why?

Meet me on Tower Bridge.
The jumper?

**I have a hunch this man didn't jump at all.**

That was the start of the case of the jumper who didn't jump which took them from London to Leeds and finally to Snowdonia National Park in Wales. All of this culminating in a dramatic confrontation at Dolbadarn Castle that John would likely write about some day.

It was exciting and time-consuming and exhausting and frantic and somehow he was still able to catch an AA meeting every single day, all in person except for one on his laptop.

"We never did make it to dinner," Sherlock remarked on the plane ride home.

"What dinner could compare to that? Besides, time with you is always precious time well spent."

"Perhaps you're right." He said taking John's hand, linking their fingers and closing his eyes for some much-deserved sleep.

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It wasn't all easy. It wasn't all running. There were long quiet hours where he felt about 20 seconds sober and not months. There were times where he pulled up the URL where all his ordering information and bank data was saved. He even had the item pending in his cart. Those beautiful, smooth, oval, white, Watson, 387's. Holy God but he wanted them.

There were times when it was as if someone was slowly tightening a noose around his neck, that was the feeling of the anxiety returning full force.

There were times when all those dark feelings of sadness and self-doubt rose like a current to carry him away.

There were times where he felt so angry, so incredibly, blindly furious that he didn't want to just break something, he wanted to break everything.

These were the times he tried his best to apply what he'd learned and ignored, or purposefully forgotten at The Location and what he was still learning now.

These were the times he not so subtly begged Sherlock for distraction; a case, a board game, a walk around the block, anything except something physical. He'd muddled their bedroom activity enough and was determined not to do that anymore.

Sometimes, if Sherlock wasn't available, and bless him, he tried to be, John would need to find some other way to busy himself up to and including resorting to cleaning.

Cleaning was how he found the second letter.

He'd slowly but surely been making his way through the pile of books on recovery and other relevant topics that Hanah had gifted him. As he finished one book he set it not so neatly to the side and chose another. The pile had recently toppled over and as he was trying to clear his mind and rearrange it in a coherent manner an enveloped slipped out from between two of the texts.

The word "Pripyat" was written in Hanah's hand and he remembered now when she'd placed the envelope atop the box.

From his fevered research when all of this had begun he remembered the name. Pripyat was a bustling city of over 49,000 people in 1970 and seen as proof of the power of the nuclear age and the
future of the Soviet Union. The average age of the residents was 26 and people to this day still spoke fondly of it recalling the river full of fish, the mushrooms they could pick in the woods and the rose and fruit trees in full bloom. For years the city grew and flourished under the shadow of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

The planned May Day celebrations, complete with a carnival and a bright yellow Ferris wheel were set to begin May 1st, 1986.

But when on April 26th an unexpected power surge and subsequent power spike occurred upon attempts of an emergency shutdown those plans along with the town of Pripyat were canceled.

When all was said and done Pripyat was evacuated except for the remaining souls left to contain and battle the meltdown at the plant.

It was now a ghost town, the houses having fallen into disrepair, the gardens overgrown, the Ferris wheel having never turned.

It will be habitable for humans in 24,000 years and not a moment before.

4.3 km from Pripyat is the Red Forest. A 43-minute walk or a 7-minute car ride.

When the plant blew the nearby forests were poisoned like everything else. The soil, water, and atmosphere were blasted with radioactive degrees 20 times more deadly than what was caused by the A-Bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

*Life comes back, John. Not always in the way we'd like or expect; but with pain and struggle and stumbling steps and time, it does come back.*

*Your forest isn't as you remember it.*

That was what Hanah had handwritten at the top of the article.

It was titled **Thriving In the Exclusion Zone** by T. R. Cherry and John sat down on the floor of his old bedroom to read it. It opened with mentioning the human toll, the lives lost that day and those after as the effects of the radiation swept through the populous. The cancer, the mutations, the suffering, the death. The aftermath that is still happening and hasn't been properly cataloged and very well may never be.

Though grim, all of this was to be expected. There are no results in the human population that took scientists off guard.

The same, however, could not be said for the wildlife.

"The first thing that surprises me is the call of birds overhead. I glance up and see more than I can quickly count. They swoop away lyrically, lazily and seem to be headed toward the abandoned city of Pripyat. My guide tells me they've built nests in the deserted buildings. I ask for a rough estimate of how many birds remain here and am told it's impossible to tell. But eagles, storks, cranes, swans, and hawks are among them. Bird watching here is excellent and someone could check off a hefty number were they doing a Big Year.

A bit further into the forest, I am amazed to see elk grazing peacefully seemingly unbothered by my presence. Wolves appear cautiously then dart out of sight, far less trustful. I am amazed. With each step, I am re-adjusting my understanding of what a nuclear disaster does and what it does not do."
By journey's end, I have seen more than I thought possible; beavers, mice, foxes, lynx, buffalo, badgers, tanuki, and deer to name a few.

The Red Forest scorched a burnt crimson by never-before-seen radiation was once thought to be irrevocably damaged.

But in that damage some scientists put forth the controversial idea that the land was cleansed, the soil enriched.

I came here expecting to find a dark and foreboding place, twisted, sick, dying or dead. Instead, I discovered a location still too poisoned for the likes of me, yet flourishing with a new life, a new chance and a new future.

There is no question about it, there is more wildlife here than there was 30 years ago when the accident occurred.

I leave here with a new and better perspective. I leave here with a different, more literal understanding of Camus' "invincible summer".

Life is indomitable and the Red Forest along with it.

John didn't know this would make him cry. He didn't know if it was supposed to or not. But it had. He looked at the accompanying pictures. Yes, there were felled trees and dry grasses and brittle leaves. But there were also great patches of green and trees short and squat but growing just the same. It was not at all the dark place his mind would drag him to at his lowest points. By God, there were even vegetables and berries growing in some places. Not safe to eat, mind you, but that wasn't the point, was it? The point was the land was trying. It was struggling and sparse and clawing its way back and it would take time and time and more time but it was there.

It was there.

He was there.

Life is indomitable and the Red Forest along with it.

Unfamiliar with the Camus quote she referenced he wiped at his eyes, took out his phone and typed it in.

"In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back."

A/N: Well, Happy New Year, guys.

I obviously didn't manage to get it finished in time and I still have more to go but I wanted to get this posted before heading to bed tonight.

I hope you guys had a wonderful evening and here's hoping 2018 is a wonderful, happy, healthy, productive and secure year for us all.

Here's hoping we find our invincible summer.

Thanks for sticking with me!
-Maribor
They were meeting for their long put-off dinner at last and John was just ending a conversation on his mobile when Sherlock seated himself at the table.

"Excellent! Yes, yes we'll be in touch soon. Ok. Ok, great. Cheers." He concluded and placed his phone back in his pocket. "Hello, darling."

"Hello, John."

"Excellent news, I may have found a buyer for the house."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. Two months from now it could be over and done with."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Good. Really good. I think it's time to let it go. Long past time. For the longest, I could only think of the bad memories I made there. But I had good ones too. It's not a bad house and it should be filled with people again. My life isn't there anymore and it hasn't been for a good while. My life and future are at Baker Street."

Sherlock ducked his head and smiled. When that didn't calm the blush he hid slightly behind the menu he surely knew by heart.

"And how was your meeting?" He asked.

"Meeting went well. I spoke a bit today about the past and how hard but necessary it can be to let go. Eric and I had a good talk this morning. Actually, we talked a bit about anniversaries. You know, sober anniversaries and others and Mary came up. The anniversary of her death specifically. And I don't recall if I did it at the time...and even if I did it wasn't enough but... Thank you, for helping me through it this year. It was difficult and I know I was difficult and sad and you were perfect. I just wanted to thank you again."

"No need, John. You thanked me at the time and it was enough."

"Good, that's really good, I'm glad." John said before clearing his throat before he grew over emotional. "Um, well, I haven't had a chance to get back to my editor yet but I will tomorrow. Oh and the check from Squire, Squire, Hackerman & Dudley finally cleared. I checked your account."

"Glad to hear it." Sherlock said and then paused before starting up again. "Your name should be on that account as well."

"Hardly matters. I mean, you gave me access to your login and pin ages ago." John said scanning the menu himself. "Maybe I'll try lasagna tonight? I always get the same thing. Might be a good night to change it up."
"Yes, but it's the principle of the thing."

"The principle of lasagna?" John asked.

"No, the principle of the account. And other matters as well." Sherlock was starting to appear flustered and John put down the menu with a frown of concern. "We should address this, I think."

"Ok, take it easy. Tell me what you're saying," He said reaching across the table and taking his hand.

They were out as a couple. But not out-out. They didn't hold hands walking down the street, they didn't normally kiss in public. For no other reason than that they were both private men. But that didn't mean that they ever drew back from affectionate touch when the situation called for it. The press had picked up on it, speculating here and there but thankfully there were bigger stories. That didn't mean their Twitter accounts weren't full of questions and innuendos.

"I want to make certain that should anything ever happen to me that you would have access to all that is...was mine. The bank account, my possessions. I've already amended my will-

"Whoa... Why are we talking about a will? Where is this coming from? Are you alright? Is something wrong? Have you been to see a doctor?"

"No, no, John I'm not ill. I...I'm doing this all wrong. How on earth does someone manage to get this wrong." He said running a hand through his curls.

"Ok, if you're not sick, and I'm choosing to believe you, then why not drink some water and then we'll order and maybe you'll feel a little more settled when you have some food in you. I know you haven't eaten all day." John said softly and squeezed his hand.

Sherlock seemed to sigh with frustration and withdraw a little into his own thoughts.

"For the record, you can have the pin and stuff to my account, if you like."

Sherlock huffed derisively.

"There would hardly be a purpose for that, you never have any money."

Something that in the past might have caused John to bristle now just made him laugh.

"Quite right." he said with a nod.

"That was rude of me. You weren't offering the account at face value. It was an offer to share something you don't with anyone else. I appreciate it, I recognize the gesture and I accept."

"Good. We'll work it out when we get home."

"John?"

"Yes, love?"

"Do you recall our conversation on the landing strip? Just before I was about to leave...for good?"

"Yes, of course, I recall."

"I wasn't going to tell you that Sherlock was a girls name."

"Then what were you going to tell me?" John said leaning forward. He'd replayed that scene over
and over in his head, always with what he could have said and done. Now, he wanted to hear Sherlock's version.

"That you had awakened a part of me I thought either dormant or dead. That you had brought an indescribable joy to my life and if I could no longer be with you then I should welcome death within six months or less."

"Sherlock-"

"Let me finish, please. I couldn't say these things because it would be unfair to you and Mary. I couldn't say these things because we had never come close to broaching the subject of us. I couldn't say these things because whether or not the former statements were true, I was still a coward. I don't want to be a coward anymore and I also know how breathtakingly short life can be. In light of this..."

Sherlock placed a squat, black box on the table wrapped with a white bow.

"What's this?" John asked. "You got me a present?"

"Open it."

John picked up the box which was heavier than he expected and opened the top. He slid out the contents into his hand and was greeted with a small jar. There was no mistaking the contents and even though it was sealed John could still detect the florid scent.

"Is this what I think it is? Deli bal?"

"Mad honey, yes."

"You daft man, this is wonderful." He said with a grin.

"Perhaps a hallucinogenic isn't the best gift from one recovering addict to another but it's not for now. Look at the sticker on the back."

John did as asked and read; Sherlock and John do not open until 2046.

"What happens in 2046?" John asked.

Sherlock took a deep breath and reached into his pocket again.

"I thought long and hard about how to do this. You're actually a confusing sort. You enjoy attention, you enjoy being admired. And, as evidenced by the blog and the forthcoming book you don't take issue with some elements of your private life being public information. This is further backed up by the fact that AA meetings are public and you haven't shied away from having your issue with addiction mentioned in less than private spheres. Also, when it was your...when you were the one doing this you chose a restaurant which shows you weren't averse to drawing some focus for what was presumed to be a yes. And yet, somehow, I would still consider you to be a private person. Circling back, while I didn't want a repeat the mood exactly I did worry that were I to do it at home it would lack that special quality that people so often go on about. I thought about perhaps taking a trip, but then I was concerned that might telegraph it too soon and completely do away with the element of surprise. I wanted it to be a surprise. Ultimately, I settled upon here, where we had our first meal together, at the same table where we sat and spoke to one another as human beings. Where our paths might have changed course had we allowed it."

John watched as Sherlock reached for a glass of water and took a rather large gulp. He couldn't imagine this was all about honey. That would be daft. But he really had no idea where this was
heading. Whatever was occurring Sherlock seemed nervous and John just wanted to calm him down.

"Ok, darling, I'm sorry and I imagine this won't come as much of a surprise to you but I'm not following. Can you slow down and just tell me what you're on about?"

The hand that had been lurking in Sherlock's pocket left that location and rested in his lap just out of view for a moment.

"To answer your earlier question, if I'm so fortunate...2046 will be our 30th wedding anniversary."

He removed a small velvet box from where he'd kept it caged in his hand and opened it, delicately for John to see.

"I... wasn't sure if you wanted me to get down on one knee. I've never proposed to anyone before. I'm not counting Janine. Neither the books nor the internet were any help. After that I-"

Sherlock kept talking but John's mind was briefly short-circuiting. He hadn't expected this. Not in a million years. It wasn't that he thought Sherlock was commitment phobic, but rather that he didn't place much value in institutions. After all, they had both agreed to essentially living out their lives together. Surely that's what retiring to Sussex meant. But, though he was helpful and supportive while he and Mary were prepping for the wedding, he didn't seem to give much credence to the actual ceremony.

Plus, when Mary died John assumed he would never marry again. It seemed an absurd idea. And one of the many reasons he kept his ring on was to keep everyone away. He didn't want to flirt. He didn't want to chat. He didn't want to be asked out on a date or slipped a number. He wanted to be left alone.

Left alone by everyone except Sherlock. Maybe he'd even used it to keep him at a distance. And not so long ago he had finally taken that ring off.

In one of his last meetings, they had talked about doubt. How, because they had taken more than a few wrong paths and made a few wrong choices now every path and every choice that they willing went after must be wrong. That's what addiction does and that's how recovery can skew so badly. You start to doubt everything. It was similar to something Eric had told him once.

"You're not a broken watch, John. You're not only right by default twice a day. So you screwed up. So you did more than screw up, so you completely fucked up. Now what? I'm not saying that analyzing a situation isn't smart. I'm not saying that doubt isn't a normal part of life or that weighing one thing against another isn't good. But you can't let it plague you. You can't freeze in place for fear of making a mistake. Only statues are blameless and they never get anywhere."

John searched his mind and his heart. He took a deep breath and he looked for anything within that told him this was a bad idea. Any nagging worry that might hold him back. Any reason not to take this step. Any reason to give any other answer except yes.

He searched and he came up empty-handed.

"John?" Apparently, Sherlock had stopped his earlier torrent of words but John hadn't noticed.

"Yeah, sorry about that." He said, having no idea how long he'd been sitting in silence. "You know, you haven't actually asked me yet."

"Sorry?"
"I said, you haven't actually asked me. You put the ring box on the table but you didn't, as they say, pop the question. You made sure to call me vain and attention seeking in your preamble but nothing more. And...now that you mention it, I think I would like you on one knee. If you don't mind." He said with a soft smile as he rose to his feet. "I think I'd like that very much."

Sherlock released a stuttering breath that he'd obviously been holding.

"I...yes, of course." He snatched the box off the table and stood up before sinking down on his right knee and opening the lid to reveal the ring. There were more than a few gasps and whispered "Oh my God's" as it became obvious what Sherlock was doing.

"John Hamish Watson. Your presence in my life was nothing I knew I wanted, everything I needed and something that I could not possibly deserve. I have discovered how I should like to spend the currency bestowed on me. Would you do me the distinct honour of being my husband?"

John found himself nodding before his partner was even finished with the question.

"Yes, yes I will marry you."

Sherlock broke into a wide smile and nearly hopped to his feet. John kept his eyes riveted to his face. His face. His perfect face.

"Give me your hand," Sherlock said quietly and John did. The ring as it was slipped on felt cool around his finger. Of course, it fit perfectly, Sherlock would have it no other way.

The gasps had now been replaced by the sound of mobiles snapping pictures and it only increased as Sherlock drew him in for a kiss. John smiled against his lips, kissing him back happily, deeply.

"I love you." he said when they broke apart briefly.

The sound of applause surprised him and not long after the clapping of some, not all, the patrons filled their ears.

Both of them flush with the excitement and attention of the moment took their seats again.

"I had no idea what you were doing." John said with a laugh. "You seemed so upset I thought something was wrong."

"I was nervous. I've never been that nervous before. Frightened yes, but not nervous."

"You were frightened too?"

"I thought you might say no. And before we go any further, to avoid confusion, I want to show you something. Here's the receipt."

"Sherlock, I don't need to know how much it costs." He protested.

"No, not for the price. I've crossed the price out. For the date."

John picked up the receipt to read the date.

"This date is from the week I went to rehab the second time." He said.

"Yes, it is. I didn't want you to think that any of this hinged on..."

"I don't understand. This is when I was...when I was truly losing myself. You bought the ring then.
You were going to ask *that* John to marry you?"

"No, I was going to ask *my* John to marry me. My constant John. I knew you were slipping and I knew you would regain your footing and we could finally start our life together. I never wavered, John. I never will."

"I was..." The burning in his eyes flared and he cleared his throat. "I was at my absolute worst and you still wanted me. I didn't even want me. You spent so much of these past nearly two years chasing after me I..."

"That isn't true. It's not that simple as you running and me chasing. But even if it were, the fact remains as true now as when I first visited you at The Location. I will always come for you, John Watson. I will always come for you."

Though Angelo, who was delighted beyond words, brought a candle to the table at John's request to make things more romantic they didn't end up staying long. Moments later their phones started sending notification after notification until it was just one long sustained noise. Those pictures that had been snapped minutes before had made their way to Twitter. And all their followers, it literally seemed as though it were every single one, was @-ing them.

That wouldn't have been quite so bad but they both knew the press was soon to follow. Except they would track them down in person.

They ordered quickly To-Go and hurried back to Baker Street and once inside John unceremoniously dropped the bags of food on the floor and yanked Sherlock in for a kiss.

"Something tells me you don't want to eat right now." Sherlock said before resuming the kiss.

"True, but that doesn't mean I'm not hungry. Bed. Now. I'll put the food in the fridge, put our mobiles on their chargers because they'll be dead by tomorrow if we don't and lock up out here. You, get naked. Everyone and everything else can wait until tomorrow."

"Feeling forceful tonight, are we?"

"That was an order, mister. On the double." He replied with a wink in his eye.

Sherlock gave a surprisingly convincing salute.

"Aye, Captain."

Somewhere around 8 and 1/2 minutes later they were both writhing in bed, John atop Sherlock, pinning his arms down as he nibbled on his bottom lip.

"So, I bought something for us." John whispered.

"What's that?"

"Well, and feel free to say no. It was just a lark really."

"I hate when you dilly-dally, John. Tell me."

"I thought you might like something hard and firm to stick up that tight arse of yours. So...I got us a toy." John reached across to the nightstand, opened the drawer and pulled out the item. "Just your average cock and balls dildo. Not too big."

Sherlock eyed the toy but not warily.
"Would it be alright if I declined? It will likely sound ghastly sentimental. But the first thing I want inside me is you."

"Of course, it's alright. Still holding out hope, eh?"

"Shut up and kiss me." He grinned and John obliged, snogging him properly before they both needed to break apart for a breath. "Though I wouldn't mind if you slid a few fingers up there."

"I do love when you make requests," John said. He reached over again and traded the dildo for lube. Changing his positioning so he was at Sherlock's side he slicked his digits and parted his legs. He knew how to play his body now. He'd never be a virtuoso on the violin like Sherlock was but he knew how to make the maestro himself make the loveliest sounds.

One finger, then two, then three. Sherlock's legs falling open wider, his hips making slow circles on the bed as he begged shamelessly for more. If he'd been able to manage the angle John would have gladly wrapped a palm around his fiance's cock but Sherlock was handling that himself, stroking his erection with each thrust.

"You're so beautiful, Sherlock. So lovely. Every inch of you, every single inch. I love you."

"I love you too." He said but it was more of a moan and a few moments later he was coming loudly dotting his chest with ejaculate John was all too happy to lick off. Once he'd lapped him clean they both drowsily retreated beneath the covers, John spooning his partner.

"So this whole marriage deal?" John began.

"Yes?"

"This means I'm fortunate enough to get to have you for the rest of my life? I wake up, you're there. I go to sleep, you're there."

"I'm afraid so. It means that legally you can't get rid of me."

John smiled and inhaled deeply at the nape of Sherlock's neck. His thoughts were lost in the happy prospect of forever

"I'll survive." He whispered against those dark curls.

"You'd better." Came the reply.

He was awakened not by what would soon catch both their attention, but instead by Sherlock's insistent voice.

"John?" A beat. "John??" Another beat. "Wake up, John."

"Wha-what is it, baby?" He'd asked still more than half asleep. He was spooned behind Sherlock so tightly that not even a sliver of sunlight could have made it between them.

"You're...um..." He cleared his throat. "It's...well, it's..."

John mistook Sherlock's hesitancy for alarm and his eyes sprang open.

"What is it?" He asked suddenly far more clear headed. "What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"No, no, I'm fine. We're both fine." He glanced over his shoulder at him. "You really don't know, do
you? I suppose that's not altogether unexpected still, it's bloody fascinating. It's like, you've forgotten it's there. Understandable really, I mean-

"Sherlock what are you-

But he didn't finish his sentence because at that moment Sherlock pressed his arse firmly back against him and John was pretty sure he lost the power of both speech and coherent thought.

"And the penny drops." Sherlock said and it wasn't until later that John recalled the breathless quality of his voice.

Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, John's first instinct was to deny its existence.

"It's morning wood."

"Is it? Nocturnal penile tumescence feels different than an erection caused by arousal. Does it feel like morning wood?"

"I...I can't remember." John faltered.

Sherlock took a deep breath and pressed into him again.

"Ohhh... John, try."

"Ok, um...ok..." He did try. He thought back to those mornings, nearly every morning if you took into account his entire lifespan, waking up with that how-do-you-do. Sometimes he could translate it into a morning wank. But sometimes, it just went away on its own. Come to think of it, he did remember it feeling different. It could be worked into something sexier but mostly it was just perfunctory. A dry run rather than the real show, the opening night. It was something to be dealt with, overcome or ignored.

Long story short, it didn’t feel a damn thing like this.

"Sherlock, I think this is the real deal."

Sherlock groaned and reached back to grasp at his hip.

"John..." He whispered.

"Oh God, Sherlock." He whispered in return.

"We're each speaking in hushed tones like it's a frightened rabbit and is likely to bounce away." Sherlock said after a moment.

They both broke into peals of laughter at both the ridiculousness and happiness of the situation. Warm, intimate laughter that only they shared.

Still chuckling softly John began to kiss Sherlock's bare shoulder. They were both still naked from earlier, neither having bothered to put on pyjamas.

"Sherlock?"

"Hmmmm?"

"Can I make love to you?"
"Oh yes, please." He replied with quiet excitement. He quickly turned, rolling his body over until he lay atop John.

It was no surprise to find that Sherlock was hard too but it was wonderful to finally, finally be experiencing it together.

They kissed and kissed and kissed, hungrily, sweetly, with groans and whispers and pleas and all the while John's erection held steady. He brought both hands down to Sherlock's arse, squeezing and kneading the cheeks enough to make his boyfriend squirm atop him.

"John..." he said and it was nearly a whine.

"Darling, where's the lube from earlier?"

"Drawer." Came the hurried reply and then Sherlock was reaching for it before John even had a chance. He passed it to him and John popped open the lid.

"Are you going to be good and patient while I get you ready?"

"Yes, John."

"I don't want to hurt you so we're going to take this slow."

"Yes, John. Anything you say, John."

"You must be horny, you've never said those words before." He teased as he took two slick fingers and began rubbing Sherlock's hole. The body atop John instantly grew heavier, relaxing into the sensation while simultaneously urging him forward.

"Inside me." He half commanded.

"You just promised to do anything I said a moment ago. Patience, Sherlock. Now kiss me."

The younger man obeyed and they settled again into soft, easy kisses as John worked first one, then two and finally three fingers inside him. He wasn't as tight as he'd been earlier in the evening but John could think of no reason not to be slow and purposeful. First, he didn't want to rush this moment. He'd waited so long. They both had and it deserved to be savoured. Second, Sherlock was too impetuous and too eager and when he inevitably tried to rush things, as John knew he would, he wanted to lessen the likelihood he'd injure himself. Not to mention it was so much fun, those desperate moans from both of them, glancing against Sherlock's prostate, feeling him buck and twist and frot against him. Feeling those tight muscles of his arse loosen just enough for what John had planned.

Of course, if he thought too much about that he got nervous too. It had after all been over 2 years, nearly 2 1/2 since he'd had sex.

What if were terrible now? What if he was all awkward and bad rhythm and aim and sloppy kisses and premature ejaculation.

Jesus, this could be a disaster.

"Whatever you're thinking, stop it. Stop it and let me ride you."

Sherlock's words snapped him out of it. Blunt as they were, they were right.

Just to be on the safe side he squeezed more lube into his palm as he adjusted their positions and
once he was sitting, back against the headboard, Sherlock hovering over him on his knees, he
crowned his cock coating it. Strangely, it was the first time he'd touched himself and it was el e  

c. He groaned hoarsely as he stroked himself, unashamedly closing his eyes and taking the moment
selfishly as his own.

"John...please..." Sherlock said from above him. "I'm ready."

"Ok, love, ok." He said opening his eyes and finding his way back to just the two of them. Holding
his cock upright he readied it for his partner. "Sink down, slow at first, very slow."

Sherlock nodded and positioned himself above him and John paid careful attention to the look of
concentration on his face. Helping him along, John rubbed just the tip of his cock against his hole,
one twice before penetrating him ever so slightly.

"You do the rest. Take your time. Take however much of me you want when you want. Just go
slow."

Sherlock nodded again and slowly resumed lowering himself down. He was silent and largely still at
first and John did his best not to overreact to the first wince of pain on his face. Still, it was terribly
disconcerting as from his vantage point, everything felt incredible.

"Mmmph." Sherlock voiced.

"Easy, love. Slow at first. It might take a bit of time."

Sherlock pitched forward just a bit, arching his back and tried again with John resting a gentle hand
on his hip but the look of focus on his face turned into a grimace of pain.

"Shit..."

"Sherlock?"

"Just...just a moment."

"Sherlock?"

"It hurts but I can do this." He said through gritted teeth.

It was just as John thought. Sherlock was pursuing this with typical Sherlock gusto all the while his
worst critic was chattering in his ear telling him he was doing it wrong; too awkwardly, too slowly
and just in general, badly. That worst critic was also, of course, Sherlock.

At this point, however, John was quite skilled at breaking up a negative train or trainwreck of
thought.

He ran his hands up and down Sherlock's back and leaning forward he kissed his chest before staring
up at him.

"Who are you trying to impress?" The action and the caresses were sufficient to stop him from his
into my eyes."

Sherlock gave him a little nod and did just that.

Even John was surprised at how calm he was being. His body, every single inch of him was crying
out for Sherlock. He was hard as a rock and he wanted desperately to be inside of him, as far inside of him as he could be. But first things first. And what mattered first and foremost was Sherlock's happiness, security, and comfort.

"Now, what we're going to do is change positions, ok? This was a bit ambitious on our parts anyway. We're going to go a bit more traditional. So, off you pop." He said giving his arse a light smack. "On your back for me."

The slowly worked their bodies into a new position. Sherlock, head resting on the pillow, curls fanned out looking every bit the pale gorgeous, young beauty that John saw him as. John grabbed a pillow and urging Sherlock to raise up slipped it under his arse. He was even more grateful now for gay sex guide he'd bought awhile back. Even though he hadn't touched it in months, it seemed he'd retained some rather important knowledge.

"Ok, we're going to backtrack, just a little. I need to get you back into the mood and out of your weird headspace."

"I'm not in a weird headspace." Sherlock huffed.

But John ignored him and instead lay flat on the bed between his legs and took him in his mouth. Sherlock hadn't gone soft but he was flagging a bit and John intended to turn that around. He acknowledged the ragged and lusty gasp from Sherlock by placing a hand on his chest and gently telegraphing that he wanted him to remain as he was. He took his time. Slow, deliberate movement of his lips and tongue until all that wonderful precum was flowing again. His own cock was pressed firmly against the bed and he wasn't above humping the mattress to relieve some of the pressure. His fingers returned to Sherlock's arsehole just to check, just to make sure he was still slick and open and ready. He could have stayed there, he would have been happy to make Sherlock come with his cock in his mouth and his finger in his arse. He would have been happy to fuck the mattress until he orgasmed hard against it. But they weren't there for that. Not this time.

Seductively he removed his mouth from Sherlock's erection and started to kiss his way back up his body ending at his lips.

"Hey, listen to me. Taking our time isn’t a bad thing. We have so many spirited, wicked, inappropriate fucks ahead of us. Likely in the backseat of a car, or outside up against a tree or in a church confessional..."

The tension still strung tightly in Sherlock finally broke as he laughed and John laughed along with him.

"But,“ John continued. “I don’t want to do that now. I want to take things slow because we can and we should. You have waited a very, very long time for this, Sherlock Holmes, and it should be special. And I have waited a very long time for you. And I know what you’re thinking, virginity is a social construct and neither of us are teenagers and it isn’t exactly my first time and we’ve certainly been intimate before and—"

“I wasn’t thinking anything as clumsy as that.” Sherlock interrupted indignantly.

“You weren’t?” John asked, bemused as ever.

“No. It was much simpler. I was just thinking I'm glad we're here.”

"Finally."

"No, not finally. I wasn't impatient. This isn't a relief. I'm just happy. For you, for me, for us. Just
happy, with no other cumbersome weighted to the word."

With Sherlock's pronouncement, the last bit of embarrassment John had at how long this had all taken faded away. It wasn't on his partner's mind at all, so he wouldn't allow it to haunt his.

Still...

"I...it's been a few years since I've done this. So, I feel I should warn you."

"Warnings are boring." He said with a grin. "Get on with it, John."

John laughed before eventually sobering as he and Sherlock shared another deep kiss.

Nudging Sherlock's legs apart and encouraging him to raise them slightly while bending his knees he settled himself between them.

Cock in hand, John pressed ever so gently against his entrance, the tip just barely inside him. Christ, it was perfect. Just that and that alone was perfect and he bit his bottom lip hard to steady himself.

Sherlock, on the other hand, tensed and John had an idea break through the dizzying fog of want and lust and need he was feeling.

"Ok, love." He said taking one of Sherlock’s hands. Balancing with his elbow he brought his partner's arm back so his palm rested on his arse cheek. “Now, the other one.” He said and Sherlock did as he was asked, both large hands on John’s bottom. “You’re in control. When you’re ready and want me to move a little further in, you just pull me closer to you, when you let go, I’ll stop. All up to you.”

“Good plan.” He replied.

“Now, breathe and kiss me.”

Sherlock inhaled and exhaled and they continued snogging. When John felt a little tug he pressed his hips forward ever so slightly stopping only when his lover's grip loosened nearly vanishing altogether. He was further inside him, that was certain but Sherlock had hissed in pain and they’d both stilled.

“Alright, darling?” John asked as he nuzzled his cheek. “We don’t have to, you know.”

He would stop in a heartbeat if Sherlock asked but by God, this felt good. He was tighter than anything he’d ever felt before. Anything he’d ever imagined. He was smooth and hot and snug and everything about this moment from the flush of Sherlock’s cheeks to his plump, swollen lips, to the feeling of his hard cock, leaking, leaking, leaking, sticky and salty and coppery and sweet pressed between them made John want to drive him, hips pistoning into the bed.

Sherlock didn’t answer his question but instead, those long fingers were pressing into the flesh of his arse again, tugging him forward and John went deeper still. Sherlock gave three little “Ah’s”. The first two were easily identified as frustrated, nervous and just slightly painful. But the third one, the one that occurred just as John brushed his prostate for the first time was a different sound altogether. It set off a cascade of clenches around John’s cock and he drew in a sharp breath that telegraphed nothing but pleasure.

The hand gripping John’s arse loosened once again but the beautiful creature before him, though silent had clearly entered a completely different realm than before. He was squirming beneath him but not with discomfort, it was needy, lusty, trying to figure out what position best suited him, what he wanted.
“God...John...” He said pulling at him again, slowly but surely until John was fully seated in him.

Sherlock stilled for a moment, steadying his breathing and John wondered what it felt like, to be penetrated, to be filled. But he couldn’t be jealous because his sensations were off the chart.

Sherlock again started to squirm beneath him, making the loveliest, sexiest sounds of impatience.

“John, I...please...-” He said tugging at his arse again, fingers digging pleasantly into John's flesh.

“Can’t go any deeper, I’m afraid, love.” He said before kissing him. “You ok?”

“Mmmm..yes, yes I’m ok. I just...”

“Well, I think what you’re wanting, is this.” He drew his hips back and thrust, for the first time inside him. It was slow and gentle, one smooth movement, out and in.

He'd thought Sherlock might close his eyes but instead, he kept them open and they grew wider as he let himself feel. Those beautiful eyes, two pools of ever-changing color always teetering on the edges of blue and gray and green. John had wanted to see those eyes at this particular moment when they were as connected and as one as they ever had been. Sherlock's hand moved up the landscape of John's back to rest on the nape of his neck, gently tugging, silently asking for a kiss which John gave.

Finally, no more bumbling or questioning or confusion because he knew how to do this.

He knew how this part worked.

The slow roll of the hips. The steady, rhythmic movement. Pressing forward when Sherlock arched his back. Applying just the right amount of pressure to keep him on the mattress where he wanted him. Setting a pace that would calm some of Sherlock's frenetic energy. And Sherlock matched him in kind, even in this they were together, partnered, in sync.

John slipped his tongue into his mouth as they kissed, the action biting off some of Sherlock's little whimpers of pleasure which were becoming all the more frequent. Everything was blissfully warm; their bodies under the blanket, Sherlock's delicious thighs, his tight, tight arse, his lips, his neck, every inch of skin that John touched or kissed. It was all warmth and beauty and bliss and love and perfection and at one point he had to pull his mouth away from his partner as he clenched around him. A shudder and moan tumbled from John's lips as he was thrown off what he figured had been metronome-perfect lovemaking.

He looked down at Sherlock breathlessly and found him grinning with glee. With a raise of his eyebrows, he repeated the action, clenching around him, again and again, until all John could do was shut his eyes, lower his head and try to breathe.

"Oh...God...Sherlock...I can...just let me do the work. Tell me when you want to come and I'll bring us there.”

John saw the curious combination of lust and interest, acquiescence and deferment spark and momentarily bloom in Sherlock’s eyes. He couldn’t help but feel more than a little proud at that. It was a poor sex addict who hadn’t picked up some skills. One of the ones he was most proud of was edging. As excited as he was to be here and now in this moment he was in his element and he wanted to give them both an experience that was neither rushed nor frantic.

"Tempting...mmmph...but no. Perfection isn't wanted here. I just want you.”
He was right of course, a fact he accepted much easier now than he might have months ago. Even detachment in the name of prolonging Sherlock's pleasure was still detachment. He nodded, kissed him again and decided to let his hips do what they wanted and left his mind out of the equation.

"God...yes, that's right," Sherlock whispered as John's pace increased.

"Fuck yes, it is."

"See? You can show off for me next time." Sherlock said with a low chuckle.

"Cheeky," John said laughing along with him.

He already knew he wasn't going to last as long as he wanted too. Sherlock was too beautiful, too swept away, too vocal ("John...John, my John...so, so good.") "I love your cock. I love your big cock." and the kicker, which was far more erotic than anything that preceded it; "I've wanted this since the day we met.") and too, too tight. Not that he was complaining. And speaking of tight, holy God, but it was more than he was expecting. It wasn't exactly that he was tighter than any woman he'd ever been with it was different than that. It was... a different kind of grip. A different kind of hold. Different muscles, different pressure, just different and wonderfully so. And hitting Sherlock's prostate produced much the same reaction as hitting a g-spot; that delightful twist and squirming of his body, his hips snapping upward and those sound, those unabashed, unashamed sounds of pleasure.

No, he wasn't going to last long at all. That warm pleasure was already building and circling, starting in his balls and then radiating outward. Joining that was the delicious ache which grew more and more pronounced with every thrust. Everything started to tingle and spark from his fingertips and toes to the base of his spine. Sweat was beading on his forehead and chest and his thighs rubbed slickly against Sherlock's. And Sherlock, a vision beneath his, a few stray curls pasted to his forehead by sweat, his cheeks flushed and pink, his breathing laboured, his lips pink, his neck painted with bright splotches where John had kissed and licked and nipped and bitten. They were moving in tandem now, working together, racing toward the same desperate finish.

He'd lost the narrative thread to sex somewhere along the way, he knew that now. He knew something was missing. God knows that was what they told him in rehab and counseling and groups. Something is missing and you need to get it back. But they can never tell you what it is because it's just uniquely you. Which is as promising as it is insanely frustrating. How did he know what he was searching for when they couldn't tell him and he couldn't remember.

And then...it happens. It was happening right here right now. That closeness, that connection, that singularity where everything outside of him and the other person he was with shut down and was shut out. And it wasn't about coming or getting off. It wasn't about adding another notch to the bedpost as the old saying went. It was about the experience. It was about hugging after a long absence and holding hands for the first time, the first scratchy kiss with a long forgotten beard, standing quietly as the sun set, it was about frosty air and snowflakes on eyelashes and goodbyes that lead to hello's. It was about winks at first meetings and the fire inside him it kindled. It was about flirting and friendship and fights and grief and loss and pain he thought he'd never recover from. It was about forgiveness and moving forward while confusing that with moving on. And it was about moving on too. Until it was finally about moving on together. It was about all of that, every moment good and bad and in-between leading to this and he'd found it in this ridiculous, beautiful man who he'd just agreed to marry. All of it, right here in his arms. All that was good in the world. In his world.

All that's best of dark and bright meet in his aspect and his eyes.
It was an odd time for an old bit of forgotten poetry from school days to come to mind. But there it was.

Finally, John crossed that line, the point of no return where nothing mattered but ecstasy and orgasm and relief. Sherlock was there, right there with him, holding his gaze, pleading for a dizzying climax.

He was ready. Sherlock was ready. They were ready. And he wanted nothing more than to finally give in.

"'Come, darling." He said recalling his lover's fantasy. "Come for me." he whispered in his ear.

From Sherlock, there was a cessation of breath, nothing, no sound at all until he released it in graduated, stuttered gasps and shudders as he came. A sticky and welcomed warmth spread between them; messy and lovely and sexy and wonderful, everything John wanted.

And then it was his turn, and he was thrusting erratically, face buried in Sherlock's neck, moaning against salty skin. Sherlock holding him, arms wrapped tightly around him needing him nearer, nearer until for John everything momentarily grayed out before bursting into color and world-tilting stars as he came.

They'd shared this moment before, of course, and he would never denigrate those times. But this was so different and dare he say it, so much better. There was always something to be said for losing yourself along with your partner but to do it while one of you was inside the other...it was everything he'd been missing and everything he couldn't describe.

Sherlock was still a delightful live wire, twitching underneath him every so often for a few moments afterward even as John kissed him soothingly.

"I love you." Sherlock said between kisses and breaths.

"I love you too. Thank you for waiting for me."

"Hush, no more of that."

John agreed and after slowly pulling out he tugged the pillow from underneath Sherlock so he could lie more comfortably.

"Have you the energy for a shower? We should clean up a bit before going back to sleep I think." Sherlock asked.

"Yeah, I can manage to drag my arse into the shower. We really will need to invest in some baby wipes or something, though. Because most times, I'm going to prefer lying here with you."

"I like this promise of many more times in the future."

"So do I."

They showered and toweled off and John was able to catch a glimpse of the time before they crawled, naked, back into bed. It was only a quarter past midnight. Still so early and so much had happened.

"Are we going to tell people tomorrow?" John asked sleepily as he spooned up behind him.

"About the sex?"

"It does ring a few bells. Yes, we can if you like."

"Well, maybe we can have just a day or two to sit on it. With just us knowing. Plus, I want you to have a ring too."

"Of course."

"How does that work with the ceremony by the way?"

"As I understand it we'll just remove them and when the words 'With this ring I thee wed' come up we'll replace them on one another's fingers."

"Makes sense. I liked your proposal a lot."

"I bungled it."

"I admit, I love how you managed to slip an insult or two in there in the process."

"I didn't insult you!"

"You said I was vain and I liked attention."

"Oh."

"But hey, I said yes, didn't I?"

"Yes, I suppose you did."

"I confess, I never had you pegged for the marrying type."

"I wasn't. Not until someone told me to do something while there was still a chance. Because that chance doesn't last forever. If I wasn't careful it could be gone before I knew it."

John was silent as he pulled the blankets up over both of them.

"Sounds like a smart guy." He said with a smile that hadn't left his face all evening.

"He does have his moments."

"I love you. Get some rest." John said kissing his shoulder and closing his eyes.

"I love you too."

The room settled into peaceful silence until John spoke again.

"Sherlock, I love our flat and I don't want to be anywhere else but here. So, I think to stay on Mrs. Hudson's good side we should get her some noise canceling headphones."

"Were we loud tonight do you think?"

"Not nearly as loud as I intend to get with you. And not nearly as loudly as I intend to make you come in the future."

Sherlock cleared his throat once and then again.

"Yes, well...yes, that sounds...-" John chuckled behind him, listening as he struggled to get the sentence out. "That's...I'll place an order first thing tomorrow."
"Fantastic idea."

"Best set they have."

"Brilliant."

"And I'll get them next day delivery. She shouldn't have to wait for them to arrive."

"Mmhmm, and neither should we."

"Goodnight, John."

"Goodnight, Sherlock."

"...John?"

"Yes, Sherlock?"

"Can we do that again in the morning?"

"If you give me about five more minutes we can do it again right now."

______________________________

**A/N:** I think I may have accidentally given a few of you that the last chapter I posted was *the last chapter*. LOL It wasn't. And neither is this.

One more left and perhaps a soft epilogue, we'll see.

You guys have been so lovely about this story for so long. My goodness, I started it in April and had no idea it would get this big. But it mostly just wrote itself, which is just about the nicest experience you could ask for.

Anyways, I hope you're all having a good 2018 so far.

See you soon...ish.

-Maribor

1/10/18
They'd tried several times to get out of bed.

They truly, truly had.

John had even made it once because engagement or no engagement he wanted to keep up his talks with Eric. But soon upon returning, the warmth and allure of Sherlock, still wrapped sleeping in their covers drew him back.

They'd had two more goes for a grand total of three. Three times and each time John was immensely pleased to see his cock was ready for action when duty called.

They'd napped in-between, lazily, happily, curling around one another with the familiarity they'd
cultivated. But eventually, Sherlock had outgrown a need for sleep long before John. Still though, what work he did do was from his mobile, in bed, naked alongside a drowsy and sated fiance.

This was everything. This was perfection. This was heaven. And there wasn't a part of him that wanted it disturbed.

"John, what is Johnlock?"

"Hmm?"

"Johnlock. It's trending on Twitter and there are a great many messages referencing it in our inbox."

"Oh...um..." John began but his sentence was interrupted by a loud yawn. Sherlock waited somewhat impatiently but he waited just the same. "That's what they call us, you know? Like, remember Brangelina?"

"I don't know what a Brangelina is."

John chuckled and yawned again.

"It's...do you know who Brad Pitt is?"

"If this is about a celebrity then I'm already getting bored." He said with an eye-roll.

John pulled the blanket over his head, not at all eager to let in the sunlight or the responsibilities of the day. "Well, it's just a combination of our names. Some of our overzealous fans started it ages ago."

"I don't want fans I want clients."

"Well, fans spread the word far and wide. They can bring in clients in a roundabout way."

"It's cumbersome," Sherlock said after a moment.

"What is?" His partner asked.

"Johnlock."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you. There's a formula to these things. One first name from one person and the last name from the other. Or something like that. I suppose there are exceptions."

"Why not the other way around? You know to avoid confusion with the philosopher."

"No one confuses us with the philosopher."

"Sherlson." He said after a moment.

"That is truly awful. Plus I think it would be LockOhn. That sounds kind of cool, I think."

"Dreadful all around." Sherlock proclaimed. "Fine, Johnlock it is."

"Wait, what is this about again?"

"Apparently we're trending on Twitter."

"Ok, good to know."
"Are you ever intending to get up?"

"Mmmm." He said noncommittally.

There was a shifting of weight next to him on the bed and he expected to have the blankets tugged from his body. Instead, Sherlock joined him beneath them but not for a kiss. By the time John caught sight of him, he had already slid halfway down the bed.

"What are you doing?" He asked raising his head to look at him.

"Waking you up," Sherlock replied with a combination of mischief and frustration as he took John's flaccid cock in his mouth.

"Fuck..." He swore as the warm, wet, talented mouth enveloped him and then he remembered. Like a lightning bolt out of the blue he remembered. This was his first blowjob from Sherlock.

Sure there's been the time he'd come and Sherlock had lapped at his belly before taking his soft cock in his mouth. But that was more...sensual cleanup than blowjob and it had only lasted moments.

This was the real deal.

The number of dreams, the number of waking fantasies he'd had about this, all of them engendered by those surprisingly plump lips and the way he so demurely dabbed at them to brush away crumbs or a bit of jam or a hint of cream.

God, but he wanted to watch him dab away a bit of cream.

John grabbed the edge of the blanket covering them both and threw it off.

"Fuck this, I need to see you." He growled. But once he did see him it was nearly too much. Those lips working up and down his shaft, the cheeks, hollowing out as they sucked him, the nearly closed eyelids and the way his curls moved as his head bobbed. Sensory overload. Delicious, decadent sensory overload. All of it, every angle, every motion, from the crown of Sherlock's head to the hand that rested on his thigh to the curve of his arse and how he could see the way it flexed sensuously as he humped the bed. "Yessssss, please suck my cock, Sherlock. Just like that, suck my hard cock."

Sherlock whimpered, clearly enjoying the command and he upped his efforts to obey. John propped up on his elbows but could only manage to watch for a few seconds before his head fell back with a groan.

He felt a slight rhythmic rocking to the bed and he knew his fiance was jerking himself off. He wished he could. He wished he could see everything. He wanted to see every possible view of this and experience it too.

It was all going to be over soon, too soon for his taste but that didn't mean he wasn't looking forward to coming in Sherlock's mouth. It was only polite to give him a bit of warning and John did so by reaching forward, tugging on those curls and voicing a soft; "Sweetheart, I'm..."

That was nearly too late but Sherlock seemed to have no intention of pulling away in any case. John came with a breathy groan and a wave of swears that crested as he did before he finally relaxed back again onto the soft mattress.

"You could give lessons on that, you could. Sherlock, that was marvelous." He said far more out of
breath than he imagined.

John raised his head and looked down just in time to see his partner demurely wipe at his lips.

"Thank you, John."

"Now, come here and fuck my mouth."

Sherlock's cheeks turned pink at the off-colour command but he also looked more aroused than ever.

"You didn't come yet," He said propping himself up on a pillow. "So, crawl over here on your knees and fuck my mouth until you do."

The second invitation seemed to have sunk in and Sherlock scrambled across the bed on his knees, hovering just over John's chest. The latter leaned forward and took the beautiful erection, hard, straight and wet with precum into his mouth. Sherlock gripped the backboard as John gripped his arse cheeks pulling him forward, encouraging him to take over the movements himself. Not long after he was doing as John had demanded, slowly but steadily thrusting in and out of his mouth until he came with a few grunts that made John's toes curls.

After a moment he pulled out and ducked his head so they could kiss, the taste of each other mingling on their tongues.

"Mission accomplished." John all but purred against his lips.

"Was there a mission? I seem to have forgotten."

"There was and congratulations. You did indeed wake me up."

Finally, they managed to tear themselves away from the bedroom and not long after they started their morning kitchen routine, Mrs. Hudson arrived.

"Boys? Are you decent?"

"As decent as we ever are, Mrs. Hudson. John is making breakfast so if you have a request best put it in now." Sherlock said from where he sat at the table.

Mrs. Hudson came in timidly, John noted, almost as though she expected them to be swinging naked from a trapeze.

"It's a bit late for breakfast, dear. Nearer to lunch now."

"Is it?" Sherlock asked innocently. "Did you happen to bring the newspaper up with you."

Mrs. Hudson ignored him and kept her eyes on John who gave her a smile.

"Morning, or should I say afternoon?" He greeted her.

"Is it true?" She asked excitedly.

"Is what true?" John replied.

"Let me see your hand! Your left hand!"

Oh. He thought with a smile and held up his newly ringed hand and she squealed like a schoolgirl.
"Boys, I am so happy for you!" She said giving John a hug before doing the same for Sherlock. "I knew it! I knew all along that this is where you were both heading. So when is the wedding?"

"Oh, well...we haven't decided yet. It's all very new."

"Mrs. Hudson, the paper?" Sherlock asked again. "Oh, and how did you know? You're not on Twitter now too, are you?"

"The paper." She handing it to him.

"Beg pardon?" John asked.

"It's the paper, you plums."

"It's...what?" John asked, taking the food off the burner to look over Sherlock's shoulder. There they were, big and bright as day if not a little blurry, on the front cover. Sherlock kneeling, John smiling. And smaller insets of them kissing and exiting the restaurant in a hurry.

"Well, we're out now, aren't we?" Sherlock said with a delightfully pleased smirk.

"Drama queen," John said affectionately as he raised his chin to kiss him.

"I'm not certain how we thought we could keep this quiet." Sherlock said.

"I think we were a little too wrapped up in the moment to be thinking clearly."

Though he did enjoy preening for awhile, eventually, the attention grew to be too much for Sherlock. Their phones were ringing off the hook, emails seemed to be flooding in nearly every few seconds and there was a gathering gaggle of reporters outside. So, for Sherlock, "eventually" meant around 3 o'clock that afternoon just as John was returning from his meeting. Well, not his meeting. He'd had to go to a different one that was a bit out of the way just to avoid the paparazzi. He had, in a way, willingly given up his anonymity, but it wasn't fair to anyone else in any group he might make use of.

"This is insufferable, John! Everyone and I do mean everyone has clogged up our inbox with well wishes. They're asking us where we're registered. They want to send gifts. How do we make this stop!"

"Calm down, sweetheart. I'm working on it."

"What do you mean?"

"I anticipated this and I've been working on a fix, started on my laptop on the bus."

"You have?" Sherlock asked curiously.

"Mmmhmm. Just give me a few minutes to deploy."

Within 10 minutes John, having settled in his chair, had posted a tweet confirming the news, a plea to not drown their inbox in good wishes and an alternate link to an on-site message board along with an FAQ that answered questions like "When is the wedding?" "Where is the wedding?" "Public or private?" etc. etc. He'd decided to choose from the most common ones he saw in their flood of messages to them both.

"Refresh your page, Sherlock and tell me what you think?"
First off, thank you all so very much for all the well wishes. Both Sherlock and I are very appreciative and overwhelmed by the response. In an effort to keep our inbox strictly for work we've created this FAQ page.

1) When is the wedding?

We haven't a chosen a date yet. We'll keep you posted.

2) Will it be open to the public?

Sorry, friends. But Sherlock and I are likely to keep this small and very private.

3) Who proposed to whom?

Sherlock proposed to me

4) Did the propose-ee say yes immediately?

Once I realized what was happening, yes I did!

5) Where can we send prezzies?

Please, no gifts! We think the gesture is lovely but we're both fine. However, we will be adding a charity to which you can donate in our name if you're so inclined.

6) Where will you honeymoon?

Not sure when or where yet. I'd like somewhere sunny and relaxing. I'm sure Sherlock would like a town full of intrigue and murder.

"I just want to add a couple more."

"I think that's more than sufficient, John."

"Just one or two I'm looking for repeats," He said and then paused. "Hmmm, they're asking us about taking each other's names. This is about the fifth one I've come across."

"I didn't think you'd be interested in that," Sherlock said looking up from his own computer. "It's rather old-fashioned."

"I suppose I don't care either way. I mean, I know we belong to each other and once it's legal our names won't matter that much. But it does make me think of Rosie."

"Rosie? How so?"

"Well, I want you to be her dad, as legally as you can. I'm not sure how exactly that will work or even if it can but I want her to share the same last name as you, so I want to share the same last name as well. She will be your daughter too."

"My daughter..." He said softly as if the idea were just occurring to him.
"That way if something happened to me you'd have that little extra claim."

"Nothing will happen to you," Sherlock said quickly.

"Well, you know, if it did. It's not as if I think Harry and Clara would put up a fuss, they love you. It's just...it would make me feel better. And you can't exactly change your name, you're a brand."

"Would you have any objection to being a Holmes then?"

"Not exactly, it's just, there was that rather well-known, old-timey porn star with that name. John Holmes. I think we have to go with a hyphen."

"Really?"

"Yes, and don't you go looking him up. ...Sherlock? Aaaand you're looking him up."

"Oh my God."

"Sherlock."

"13 inches." He said with clear distaste.

"Sherlock."

"That's not a penis that's a caber."

"Sherlock, focus!"

"Yes, sorry. Hyphen it is then. We're the Watson-Holmes."


"I could get used to that," John said with a grin. "So, what's on the agenda for today for the Willoghby case?"

"We have to interview the dressage horse groomer and the barrister's secretary, specifically to see if we can get our hands on his travel itinerary."

"I wouldn't mind taking a look at his browser history if we can get into his office." John added.

"Agreed. Anything else?"

"Yeah, we need eggs and a few other things from the shop. I assume I'll be handling that as well." John teased.

"You're so much better at it than I am."

"You're lucky you're handsome. Otherwise, you'd be an enormous pain in the arse. Alright, well, when you're near ready I'll leave first. There's a swarm of paparazzi outside, I may be able to get them to trail after me like ducklings."

"Are you sure?" He asked with a frown and John warmed at that protective nature.

"Yeah, I don't mind. Not now, not today." He said settling back in his chair and closed his laptop. "When can we get your ring?"
"I already ordered it. We can pick it up soon."

"Brilliant."

John paused for a bit, watching Sherlock's studious frown as he scanned email after email. The movement of his hand showed there were still plenty to delete but he didn't seem quite as irritated at the prospect as before.

"Sherlock-" He began.

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Of course I do, I know that tone."

"What then?"

"You were going to ask me to talk to my brother."

"Alright, so you did know what I was going to say."

He sighed.

"And my answer is no."

"When he first came to me, all those years ago it was out of concern for you. In fact, when we're alone he had rarely failed to ask me to look after you."

"And you do an admirable job. A job that you did, regardless of an order from my overbearing sibling."

"I wasn't ordered, I was requested. What he did...he was just trying to protect you."

Sherlock snapped his laptop closed and stared at him.

"Are you seriously arguing on behalf of the man who ordered you out of my life knowing you were suicidal?"

"Honestly, I don't know if I've ever had more respect for him."

"Come again?"

"He knew, without a shadow of a doubt that the price of this would be him losing you. If you found out he knew you'd never forgive him. He was willing to live with that if it meant you would live. He was willing to give you up. I am not saying you don't have a very unconventional relationship. I'm also not saying that I want to start having a weekly Sunday tea with him. Mycroft and I will never be friends. Not ever. But what I am saying...is that he loves you. All I'm asking is that you think it over. Will you think it over?"

Sherlock raised his chin and met John's eyes.

"Kiss me."

"What?"

"You heard me, kiss me."
John rose from his chair and walked over to his partners, putting first one knee and then the other on the outside of Sherlock's thighs. As they sunk into the cushion of the chair he leaned in close, just close enough to brush their lips against one another's.

"Will you consider it?" John whispered.

"Kiss. Me." He insisted.

John quirked a smile and obliged, kissing him slowly and softly.

"Alright...I'll consider it." He said finally, his tone hushed.

"Good boy."

"Oh...sorry, I didn't...I came to offer my congratulations and...I can just come back or wait..." Came a voice from behind them. John turned to see a very red faced Lestrade as he carefully got off Sherlock's lap.

"No need, Greg." John laughed. "We were just...negotiating."

"Yeah...yeah that's what it looked like." He said clearing his throat.

"You know, Greg might have a point. If we're going to be doing that we might want to start closing the door. You know, having clients knock. No need to scandalize." John said.

"I quite agree," Sherlock said with none of the argument that John had anticipated. "Now, Greg-"

"Yeah, is it true? What the papers say? Are you two...?"

John held up his hand to show off the ring again. He liked showing it off.

"It's true. The Mail actually got something right, for once."

"Well done, both of you!" Greg said before pulling John into a heartfelt embrace.

"Cheers, Greg." John said with a laugh as he hugged him in return.

"Now you." He said gesturing to Sherlock who had returned to work on his laptop.

"I'm busy at the moment. Hug John again. He'll pass it along to me later."

Good naturedly Greg hugged him again and John clapped him on the back.

"Molly was very happy for you both."

"Oh, come from Molly's have you?" John asked as he headed to the kitchen to make their friend a cuppa.

"No, actually, she's at mine."

"Things are progressing well then?"

"I think so. And I feel good. I've quit smoking again, divorce finally came through. I think I'm ready to move on."

Both men turned to look at Sherlock almost instinctively. Our of habit, John braced for a brutally cutting remark, something sure to undermine Greg's hopeful mood. Finally feeling the eyes upon him
Sherlock glanced up.

"What?"

"Nothing to say?" Lestrade asked.

"Not particularly."

"Not going to quote me the statistics on smokers who relapse or my habit of giving my wife, sorry ex-wife, chance after chance. No comment on Molly's choices in men."

"If I was going to say anything it would seem as though you've said it all for me. But...I wasn't. I have known you for many years now and have never, in my recollection, seen you quite so content. I am happy for you. And I commend you for your choice. Molly is brilliant, clever, loyal and lovely. And she always deserved better than she aspired to romantically. I am glad that she finally found it."

Whatever Greg had expected him to say, that wasn't it and John watched in amusement as he could think of nothing to voice in return. Realizing that no reply was forthcoming Sherlock again returned to his laptop.

"Two sugars, right?" John asked handing the tea to their mate.

"Um...yeah, yes, two. Thank you."

"John, you'd best get going if you intend to meet me later at the stables."

John glanced at the time and realized he was correct.

"Right, I'd better dash." After grabbing his wallet and keys he went to Sherlock's chair and tilting up his chin gave him a kiss. "See you later."

"Yes, later." Sherlock replied with a smile.

Greg shook his head, clearly still not quite able to believe what he was seeing.

"I don't know when I've ever seen you in a better mood when there wasn't a body around."

"Of course I'm in a good mood. John agreed to marry me and we've been having sex all morning."

John heard this as he was descending the stairs and he imagined they heard him laugh in reply.

April 27th, 2017

202 Days Clean

There were fewer questions this time around.

With Mary, well, to people on the outside he hadn't known her that long. They wished him congratulations but there was always a hesitancy in their eyes, something just on the tip of their tongues.

But not now.
Everyone who knew him greeted him with a hearty welcome, congratulations, a bracing hug, a kiss on the cheek and a "Well done!". It felt nice. He didn't need his decision to spend the rest of his life with Sherlock validated. But still...to be embraced like this, it felt nice.

They'd told Hanah as soon as they could, both of them thrilled with the idea that they didn't just have the wedding news to spring on her but the fact that it was back to working again.

She was delighted for them but more than that she was proud.

"I'd like you to do something for me, John. Your journal that you kept in rehab? Is it something you could go and grab right now?"

"Umm, yeah, I know where it is. Hang on." He replied and after a few minutes returned with the notebook in hand.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like you to read your first entry aloud."

"I...ok." he said opening the book and glancing down at the first pages. He winced slightly as he began to read silently to himself. "Some of this is a bit...rough."

"I think we can all take it." She said with a smile. "Please."

John cleared his throat and began.

"I hate this. I should have used the gun."

Sherlock made a small pained noise at his side but that was all, and he continued.

"I've only been here a short while and I already think it's a bad idea. I don't belong here. Not just because it's too posh, to clean, too good for the likes of me. But because it's filled with people who actually want to get better. I don't want to get better. I don't want to be here. Not in this room, this country, this planet. Everything I had that mattered, I made sure to lose. My wife, my daughter, my friends, my...Sherlock. The best mate I have ever had and I made sure to push him so far away from me that he'll never come back. That ache I felt when he "died", it's back again. Except now it's compounded with all the losses that have happened since then. I am struggling under a weight that is too heavy for me to bear. I wish I could get drunk right now. I wish I could drink and drink and drink until I drowned. Rehab is meant to return you to the life that you left behind. I don't want to go back there. I don't want to go back to anywhere. I want no past and no future. I just want to cease to be. I should have used the gun."

The room was silent for a solid 30 seconds. John didn't want to meet either of their eyes. Those feelings weren't as distant as he might have thought. He recalled holding the pen and he recalled the shaky hand he used to write those letters. he called the despair and the depression and the sickness and the craving and the numbness and the brokenness that he felt in those moments. he recalled being swamped by it, carried away, soaking, struggling, sinking in it. He recalled this part of him that somewhere was still there, negative and raw and howling to be soothed. The second go at rehab had helped and so did Hanah and meetings and Eric, and writing and Sherlock. They all helped but it never really went fully away. That's why he was recovering. That's why he would always be recovering.

"I hope you both understand why I wanted you to read that and remember. Not to put a damper on the day, but to shine a big, bright light on it. The man who wrote that couldn't imagine and wouldn't dare to dream about what you've made for yourself here and now. You worked very hard to get here John. You crawled on hands and knees until you could walk upright. And sometimes you stumbled
or you outright fell but you made it. You're still making it. Remember that. Remember that neither of
you is afraid of hard work. That can sometimes be forgotten as the years go on, especially if you
stumble or fall again. Remember and don't let it be forgotten. Either of you."

John understood. And solemnly he promised her that they wouldn't. No matter what lay ahead, they
wouldn't forget.

Of course, they invited her to the wedding, appropriate or not. And appropriate or not, she accepted.

John had also spoken to Sholto. It wasn't the first time since he'd walked out on him at the restaurant
on that fateful night. He'd made sure to write to him a lengthy and heartfelt apology in rehab and
followed that up with a call when he'd gotten home. Slowly they worked on mending what John had
torn apart and he wanted nothing more than for his old mate to be there with him on that day as his
best man. Happily, old Duck agreed.

Harry, of course, wanted to take them both out to dinner to celebrate. Wanting to avoid the publicity
and the idea of dealing with a fussy toddler in a posh place he was able to talk she and Clara down to
a nice dinner at home.

It got postponed more than a few times but eventually their caseload allowed for an evening at Baker
Street and a nice dinner ordered in.

Harry cooed over their rings while Clara asked more of the practical; when, where, how questions.
Sherlock, to his credit, was genial and pleasant. About halfway through, John realized he wasn't just
putting on a pleasant face. He was actually enjoying discussing it.

He watched him a little closer as he talked, watched his lips form words, watched the skin around his
eyes crinkle as he smiled and he did smile quite a bit.

John took his free hand and squeezed it. That was all. Just squeezed it and then held it in his own.

There wasn't much to explain to Rosie. For her, life wouldn't really change much. Daddy and Dada
would remain the same. When she was older they could show her pictures and tell her about the day
they became a family in a way that no one could tear apart.

For now, she was content to just sit in John's lap clutching Bumbly before she grew bored of that and
wanted to sit with Sherlock.

It was a good night, a quiet night, a night he couldn't have imagined 5 years ago. And now, a night
he couldn't not imagine having over and over again.

His father hadn't wanted this for them, he and Harry. In some ways, taking their personalities into
account he had purposefully pitted them against one another. Their own attitudes and bad habits and
addictions and personal miseries and secrets had done the rest.

And now here they sat, clean, sober, partnered and hopeful.

This felt like a success. This felt like a victory. And if there was one thing rehab had taught him, it
was to claim his victories when they appeared.

May 7th 2017

212 days clean
"Right, if you're just going to sit there staring at the package then I'll open it." Sherlock said with exasperation.

The unassuming delivery from his publisher had arrived earlier and he was doing everything he could not to open it. Even though he desperately wanted to open it.

"No, no I'll do it." He said reaching to grab it before Sherlock could.

"Why are you hesitating?"
"Because once I open it, it'll be real."

"It's already real. I've never understood that. Summoning something into existence makes it real. Ignoring it does not negate its state of reality."

"Once I open this, in my mind and to the world I'm officially a published author. I've produced something and I'll have to produce something again. This isn't just a one and done. I've committed. I've signed on, re-upped."

"Yes, you have." Sherlock smiled. "And isn't it glorious?"
"Yeah, it kinda is." John replied with a breathy laugh.

"All that wonderful pressure and adrenaline and fear and expectation."

"Sherlock...you're not helping."

"Yes, I am. Because you love it, Doctor. You always have. And if this is your new drug then I am all for it. So, open it up and take your first hit."

John laughed, shook his head and tore into the package. A moment later he was holding "The Case of the Agony Column" in his hands. By Dr. John H. Watson.

"The first volume of the highly anticipated Sherlock Holmes mystery series. Good God, I have to write a series now."

"Yes, we'll have to keep you up to the neck in cases, won't we?"

"I suppose we will."

"Will you be receiving other copies?"

"I imagine so."

"Good. May I have that one?"

"You... you want it?"

"Yes, please. I think it's only right that I get the first copy."

"Yeah, I think that is right. Well, here, it's yours. Take it in good health."

"Sign it first."

John laughed again and shook his head before reaching for a pen.
"Ok."

He raised the pen above the blank white of the inside cover and after a moment began to write.

To my dearest Sherlock.

You give me everything. You give me what I call a restless joy. Not restless because it's unsatisfying. But because it's so fulfilling, so all-encompassing, so absolutely everything, that while I'm enjoying the moment, it makes me eager and impatient for all that's to come for us.

I love you. Without you, none of this would have been possible. With you, everything is.

Always, your John.

He handed it to Sherlock who immediately read it, his face softening as he did so.

"Well," he began before clearing his throat. "I don't envy you."

"Why is that?"

"Because your wedding vows are going to have to top that. And that won't be easy."

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May 23rd 2017

228 days clean

Sherlock was a quick study and while John didn't think he had any bad angles he certainly knew how to accentuate his best. He knew how to pose in bed, how to hold his body, how to make John drop absolutely everything with just a raise of an eyebrow. He was energetic in bed, young, vibrant, excited and exciting. And best of all, considering his upbringing and some of the Victorianism's he knew could come part and parcel with the upper classes, he had no shame about their sex life, no hang-ups or holdouts about what could and couldn't be done in bed. Which wasn't to say they'd brought in the trapeze and bondage gear just yet. But, there was a freedom and an easy sensuality John hadn't expected to find beneath Sherlock's lovely surface. He knew and had known for a long time ago, that Sherlock wasn't cold, as so many had so long suspected. He knew he was, loving, sexy, slinky. He knew he burned steady and bright. He knew he was warm. But he had been a little pleasantly surprised to find out he was hot.

They'd started out this particular evening with John gleefully giving his partner a blowjob with just a little extra kick. This time when he'd asked Sherlock if he minded using the toy he'd been met with an eager shake of the head. Once he'd been properly lubed and stretched John had slipped it inside. By God, it was a nice angle and he watched with rapt attention as Sherlock squirmed, legs opening wider, hard cock leaking onto his abdomen as he was fucked with the dildo. John was already painfully hard himself but the pressure of the mattress against him helped and he took his time, watching lazily and the muscles in Sherlock's thighs flexed, his hands reaching to spread his cheeks further apart, the toy smoothly and wetly sliding in and out. But John wanted more and to give Sherlock more and without warning, he took him in his mouth.

"JOHN!"
John smiled around the hard member in his mouth and started to fuck him harder until he came in his mouth, flowing salty fresh and biting over his tongue clenching down hard on the toy. He sucked him happily, greedily until his movements and cries subsided. John removed his mouth from his cock leaving it wet and still half-hard before he slowly pulled out the toy and smiling as Sherlock whimpered in response.

Tossing the dildo aside John moved his body atop Sherlock's, the latter throwing an arm around him weakly.

"You didn't come, sweetheart. I can still feel you...hard against my thigh. Let me suck you off."

"Quiet, Sherlock," he said softly before kissing him. "I'm going to come. I'm just going to do it inside you. As soon as you're ready."

His partner's eyes widened with pleasure and excitement and soon they were back to snogging, rolling about on the bed, moaning quietly and not so quietly. Sometimes, even after all this time, the months and months of impotence and intimacy John was still surprised by how well they got on in bed. They were nothing short of well matched in stamina, appetite, size and need for one another. Sherlock was just as fond of a delightful afternoon quickie as he was of a slow, late-night session where they took their sweet time. John had been in bed with people where they were both woefully incompatible, where everything was off, but this was just the opposite, this was perfect.

"John, now...inside me, please," Sherlock asked looking up at him from the bed. A few careful maneuvers and one glorious thrust and John was hissing with pleasure at how gloriously snug the fit was.

Let others balk about missionary, but right now, at least at this stage in their relationship, it was a favourite. And it wasn't as though they hadn't experimented. They had tried quite a few, finding themselves delightfully adventurous and bendy when the situation called. Still though, there was nothing quite like being able to make direct eye contact in the middle of lovemaking. No craning of the neck, no glances back over a shoulder, no impediment, nothing at all between them.

It was glorious and Sherlock in bed was sometimes his most Sherlock. Pouty, entitled, demanding, sweet, lovely and loving and complete with expected expectations.

"No...John, I don't want to come. Not just yet... Can you...?"

"Can I...?" John asked, out of breath and mid-thrust.

"Slow down?"

Though once of twice he had bristled at the Three Continents nickname he had, as a sexual world traveler, developed some finesse that came only with a great deal of experience. One of the things he'd learned and gotten extraordinarily good at was slowing things down.

The more he knew a lover's body the more he could tell when they were just about to come. He'd always ask them first. It seemed a little cruel to do it without permission. It was just that Sherlock had beat him to it.

"Want me to slow down?" He'd ask. "If I slow down, when you do come, it'll be so much better."

"Slow it down, yes, John." They'd say and he would. He'd slow his smooth movements and those hard thrusts would become gentle. And like a carousel, he'd guide them and those sensations would go up and down and up and down John keeping them hovering just at that plateau, relief just out of reach.
He could hold on, blimey, could he hold on and hold back and it was usually them who begged, pleaded.

"Please, John..."

"Please, baby."

"Oh God, John, let me!"

And he'd reply to each of them; "Come, love." "Come for me, baby." "Come for Daddy."

But he'd always brought it up. They'd never initially asked.

Sherlock was the first.

"Of course I can slow it down."

He kissed and nibbled at Sherlock's neck, switching from the frenetic hip movements to the measured, slow rolling.

"Oh God, yes, like that." Sherlock replied.

"I know, darling. I know what you want."

There was nothing quite like watching Sherlock's face, reactive, expressive, sweet, patient, relaxed. He brow knitting slightly when John drew back and relaxing when he thrust forward again.

"Sherlock, you're beautiful. You're just lovely...the loveliest thing I've ever seen." He'd taken to rambling and babbling nothings and everythings in Sherlock's ear at times like this. Unable to contain himself, unable to hold back. No part of him could resist it especially as it seemed to give his partner so much pleasure. He'd preen and stretch and gasp ever so softly. If it wasn't a praise kink it was close.

"John...slow...please...just like that."

"Does my posh, pretty boy like that?" He whispered against his shoulder. "You like me inside you?"

"Yes, John..."

"You're gorgeous. Every part of you, every inch. And you're so tight. God, you're so tight around my cock."

Sherlock arched up, bringing their chests together. He was all warmth. All warm flesh and long legs and caresses and the slightest sheen of sweat and muscles working flexing clenching, yielding.

They continued on like that, John bringing him to the peak then letting them both back down again until Sherlock had had enough or too much depending on how one looked at it.

"Now, John, please make me come."

As he obliged, pistoning hips driving them toward orgasm he watched Sherlock redden, watched the colour spread from his clavicle, up his neck, across his cheeks. He watched his eyes shut and his mouth open. He watched his teeth grit for a moment before he groaned, lips and teeth parting as keened, rocked and clenched around John. As he'd promised him it appeared hard and delicious and so worth the wait. And the only thing better than watching Sherlock come was coming himself and enjoying the little tremors and jolts that still wracked his body as he thrust into him.
"Does that have a name? What we just did." Sherlock asked as John rested heavily atop him, for the moment unable and unwilling to move.

"Mmhmm.." He said licking the salty sweat from his neck while Sherlock shivered. "It's called orgasm denial or just edging."

"I like edging. We need to do it again."

"We will, love."

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**May 29th 2017**

**234 days clean**

He'd been so wrong. So delightfully wrong.

John had thought Sherlock might object to any sort of formal wedding.

He didn't.

He thought he might insist it not be in a church.

He didn't.

He thought he might frown and grouse at the idea of a reception.

He didn't.

He thought it might be pulling teeth to talk him into the idea of spending some time away on a honeymoon.

He didn't and in fact, asked if he might plan it.

"I'd be a pretty shite posh boy if I didn't know how to throw a party or plan a holiday, wouldn't I?"

John had been wrong and each discovery of just how wrong he'd been made him happier and happier.

Eventually, they had to get down to the brass tacks of it all and between cases and revising his second book and finalizing things with the house, they did.

Sometimes it was quick because the conversation ended up being postponed.

"Blue, then?"

"What kind of blue, John? Do you have any idea just how many kinds of blue there are?"

"I'll get back to you."

Sometimes it was quick because the answer was simple.

"French pleat or Cardinal hat?"

"Pardon?" John asked.
"For the napkins, John. French pleat or Cardinal hat." Sherlock said gesturing to the examples he created in what John felt was the blink of an eye.

"Oh ummm...French pleat, by a mile."

"Excellent."

Sometimes, it wasn't quick at all.

"Have you spoken to your parents?"

"I have."

"Did you invite them?"

"They assumed they were invited and are mulling it over."

"But you didn't specifically ask them."

"No...I wasn't certain how you'd feel about it. Or how I'd feel."

Their time spent at Sherlock's parents home had been a bit of a road to Damascus moment for Sherlock. He had been blind but now he saw and he didn't like it. And he didn't like what he saw one bit. He hadn't been to see them again. He hadn't taken their calls. He had stopped visiting Eurus.

John knew he'd tried to broach the subject with Mycroft on more than one occasion to varying degrees of success. One thing that was clear was that Sherlock's rebellion and withdrawal frightened his elder brother. John had once heard him chastise him that "I told you, you're never to go there without me. Never alone."

Before he met them it was the sort of warning John might have expected one to receive regarding Eurus, not to harmless pensioners.

He didn't think that now.

But he also didn't like the idea of Sherlock being so torn. Or worse yet, thinking that he had to stay away from them solely because of him. John wanted him to keep a healthy distance from his parents, that was true. But because Sherlock himself wanted it. Not for fear of upsetting his partner.

"Well, they hate me. Even though they invited us for Christmas, I know they still hate me. And they can't approve of the match, I imagine."

Sherlock, never one to sugarcoat, especially when he was emotionally distracted didn't contradict him.

"No, they're not pleased, they don't like you and they don't approve. I think they want the privilege of saying no to an invitation. Should I give it to them?"

"Do you want them there? Sherlock, all I want is for you to be happy. If having them there would settle your soul in a way then they should be there. My main concern is that they don't hurt you anymore. And I promise you, if I have anything to say about it, and I do, they won't. So, I mean this, in all sincerity, if you want your mum and dad there, invite them. There will be no scowls or evil eyes or even cold shoulders from me. I will be on my absolute best behavior."

Sherlock had paused and pressed his lips together tightly.
"I don't want them there."

"Alright, there's your answer. Whether you want to let them have their pride in refusing is up to you. I'll support anything you do. One hundred percent."

"Thank you, John."

Sometimes it should have been quick but one of them was being too stubborn.

"Has he...?"

"Sherlock, no, your brother is not going to call me."

Seeming intent on proving him wrong, two days later, Mycroft did indeed phone John's mobile and they spoke for what felt like hours but in reality was only a few minutes.

"Alright, so he called me." John had told him later that evening.

"My brother?" Sherlock had asked with obvious interest.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said he hasn't spoken to you in months. He said he calls you and you don't respond-"

"That isn't true I told him once that he and I had nothing to say to one another. So, you see, we have communicated."

"He's worried about you."

"I'm fine, as I believe you can vouch for and I hope you told him as much. I wouldn't have been fine if you were dead. A conclusion he clumsily helped to almost facilitate."

"Sherlock, look, there are two sets of people in this world that matter to me. People who care about Rosie and want to keep her safe. And people who care about you and want to do the same. He falls into the latter category. He cares about you and he loves you. And for the record, he knew this would likely result in losing you. He would make me live up to my word, you would find out why because you always find out and you would never forgive him. But he had the comfort of knowing you'd be safe."

"Idiotic. I am a barely recovering heroin addict. Is there anything in my past that would even remotely signal I would do well with your loss? With such a devastating trauma? If he truly believed that he's slipping."

"Talk to him, Sherlock. For me. Talk to him."

"I don't understand how through all of this he has earned you as an ally."

"Not an ally. Just...someone who knows what it's like to lose you. Someone for whom it's painful to watch it happen."

"I do not mean that much to Mycroft." Sherlock said with a shake of his head.

"Speaking as an older brother, of course, you fucking do. But, I'll leave it for now, ok?"
"Ok."

Sometimes it went especially well because it no longer involved him.

Late one evening, so late, in fact, it was technically morning John rolled over and found the other side of the bed empty. He patted the blank space and found that it was still warm so Sherlock hadn't left long ago. When he concentrated he could hear the floorboard squeaking rhythmically as though someone was walking back and forth, pacing.

Finally, they stopped and John chose that moment to creep out of bed. He only stopped in his track when he heard Sherlock's voice.

"Yes..., it's me. No, nothing is wrong. Yes, I'm aware that it's late. I said I was aware. If I wanted the exact time I would have called the BT Speaking Clock. Before we go any further you should know something. I am calling you because of John. Because he is a far more generous, decent and forgiving person that I am. I'm calling because he believes what you did you did for my sake. And if he bears you no ill will...how can I? But let me make myself clear, you owe this phone call and any continuation of our relationship to him and only him. Am I quite understood? Good. I'm well and yourself? Good. Yes, thank you. I'll pass on your congratulations to him as well. Yes, I'm happy. I'm very happy..."

That was all of the conversation John needed to hear and he silently crept back to bed

He drifted back to sleep happy and content, imagining himself and Sherlock as old men, still having their verbal sparring matches, still disagreeing, still being utterly flummoxed by each other but in the end, always in the end, coming together, mending, fixing, healing.

Yes, this could work.

June 6th 2017

242 days clean

The rented Luton was parked out front and he, Sherlock and Rosie had been in and out of it for the past few hours. Sherlock was as casual as Sherlock got, sporting trainers, John didn't know he even owned, a Barts t-shirt and a pair of jeans he found absurdly distracting. John was dressed much the same and they both had rings of sweat around their collars. Rosie was in the highest of spirits, mostly getting in the way or playing with a few neighborhood children. She'd wanted to come along and Harry had dropped her off early in the morning. Both she and Clara had offered to help with this final clean-up but John had wanted to do it mostly alone. Despite the sweating, it wasn't actually that big of a job. There were more small things than large. Most of the furniture they were leaving behind. It was barely used. The house itself was barely used. And despite the fact that it was extra work to keep an eagle-eye on her, John wanted Rosie along. This was her home too even if she didn't know it. Or it had once been, and she deserved a chance to say goodbye.

They'd started at around 8 in the morning and by noon they were nearly done. As Sherlock was securing everything in the back John took Rosie by the hand and walked her room by room, snapping her picture on his phone in each one. She loved having her picture taken and he liked the idea of his last memories of this home being of her smiling face, little hands on hips in the empty rooms.
Kneeling down he took his wedding picture out of his pocket and called her over. She'd gotten distracted by a ladybug on the windowsill in what used to be their old bedroom but she hurried to his side.

"Do you know who this is?" He asked, showing her the photograph.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, that's right. Daddy. That's me. Do you know who that is?" Rosie tilted her head and looked at him with confusion. "That's your mummy. You didn't know her but she loved you very much and for awhile we lived here, you and me and mummy and we were happy. It's ok if you don't understand now, my love. But I'm never going to let you forget her. We'll talk more about it later. But for now, can you hold this so I can take a picture?"

She nodded and John positioned her in the center of the room, holding the picture.

He snapped the shot and then came to kneel just beside her, placing an arm around her little shoulders.

"Ok, one of you and me." He said extending his arm and taking one final picture. "That's my good girl. I love you so much."

He gave her a hug, closing his eyes and drawing her little body against his. His daughter. His little girl.

"Everything alright?" Sherlock's voice intoned from the doorway.

"Dada!" She called and turned away from John before rushing toward him as though she hadn't seen him all day.

Sherlock bent over to sweep her off her feet.

"Yeah, everything is fine. Just giving everything a final once over."

With Rosie in his arms, Sherlock approached and slid his hand down his back and then around John's waist.

"You sure you're alright?" He asked as he kissed his temple.

"I'm good, darling. I'm good."

"Well, if you're ready to go, I think we're all done."

"Yeah, I'd just like to have a minute or so?"

"Of course, Rosie and I will be waiting."

They shared a kiss and after Sherlock and their daughter left John continued from room to room finally arriving in the lounge...where he found “Mary” standing by the window.

“Hey.” He said.

She turned and smiled at him.

“Hey yourself. You ok?”
“Yeah, I really think I am. You?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Congratulations, by the way.”

“Oh, yeah, cheers. I’m...happy.”

"I know you are. I can tell. I always I could. Oh, and may I say, cheers to you on the sex."

"Yes, right! It's back. After a long hiatus, my cock made a triumphant return.” He joked.

"You made him wear those jeans." She said gesturing outside.

"He volunteered."

"You made him wear them, fibber, to shamelessly show off his arse."

"Yes, alright I made him wear them and I don't feel the least bit bad about it. He looks delicious in them."

They chuckled together, like before, like always.

"You coming with?" He asked her.

“Nah, I’m going to stay here. Well, not literally here, being a figment of your imagination and all, but metaphorically. You don’t need me like this anymore. You haven’t for awhile. That’s a good thing.”

He walked up alongside her and slipped a hand around her waist.

“I’m going to miss you, Mary.”

“You’ve got loads of memories. Good ones and not so good ones. I hope the latter will fade a little. Plus, you’ve got Rosie and she’ll remind you of me now and then.”

He looked at her, really looked at her for the last time.

“Sometimes I’m not sure how not-real you are.”


Sherlock and Rosie came into view in the front yard and John knew they could look in and see him through the now curtainless window.

‘Mary” smiled at waved at their daughter.

Their daughter grinned and waved back.

He looked at “Mary” in surprise.

“Oh don’t be daft, John. There’s no such thing as ghosts. She’s waving at you.” She replied but there was something mischievous in “Mary’s” gaze that gave him pause. Still, he waved at Rosie who grinned and raised both hands in his direction. Had she always been looking in his direction?

"Yeah...yeah, of course. Well, I’d best be going.” He said turning to face her.

“Me too.” She replied.

“I love you, Mary. And I meant what I said back then when I proposed. Meeting you was the best
thing that could have possibly happened.”

“And I meant it when I said I agree. I love you, John. Be kind to yourself and them.” She said nodding in the direction of his family.

He nodded, sniffled and brought her into an embrace that in no way logically made sense. Still, it was real and warm and true. They held each other for a moment before pulled back and pressed their foreheads together, closing his eyes.

"I will make sure our daughter knows who you are. She will know her mum. Thank you, Mary. For then, for now, for always. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, my dear John."

And then he stepped away.

And then he let her go.

Quickly John Watson turned on his heel and left without a glance back.

No more glancing back.

June 24th 2017

260 days clean

On Holiday! Please Call Again!

Hello everyone! As you may or may not know, or care, Sherlock and I have tied the knot. We're off on our honeymoon for three weeks. But when we return we'll be back in business and ready to take cases again.

Until then do try not to commit any interesting crimes?

-John Watson-Holmes

John is correct that we're on our sex holiday but I will be occasionally checking our inbox so don't hesitate to send something interesting.

-SWH

Correction. He will not be checking the inbox on our honeymoon. He thought he was going to be but has since been set straight on that issue.

-John Watson-Holmes

John is correct. I have been roundly set straight.

-SWH
The wedding had been lovely.

John had wanted a big-do because this was a celebration and any underplaying just didn't fit with his current mood.

They'd gone through all the paperwork, their wills, their banking, they'd give notice at the local register's office, they'd booked a church and venue for the reception, chosen the cake, finalized the menu with Angelo and bought a dress for Rosie. They'd decided against asking for gifts via a wedding registry as they both felt they had all they needed. Instead, they opted for a charitable registry with guests donating to an organization that assisted people who were unable to afford the high cost of rehab, an LGBTQ health and social services centre and job and training centre for people just released from jail.

Sherlock was still insisting on keeping the actual plans for the honeymoon a surprise which suited John just fine.

Speaking of surprised, Mycroft had taken it upon himself to put the engagement announcement in the Times.

"All traditional like." As John said when he read it.

They'd both decided to forgo a stag-do and instead opted for a dinner with Greg and Mike. Afterward, the two of them went home and had a delightful go in Sherlock's chair, the detective riding John as though his life depended on it.

As Sherlock had fought to regain his breath and any desire to move John had taken the opportunity to kiss and lick the droplets of sweat from his chest.

"We're getting married tomorrow." He'd said. "To think, the next time we do this we'll be husband and husband."

Sherlock had drawn back to look at his in skeptical surprise.

"If you think we're not going to have sex again before the ceremony you are woefully mistaken."

John had laughed at that and found himself laughing again the next afternoon as they hastily worked to re-dress in their suits and ties following an impromptu romp where he'd bent his soon-to-be husband over the bathroom sink, trousers around their ankles, his fingers in Sherlock's hair tugging just enough so that he could watch himself in the vanity mirror. "Watch how beautiful you look when I'm inside you, Sherlock. Watch your face when you come."

So, as usual, Sherlock had been correct.

When they were finally stood there, before family and friends, Mycroft included (though Sherlock's parents had ultimately declined) John found himself very glad that he'd decided to write out his vows. He'd initially thought maybe he could wing it, speak extemporaneously. Afterall he never ran out of things to say when it came to Sherlock. But there, in front of him, he nearly lost his voice and he had certainly lost his train of thought. His throat was tight and he kept trying to clear it to no avail. Worse were the tears, sharp and vision blurring, that clouded his sight every time he blinked and attempted to read from the notecards in his hand. He stumbled through, not nearly as smooth as he had planned or dreamed. He spoke about how they had met, how they had lost one another, how they'd stumbled and fallen and hefted each other up, dragged one another, carried one another when necessary. He spoke about love in all it's unquantifiable mysteries and how he didn't understand how he had been so lucky to find it yet again. He spoke about grace and warmth and home and family.
and all that he hoped for in the future and all that he had already been given by this wonderful man in
the now. When he'd finished he'd cleared his throat again and wondered if it had sounded as rubbish
and lacking and paltry to everyone else's ears as it currently sounded echoing in his own. He glanced
up and met Sherlock's eyes, bright, calm, happy and glinting with just a sheen of tears. Without
looking he heard a few sniffles from the audience. And that was good, but Sherlock's response was
the only one that mattered.

John had then quickly shoved his notes in his pocket and was just about to reach for his handkerchief
to dab at his eyes when Sherlock impulsively leaned forward and kissed him.

"Mr. Holmes, we haven't gotten to that part just yet." The vicar chided but it didn't put Sherlock off
in the least. He finished the kiss and straightened up before speaking.

"Apologies. I couldn't help myself. As for my vows...I swore to myself I would never enter what I
have termed the suffocating chains of domesticity." Sherlock had begun causing John to erupt with a
bark of laughter. With a shake of his head, he'd softly said under his breath. "Christ, I love you."

"I know you do." Sherlock had replied in just as sotto a voice before continuing louder. "As I was
saying, the idea of being bound to one person, irrevocably until I breathed my last, knotting my day
to day life, my needs, my profession, my very existence to another person was an idea so wholly
unappealing to me that it was not even in my realm of possibility.

John Watson changed my mind.

Truth be told, I never worried myself very much with regard to fending off a gaggle of ladies or
gentlemen because I believed my manner and personality so off-putting as to stem the tide of any
expected marriage hints or proposals. Or even dates for that matter.

John Watson changed my mind.

I believed that I had chosen for myself and created the perfect life. One of solitude, reflection,
contemplation, dark stimulation via crime solving, intellectual pursuits, serenity, and adventure.

John and Rosie Watson changed my mind."

It was at that point that John had been forced to again retrieve the handkerchief and paw at his eyes,
a movement that became quite frequent during Sherlock's vows.

When they ended John exhaled a shuddering breath and Sherlock did much the same. They'd had
their share of high emotional moments over the past few years, this felt like a peak and a good one.

They exchanged rings and kissed and were presented for the first time as Mr. and Mr. Watson-
Holmes.

At the reception, they dined and danced and danced and danced and despite the fact that neither of
them touched a drop of alcohol John felt dizzy, practically drunk with happiness.

Whatever Sherlock had planned they weren't leaving until the next day. John had assumed they were
staying at home until...well, until whatever was to happen tomorrow. But as they bid goodbye to
their guests Sherlock told him they were staying For their wedding night they were staying at an inn.
It was a lovely and impractical choice and John found himself smiling for the duration of the car ride.
That was another surprise, Sherlock had rented them a car.

"There should be a reservation under Holmes-Watson." John said still smiling as they checked in.
"Yes, sir, just one moment." The clerk said as he typed in their information in the computer. "Sorry, gentlemen, we seem to only have one room. Must have gotten confused with the booking. My apologies. I'll see what else is available. Or maybe we can fit another single in there."

"No, one room is what we requested. This is my husband." John said putting a hand on the small of Sherlock's back. He glanced at his face and saw shy pride there. He knew what he was thinking. How many times had they been mistaken for this? How many times had John emphatically, frustratedly, obnoxiously denied it? No anymore. He was happy to claim him and happy to be claimed.

"Oh...oh..." Replied the clerk. "Well, then, here's your key."

They carried their bags up to the room, a charming suite Sherlock had obviously chosen with care. John flopped onto the bed and grabbing hold of his hand tugged Sherlock in after him wanting to start up the kissing they'd taken time for at every stoplight from the reception to the inn.

"How do you feel, husband?" John asked as they snogged.

"Spectacular. And you?"

"Wonderful. Bloody wonderful."

"Isn't it traditional for newlyweds to make love on their wedding night?"

"It can be." John replied. "But a lot of times they're too tired. It is, however, traditional for them to go at it like rabbits for weeks afterward, though."

"I may fall under the category of being too tired," Sherlock said softly.

"Alright, darling," John said with a smile. "Truth be told, I'm a bit knackered myself. Wouldn't want to disappoint you if I'm not up to par."

"You never disappoint me."

"Can I get a hint about tomorrow? What are we doing?"

"Mmmm...no."

John laughed as he lazily kicked his shoes off.

"Nothing to even let me know what to expect?"

"That would spoil the fun. You're like a child on Christmas so I'll tell you the same thing I would tell Rosie. The faster you go to sleep the faster morning will arrive."

John was just tired enough to believe him.

The next day, after John checked in for an online AA meeting, they set out fairly early. They were heading south, that was all John knew until they made their first stop and it became clear why Sherlock had insisted they both wear trainers today and shorts. He'd never seen Sherlock in shorts before and on the way there he kept glancing at his legs while he drove.
But once they'd parked the car he found something nearly as beautiful as his husband to catch his eye.

"Is this-

"Surrey Hills - Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. That's the full name apparently. We had such a lovely time when I came to visit you at The Location, walking about, hiking a little and such. I thought you might enjoy doing something like that again."

John turned to look at him, shaking his head slightly in disbelief. It was all so sentimental and romantic and kind.

Sherlock was still surprising him.

"I think this idea is brilliant. What say we capture some loveliness?"

There was so much to do. Far more than they could ever tackle in one day. Eventually, they settled on Wotton Trail, a 5KM walk that took them through some of the most picturesque areas John had ever seen. They traveled along wooded paths, over small arcing bridges that covered brooks and ponds, through bright, natural gardens and in the shadows of dark, arching forest. There was no tour guide and no pace they needed to set. They took their time, stopping when they wanted. Sometimes talking, sometimes not, holding hands, snapping photos and just appreciating everything around them and each other.

Out of a clearing, almost like magic rose De Vere Wotton House.

"It's a 17th century estate, 13 acres. It was the seat of the Evelyn family. It's been converted into a hotel now where we have lunch reservations."

"We do?" John asked. He'd wanted to take a peek inside but hadn't imagined it would be Sherlock's style.

"We do, indeed."

Given their walk and their breakfast which only consisted of coffee John was famished and eager to sample whatever fare the Wotton House had to offer. He wasn't disappointed as they dined on Truffle Orzi Croquette for Starters, Duck with Pearl Barley, Mushroom and Peach for a Main and John opted for chips on the side which they shared. It was a glorious meal in a lovely location. They took a brief tour, John snapping pictures the whole time. Sherlock was indulgent, lovely and serene, everything John worried he might not be able to manage with such a long holiday hanging over his head. But damned if he didn't seem to be enjoying himself.

John ordered a desert to-go and after taking a lovely looping path that lead them back to their destination and finding themselves back in the car again he opened the container and took a bite of Muscovado cake.

"Bloody hell, that's incredible. Open your mouth. Try some."

Sherlock turned on the engine and opened his mouth to sample the cake. He closed his lips, unnecessarily around John's fingers and pulled back sucking them lightly as they left his mouth.

"Cheeky." John grinned.

"Very sweet." He said putting the car in gear. "The cakes not bad either."
Some 20 minutes after they were on the road again John stopped wondering or worrying where they were going. It was a bright not-too-warm day and with the windows rolled down he closed his eyes for a while and smiled, holding Sherlock's free hand.

"Tired?" Sherlock asked him.

"Mmm, no, not really. Just content. Relaxed and content and absolutely madly in love with you." He replied.

Sherlock chuckled.

"Well, then we have that in common."

"Hey, you know I can drive. I'm not sure how much of the trip is left but I'm more than happy to split the time."

"Unnecessary, John. There's only a little more than an hour left. Besides, I enjoy driving anywhere that isn't London."

When he'd said he wasn't tired unbeknownst to him John had been lying. He didn't realize this until he awakened as Sherlock pulled into the gravel drive of a house.

"Oh, darling, I'm so sorry. I dozed off there." he said apologetically as Sherlock put the car in park.

He was met with a smile and a kiss.

"No need to apologize, John. It was a pleasant drive and you needed the rest. I know you've been anxious over the past few weeks."

He was right of course. But it was so different from his usual anxiety. This wasn't crippling. It was more like that excitable hum children felt on Christmas Eve. And now, that the moment had come and gone and they were husband and husband, his body, it seemed, had demanded a break.

"So, where are we?" He asked looking at the house before them. They appeared to be the only car in the drive. In fact, they appeared to be the only people for quite a stretch. The house sat on a grassy plot of land with no other similar places in sight. "Not another inn, it seems. Did you rent this place?"

"Something like that." He replied getting out of the car.

John exited the vehicle as well and they both headed to the boot to remove their luggage. It was a mild day but they were so far south that the breeze coming off the channel practically made it jumper weather. It was a welcomed and unexpected change from the slightly warmer walk earlier and John stretched and craned his head up toward the sky.

As they approached he took in the structure before him. It was a red bricked, Victorian home, semi-detached with great ropes of lush, green ivy climbing the walls. Clearly, it wasn't stylized to look older but rather legitimately had a history.

"Awlchester cottage, built in the 1880's." Sherlock said as though reading his thoughts. Behind them was a five bard gate that had lead to the driveway. The gravel crunched beneath their feet as they approached the front door. The steps leading the way were wide and smooth sandstone ending at a blonde, wooden door. His husband set one of their suitcases down and fished in his pocket momentarily for a key. As they waited, a breeze brought the scent of flowers and herbs to his nose and he inhaled deeply.
Marjoram, Dahlias, Lavender, and Borage, Crocus, Goldenrod and Wisteria, Hyssop, Thyme, Mint, Parsley, they were all there. In fact, when he looked around, the house was lined with rows of bright color and verdant growth. Everything growing thick and healthy and just this side of wild.

"Come on." Sherlock said having opened the door, waiting for John to step inside.

"Let's see, points of interest. Four bedrooms, one Master. Two baths, one family the other private ensuite just off the master. It's been thoroughly redone in recent years so everything is quite modern, new plumbing, electrics, etc. Ground floor, first floor. Private drive, as you could see. There's a terrace you can access in the master. There's also a detached guest house or I suppose it could serve as an office as well. A garage fit for two cars. And an apiary in the garden out back."

While it was clear Sherlock didn't have a future before him as an estate agent his description of where they were staying intrigued John none the less.

"Let's put the bags down and worry about unpacking later. For now, just give me a tour."

"Happily." Sherlock replied and they set off.

The house was more magical than his husband had described but to be fair it would have been hard to put such a glorious place into words. They walked from room to room, hand-in-hand just looking with Sherlock occasionally adding bits of information here and there. The master bedroom was expansive and beautiful and they made that their last destination setting their suitcases by the bed.

"I don't know what to say, Sherlock. This is beautiful. In fact, I'm fairly sure it's the most beautiful house I have ever seen."

"I'm glad you think so."

"I do. Is this an AirBnB? Because, if so, what a find." John paused before continuing. "Then again..."

"Then again what?"

"Well, while it could be a rental property I noticed there aren't any pictures on the wall. Nothing stuck to the refrigerator, you know, directions, phone numbers, that sort of thing. No grooves in the floor, nothing well worn, not even an indentation in the sofa. But on the other hand, it doesn't feel sterile. I mean, there are things in here that were chosen with love and care, you can tell. This stuff isn't all new. Someone didn't just pop down to Harrod's and decide to have all this shipped in. I don't know...it's like it belonged to someone and they loved it and lived here but...it was a long time ago."

Sherlock was gazing at him with a curious look of interest and pride.

"Very well done, John. I mean, quite spot on. You have come a long way. Truly, leaps and bounds. When we first met-"

"Yes, love, I get it." John teased. "I was a dunce."

"It was kindly meant and really you are spot on. So, you really like it."

"Of course I do. Who wouldn't? The people who live here are very lucky."

"What if I told you it was ours? Your and mine?"

John's mouth dropped open in surprise. He couldn't quite believe what he was hearing and he
assumed he must have heard wrong as he sat down on the king-sized bed.

"You're serious?"

"Yes, it belonged to my Uncle Rudy whom you've heard me speak about. I used to come here to visit him as a child. Mycroft never really saw my fascination with the place but he did like the silence. That all changed when Eurus...well, after that Awlchester was off limits. I'm not sure what Uncle Rudy and Mycroft did but I suspect she lived here for a time. As my memories of Eurus faded and the years stretched on I was again invited up to spend time here. I felt such...trepidation, such danger. I couldn't place it or name it. I still saw Uncle Rudy but I never returned here. I believe that hurt him very badly. When he died, he left it to me which put me in quite a spot. I didn't want it but didn't want to get rid of it. So it sat, languishing. That is until the aftermath with Eurus and Mary. And when I began thinking about that currency conveyed. I made a trip up here and found the place in disarray but not quite the rack and ruin I expected. I made plans for the renovation, changing things out, modernizing, sprucing them up but leaving it mostly as I remembered it being when I was small. Slowly the bad memories started to fade and the warm ones returned. I remembered this as the home I had once loved, more so than my own. Even when I wouldn't come within four towns of this place I knew I could, should the mood ever hit me, retire here in Sussex, in the South Downs. And then, once I met you, I hoped I wouldn't have to do it alone. I allowed myself to entertain pleasant, platonic memories of the two of us, grumpy old pensioners needing no one else in the world, living happily as the silent stars go by. But when we became a couple, well, the fantasy became richer, fuller. And, well...here we are. Would this be someplace you could see yourself retiring to?"

"Could I...?" John began before dragging him into a kiss. "Sherlock, it's going to take literally everything I've got to not suggest we move here now."

"Not yet, still so much work to do. So many cases to solve. So much fun left." He grinned. "I'm glad you like it. It's in both our names and I've already added it to the will so it will be Rosie's when the time comes."

"This is a wonderful wedding surprise. Now, which one of us is the romantic?"

"Still you. But perhaps now I'm learning."

The rest of the day was relaxing and low key. John was interested in learning more about the cottage and Sherlock's Uncle Rudy and the grounds in general. They chatted about that and half a dozen other things as they relaxed about the house, their house. Later, before the sunset, his new husband showed him the vegetable garden out back as well as the apiary and they just walked in the gloaming and then the moonlight with the chalky white cliffside of the Downs gleaming in the distance, the Milky Way splashed and streaked overhead.

Sherlock had someone air out the house and stock the refrigerator and the larder prior to their arrival and John offered to make dinner while his partner showered. Once he was done, they traded places and when they were both scrubbed and dry they ate a light dinner outside enjoying the starlight.

Out of habit, John started the washing up in the kitchen only to be distracted by Sherlock pressing against him from behind. Teeth lightly grazed his neck and he tilted his head, offering Sherlock more skin to explore.

"The dishes will never get done this way." He murmured.

"Bugger the dishes. Come to bed."
"Yes?"

"Yes."

To John, it seemed that one moment they were right next to the sink and the next he was above Sherlock in the expanse of the large, soft bed. They were both naked, warm, excited and hard and Sherlock seemed eager to make up for what they had missed out on the previous night. He seemed to be feeling particularly bitey tonight and John groaned as teeth sank gently but firmly into his skin.

"Oh, God...Sherlock..."

"How do you want me tonight, John?"

"My choice?"

"Your choice."

"Then I choose inside me."

He felt Sherlock pull back in surprise, his head pressing into the pillow as he peered up to get a better look.

"Really?"

"Really. I've waited, you've waited. No more waiting. I want to." John rolled off his partner and onto his back with a grin. "Remember when you visited me in rehab? The morning after we'd had our first real kiss. I was bent over brushing my teeth, you were behind me and you sort of canted your hips toward my arse. It was just a single little bump but I was so...thrilled. I knew what you wanted. I knew what I wanted you to do. So, please, do it now."

The look in Sherlock's eyes had gone from surprise to want to hunger and John was excited at all the possibilities that promised. That said, he was sure he'd have to relax him to get him going because as eager as he knew Sherlock was he was all but frozen in place. His lips were plump and John lovingly ran a finger over his bottom one. Those lips, God, he was a slave to those lips. So sensual, sometimes too sensual, especially when they were discussing a murder.

He liked to watch him eat and talk, he liked to watch his mouth, that beautiful, carnal mouth wrapped around his cock. He liked how he kissed; sometimes tentative and shy, sometimes rough and commanding, other times possessive and deep, deep, so fucking deep that his toes curled. His toes curled like people talked about in books or movies.

He loved him as a whole, this wonderful, complicated, strange, loving man who was now all his.

And he loved him in parts. He loved that one unruly curl on his head that never went where it was supposed to go. He loved the freckles that dotted his body. He loved his hip bones and his big, silly feet. He loved his smile and his low, deep laugh and his smooth aristocratic hands that deceptively made it seem like he'd never done a days work. He loved his mind and his dry wit and his refusal to play Cluedo by the rules. He loved his intellect and his earlobes and the little soft sigh he made in the mornings after their first kiss of the day. The sigh that said. "Oh, I'm so glad we're this. Finally, finally this."

He loved him.

With a gentle tug, he pulled his husband atop him, lips gravitating toward his neck. He started with soft kisses before shifting into light, teeth grazing nips and finally moved to sucking on the skin
there, tongue occasionally darting out to lick and soothe.

He listened as Sherlock’s breathing quickened and he slowly started to reanimate. His hands found their way to John's body, cheek, neck, chest and lower.

"I love the way you taste." Sherlock whispered, his right hand shooting out toward the nightstand for the lube.

"I love how you taste as well." John replied, yanking him in for a kiss and sliding their tongues against one another's.

Sensate had been so focused, hyper-focused and he liked that, loved it really. It was this wonderful compartmentalization of eroticism. Slowly disassembling Sherlock piece by piece.

But at times like this he liked the blur; the rush of limbs, the crush of lips, the grasping, feeling, touching, kneading, holding, tugging. It all sped by and John was infinitely aware of each and every second. Sherlock was gentle but not tentative as he worked one, two, three fingers inside of him, taking breaks only to let him breathe and to lavish attention on his cock. John spent most of this time keening and trying desperately to stay still.

He could tell by the way Sherlock was stalling that he was nervous. Which is not to say his stalling wasn't delightful and erotic but it was stalling just the same.

"Sherlock, please...I'm ready. I'm so ready for you."

Sherlock glanced up, he'd been kissing John's thigh while working those long fingers in and out. He looked skeptical, hesitant but ready all the same.

"Ok, John." He said, leaving the space he'd made himself in the V of John's legs and coming to rest atop him. "If I go to fast or too hard or if anything hurts, tell me and I will stop immediately."

"I know that. I trust you. So you trust me and trust yourself."

"Alright."

In what was clearly a manifestation of his over-preparedness Sherlock opened the bottle of lube and drizzled a healthy amount into his hand and began to coat his cock with it. John already considered himself well lubed from the fingering session but he kept quiet and only gazed at his husband with a soft smile. He near ready to jump out of his skin with want, but he knew his partner needed to be handled delicately.

"Stop it." Sherlock said, not looking up.

"What?" John said, the smile growing to an amused grin.

"It's not too much. Plus, we have plenty it's not like we'll run out."

"If there's too much you might not feel me as well."

"Trust me, I'll feel you." He said putting the bottle back in its place. "I just don't want to hurt you. But this is good. I'm ready now."

"Good, because I'm about to lose my mind if you don't get started. Now, kiss me, damn it."

Sherlock did what was not so much asked as demanded, gracing John with a kiss full of longing and hunger and need. The hand which had been cupping John's cheek vanished, disappearing from view.
In the next moment, he felt something that seemed impossibly big pressing against his hole. Too big. Far too big. Much, much too big. He’d taken Sherlock in his hands and his mouth many times, he knew what he was dealing with, delicious and just slightly above average, but not enormous, not this.

He must have shrunk away just a bit because Sherlock immediately responded.

"The book, your book, said sensation can be distorted the first time around making something seem insurmountable when it's not. I assure you, John, this will work."

It was a very Sherlock sentence but he’d said it in such an agonized and breathy rush. John knew that feeling and knew he was barely holding on and that sort of raw desire made him want to continue.

"I know, I know, Don't stop."

It was a rather obvious thought that occurred to him as Sherlock edged forward gently, stretching that tight ring; fingers are far different than a cock. They felt good and they were filling and they helped him get accustomed to the notion of stretching. But fingers were malleable in a way that a hard, hard cock was not. They demanded less, needed less space, less situating, and far fewer of John's pain receptors.

He pressed his lips together, feeling his teeth digging slightly into the skin.

It hurt. There was no way around it. No love conquers all element to the basic fact that he needed to physically adjust to allow Sherlock inside him.

The only person perhaps more nervous than John was Sherlock. He was silent and nearly still, far too focused to, well...focus on kissing. It was alright, this detachment, John knew it wasn't personal. This was a lot for him. A huge step and possibly a bridge he thought he'd never cross. Not to mention the fact John didn't know if he could kiss just this second. Not just yet. Soon, he imagined, but not yet.

"Ok?" Sherlock asked.

"Mnhm." John replied. "You."

"Yes. Very ok." He responded and John noticed his eyes were heavily lidded. Ah, yes of course. He remembered how this felt when the tables were turned and as bad as he'd felt for the pain he'd been inadvertently causing their first time, by God it had felt good.

The head seemed as though it was the worst of it and now he tilted his hips to allow more of Sherlock's shaft.

A single sound escaped Sherlock's lips just as John closed his eyes. Not so much a whimper but an impatient, longing sigh. John raised his hand, blindly and finding the back of Sherlock's head pulled him down. It was starting to feel better, so, so much better and he needed and wanted him close now.

A little more.

Just a bit.

Just a few...more...just...a...

"Oh...God...yes..." Someone said. John honestly wasn't sure which one of them it was.
The look on Sherlock's face and the sound that rose from deep in his throat when he was fully inside him was sinful. Parted lips, a frown of concentration, eyes closed until a second later when with a sharp intake of breath, they burst open, bright and green and gray and blue and locked to his. And then he smiled, a relaxed, a peaceful sort of smile usually only reserved for their most silent moments, intimate moments like this, a surprising amount of which had nothing to do with sex. Just, peace and happiness that they alone shared.

John smiled in return.

The first thrust had Sherlock withdrawing nearly to the tip then pressing forward. At the same time it caused John to grab both a handful of bedsheets as well as Sherlock's arse.

"God...Sherlock..."

"Loud as you want, John. No one for miles...ohhhh...ohh...let me hear you. Please."

Invitation received and accepted John started groaning as loud as he'd always wanted to, calling Sherlock's name hoarsely, reverently.

"So tight...I had no idea you'd...ohh John...be so tight."

John raised his head to kiss him. Not to stop the words, he liked the words, but he needed to feel the warmth and the slickness of his mouth. Sherlock was full and hard inside him and by God, it felt incredible to be filled, to be receiving to let him be the one to set the plan and the pace. He liked giving up this control.

The bed was soft, sturdy but squeaky in a comical way so that which each thrust it whined beneath them.

It was good, incredibly good and as John arched back, exposing his neck, Sherlock's mouth was there lapping at the straining muscles. He was glancing his prostate again and again and again and John found himself panting, trying to catch his breath and just keep up.

Just to give as good as he was getting and also to see the result John quickly clenched his muscles around him. The response was immediate as Sherlock let out a small gasp and dropped his head, his curls momentarily moving with the effort.

"Do that again." He requested and John did as he was asked. This time the response was low and guttural and without necessarily upping the force Sherlock did up his pace.

"Sherlock, yes...you feel so good. Please, please just like that."

"Just like that." His husband repeated.

If there was one hard fought lesson he'd learned it was that there was on occasion a time to draw things out, to prolong that exquisite final moment of pleasure. And other times, it was best to just live in the now and let it happen. Tonight, all he wanted was the latter.

"I'm close..." He whispered.

Their eyes met and Sherlock nodded.

"Me too."

They had both been taking full advantage of having the freedom to raise their voices and John
wondered if they'd be able to tamp down the abandon once they returned home. But for now, he didn't care.

"A little harder, please, harder." He moaned in a voice that was just this side of unfamiliar. The sounds he made being penetrated were just slightly different than when he was the one doing the penetrating. Sherlock too sounded different, his voice, his grunts deeper, the baritone of his voice that was somehow just a little lost when John was between his thighs was there in full force now.

That incredible and familiar warm feeling in the pit of his stomach was growing with each stroke of Sherlock's cock. His own cock was already leaking wildly onto his belly, hard and firmly and pressed between them. The friction felt good, the way Sherlock was moving his body felt good, the soft mattress and the smooth sheets and the breeze from the open window felt good. Everything around him and the warmth growing within him and the steady, lovely gaze from Sherlock's coolish-greenish-blue eyes felt better than good. And finally, he was there, right there even sooner than he expected.

John reached a shaky hand, and yes, he noticed his hand was shaky, behind him to grab hold of the headboard for purchase but Sherlock stopped him.

"No, put your hands on me. Keep them on me."

Heart hammering John did as he was told, widening his legs and raising his knees higher only to press them both on either side of his partner. One hand on his back the other in his hair, John moaned with each thrust his voice rising higher, fingers tightening around Sherlock's curls.

Their lips were smashed together in a kiss as he started to come, a groan bridging into a whimper as the feeling pulled him under. His rhythmic clenching around Sherlock's cock eventually dragged the other man along with him, his repetition of John's name mostly muffled and swallowed by their mouths.

Coming together, sharing that moment as one was never overrated and both John's hands returned to Sherlock's arse encouraging him with each erratic yet ebbing thrust.

As their movements slowed then stopped the only sound in the room was their panting breaths. Sherlock had dropped his head to John's shoulder in the final throes and now raised it to smile tentatively at him.

John was happy to heap upon him much, much deserved praise and he began in an instant.

"You were magnificent."

"Yes?"

"Yes, brilliant. Kiss me, beautiful."

Sherlock did just that, kissing him as he caressed his cheek with delicate fingers.

"I love you." He said.

"I love you."

The disentanglement and cleanup were brief and in no time at all, both of them were sipping from bottles of water whose origins John couldn't determine. Sherlock must have seen to it that they were in reach and at the ready. In any case, he was sated, warm, comfortable and happy with his head resting against Sherlock's chest, his steady heartbeat sounding in his ear.
"The first time I slept with you, just slept at your side at The Location, I knew I'd never know another nights peace unless I made my permanent place there."

"I recall feeling very similar. I even slept in your bed my first night back at Baker Street." Sherlock confessed.

"You did?"

"I did."

"I left a note for the maid not to change the sheets," John said with only a slightly embarrassed chuckle. "I wanted to be able to smell you for a little longer."

"Did it work?"

"Not as good as this. What about you?"

"It helped a little. But nothing has ever been as good as this."

It took the sound of the vibrating mobile to alert John to the fact that he'd fallen asleep. Sherlock too had drifted off and he reached a long arm toward the nightstand and blearily reached for his mobile.

"Who is it?" John asked.

Grabbing his phone Sherlock looked at the screen.

"It's Lestrade." He said and John had to give him credit, it was almost apologetic.

"Fine, remember our deal."

"I remember."

They had worked out a deal not long before the wedding. It was ridiculous to assume Sherlock could stay away from stimulation of the criminal sort for 3 entire weeks. So, the rule was, he couldn't seek anything out unless people desperately needed his expertise and didn't know it. He could only offer help if someone, mostly likely Lestrade sought him out. And then, his phone calls were limited to 5 minutes. And not a second more.

"Go on, pick it up. I'm starting the timer."

"Lestrade, yes, yes, save your apologies you didn't catch us in flagrante delicto. I told you the rules so don't waste time. A de-glover? Now that's something new. Tell me everything you know and be quick about it. The clock is ticking and if I don't get off in time, John's really going to have my arse." Sherlock concluded giving him a cheeky wink.

John responded with a laugh and proceeded to get out of bed. As Sherlock spoke John got out of bed, naked, and made his way over to the window to look out. He could smell the briny scent coming off the Channel in the distance. The air was cool and fresh and he closed his eyes before slow blinking, allowing it to wash over him.

With Sherlock was on his mobile John took out his own to get a better idea of where they were.
To the south was the waterway that lead to the North Sea.
To the west were the chalky cliffs of the Seven Sisters.
To the North, over 170 km was Baker Street, home.
To the east was The Weald.

He clicked on the interesting name for more information.

The Weald was an old forest, ancient according to what he was reading on his phone. Prehistoric hunter-gatherer had used it for farming, clearing the wooded land, but by Roman times it had been regrown only to be slowly encroached upon again as the forest was decimated for shipbuilding and forest glass. This was it seemed its tale, its cycle.

Estimates placed The Weald at 20-30 million years old. It had no doubt been decimated and regrown and fallen to human encroachment and risen again as it would dozens if not hundreds of times before the Sun snuffed out. There was something immortal about this forest, about every forest. Something vital, something that demanded to be rebuilt. Something that worked to heal itself. Something, resilient. Something eternal.

He'd have to ask Sherlock if maybe the could visit it before they left.

The idea of getting lost in a forest with his husband for a few hours sounded nice. There was nothing so scary about being lost anymore now that he felt he knew the way out.

"John?" Sherlock said a yawn adding punctuation to the end of his name.

"Done with your call?" John asked as he turned away from the window, shutting off his phone.

"Mmmm, come to bed."

John returned happily to the warm, heavy sheets, his head again resting on Sherlock's chest.

"I'm still adjusting to the idea that I'm going to be lucky enough to spend my pensioner years here with you. It is an amazing gift, Sherlock. Thank you."

"As happy as I am with our life now, I confess, I feel at ease knowing this is our future."

"You won't be bored? With just me and your bees?"

"Hardly. Not to mention there are quite a few small town nearby. Small towns have more dark secrets than London could imagine."

"So, the consulting detective doesn't really ever plan on retiring...just changing location?" John laughed.

"You know you don't want to retire either. You couldn't stand it."

"No, I don't believe I could."

"Two consulting detectives."

"Two?" John asked with surprise. "Have I been promoted?"

"You know how valuable you are to me. You know how instrumental you are to my work...our
work. And if I'm the only consulting detective in the world then I have a right to choose another. That way, I'll no longer be alone."

"You'll never be alone again." He said seriously.

"You're happy...right, John?" Sherlock asked and John was surprised to hear the tinge of nervousness in his voice.

"Happy? For the first time in my life..." He began. "I'm only looking ahead. It sounds so simple, so trivial but it's huge. I've always been looking over my shoulder and that's at best. Sometimes I've stood with my back to what's in front of me."

"Yes, I'm familiar," Sherlock said, kissing the crown of his head.

"But not anymore. I'm not looking back anymore. Everything I have, everything I need..." He said turning his head to look at Sherlock. "...is by my side. And everything I want it straight ahead. Happy doesn't even begin to describe it."

"Cheers then, to what lies before beside us and before us." Sherlock said raising his bottle.

John raised his as well to toast with his husband.

"To what lies before us. I'll drink to that."

It felt as though John had just closed his eyes again when another and different ringtone struck his ear.

"That's my sisters," John said as though Sherlock wouldn't know. He pawed for his mobile, early knowing it off the small table in the process. "Back to real life, I suppose." He said with a grin.

He didn't even consider not answering it. There could be something wrong with Rosie or some other sort of emergency with their friends.

He answered the FaceTime and his sister appeared on screen.

"Hi John, I am sorry to bother you like this." She began but was nearly cut off by wailing in the background.

"That's ok." John said frowning with concern. "Is that Rosie, is she alright?"

John could feel Sherlock tense at his side as he too was looking anxiously at the phone.

"Everything is fine. She's not hurt. It's just that I think she's confused. She thought you two were coming home tonight and she's very upset. I thought maybe if she saw you-"

"Put her on, Harry." Sherlock said.

"Alright." John's sister said sounding relieved. "It's been impossible to even get her down."

"Real life isn't so bad." Sherlock said turning his head to kiss John's temple.

A moment later, passed from Clara's arms to Harry's, Rosie came into view, teary and red-cheeked.

"Hello, darling girl." John said and he watched her face instantly brighten.

"Good evening, Honeybee." Sherlock intoned and she sniffled, hitched and smiled.
"We missed you, Rosie. Dada and I missed you."

"Home." She demanded, balling up a little first, readying herself for another crying jag.

"We can't come home just yet. But what if every night we promised to call and talk to you and find out about your day. And for bedtime, we'll read you a story."

John watched as his daughter seemed to be weighing the offer, turning it around in her mind until eventually, she consented.

"Story, Dada."

"I've just the thing. And if Daddy would be so good as to provide the sound effects?" Sherlock asked him.

"Um yeah, sure of course. Happy to." John replied.

"Excellent, now, Honey Bee, you sit back and just listen.

John watched her settle back against his sister as his husband launched into *The Three Billy Goats Gruff.*

For his part, John supplied some of the voices but he was most coveted for his realistic hoof clomping.

The tears dried and Rosie smiled and laughed as only a toddler could at the big faces and antics of her fathers. Eventually, though, John watched as her eyelids grew heavier and long before the last clomp and before the troll finally fell off the bridge she was asleep. Sherlock had been bringing the volume of his voice further and further down until it was barely a whisper. He finished the story and added "Goodnight, Honey Bee."

"Good night, Rosie." John added.

So careful not to wake her they saw Clara tiptoe into the frame. She smiled and waved at them briefly before Harry handed her off and they disappeared to Rosie's bedroom.

"Thank you, both." A clearly exhausted and grateful Harry said. "I really didn't want to bother you on your honeymoon."

"Our daughter is never a bother." John said at the same time Sherlock replied. "Don't be silly, we're more than happy to."

"Not in a different time zone are you?" She asked.

"No, not until next week." Sherlock said with a grin.

"Next week? What happens next week?" John said turning his head toward him.

"Paris is an hour ahead." Sherlock replied.

"Paris? Wait a second, we're going to Paris?" He asked incredulously.

"For starters." Sherlock replied just this side of smug.

"For start-...What other things have you planned?" John asked, absolutely delighted.
"Enough travels and experiences to fill three weeks, I assure you. I'm an excellent travel planner and tour guide."

"That sounds really fun and really busy." Harry grinned. "I hope you two realize what you've signed up for. You just promised her a call. Every night while you're away. She heard that and she's like a little elephant, unlikely to forget."

John was still looking at Sherlock and saw the same feelings visible there on his features; joy and contentment.

"Yeah, I think we have a pretty good idea what we've committed to." Sherlock said finally.

"And we can't wait." John added.

After a few more apologies from both Harry and the newly returned Clara they ended their call and wordlessly Sherlock turned out the light. If today was any indication they'd probably have an early start the next morning.

"Good night, John. I love you." Sherlock said as he gathered him in his arms.

It felt good to be gathered. He'd been so scattered, such a collection of disparate pieces, like a thousand different puzzles all dumped together in a pile. And he'd been tasked with making sense of the mess made, the mess he'd made. He started to piece himself back together, bits of sky and treeline, the outlines of a self, a person, a life, until finally, he could start to fill in the middle. The meat of it all. The lungs to breathe, the heart to feel, the skin to touch and be touched, the soul to stretch and to grow and to crave the extraordinary. He'd come back to Sherlock, hat in hand, still missing pieces but more of a man than when he left. He'd tried to come back to his life, a fractured creature of misplaced shapes. And he'd broken apart, again and with the help of people he was still shocked to find around he tried again. He found the missing bits with their help, Sherlock in particular, Sherlock, especially, he started to put himself back together again.

He wasn't finished yet. He might never be completely finished, but the picture had more than taken shape. He was on his way.

It felt good to be almost whole. At the very least more whole than he had ever been.

It felt good to be solid and real and if not healed then healing.

It felt good to touch without feeling the heat and the burn.

It felt good to see the green of the forest again.

It felt good to see so much life around him.

"I love you too, Sherlock."

It felt good to be so painfully alive.

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